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A New Era in Indo-Turkish Relations

In April 2017, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made a two-day state visit to India to discuss key bilateral issues with his counterpart, including the Kashmir issue, India's Nuclear Suppliers Group membership bid, and the strengthening of counter-terrorism, trade and economic cooperation. The visit aimed to further strengthen bilateral relations between India and Turkey.

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan arrived in New Delhi, India, on 30 April 2017. Since narrowly winning a highly-contested referendum earlier in the month, this was his first foreign visit and his first ever state visit to India as President. He had previously visited India as Prime Minister of Turkey in 2008.

The results of the historic referendum saw a narrow win for President Erdoğan and the 'Yes' vote, which will effectively replace Turkey's parliamentary system with a presidential system following the next general election in 2019. The reforms will abolish the prime minister's office and grant far-reaching executive powers to the president's office. The proponents of the 'Yes' vote argue that the new presidential system would streamline policy implementation and bring stability to the country at a time of growing domestic threats. Opponents fear that the expansion

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of the powers of the president's office would cement President Erdoğan's hold on Turkey's government with little checks and balances.

Both India and Turkey recognise the role of the other as large secular democracies, with a deep-rooted cultural heritage, and growing economic and military might in their respective regions. Differing alliances during the Cold War era meant that Indo-Turkish relations did not reach their full potential of cooperation on bilateral issues.² While there was some improvement after the end of the Cold War, the relationship between the two nations remained strained due to Turkey's strong religious commonalities with Pakistan, with both countries having a majority Sunni Hanafi Muslim population. Interaction between India and Turkey has picked up since the turn of the millennium, particularly in dialogues regarding economic development and multilateral cooperation.³

The two-day state visit was designed primarily to strengthen cooperation in the key areas of counter-terrorism, defence and economic cooperation.⁴ However, it was overshadowed by President Erdoğan's comments on Kashmir's role in South Asia during an interview with Indian news channel, WION. Conducted on the eve of his departure to India on 29 April 2017,⁵ President Erdoğan called for a swift resolution to the Kashmir issue, offering Turkey's involvement as a mediator in a possible multilateral dialogue in search of "a two-state solution...which will benefit both [India and Pakistan]."⁶ President Erdoğan's comments followed similar sentiments expressed during his visit to Pakistan in 2016.⁷

² Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Turkey-India Political Relations. Retrieved from Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey-india-relations.en.mfa>

³ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs. India-Turkey Relations. Retrieved from Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs: https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Turkey_Relations.pdf

⁴ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs. (2017, April 30). State visit of President of Turkey to India (30 April to 01 May, 2017). Retrieved from Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs: http://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/28428/State_visit_of_President_of_Turkey_to_India_30_April_to_01_May_2017

⁵ Erdoğan, R T (29 April 2017). Global Leadership Series: Exclusive interview with Turkish President Erdogan. (W. N. Ramesh Ramachandran, Interviewer). Retrieved from Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3t9_APj9cs

⁶ Ramachandran, R (1 May 2017). EXCLUSIVE: India, Pak both have right to aspire to NSG: Erdogan. Retrieved from WION: <http://www.wionews.com/world/exclusive-india-pak-both-have-right-to-aspire-to-nsg-erdogan-15068>

⁷ Presidency of the Republic of Turkey. (2016, November 17). "Turkey and Pakistan Have Always Stood Side by Side during Most Trying Times". Retrieved from Presidency of the Republic of Turkey: <http://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/61022/turkiye-ve-pakistan-en-zor-zamanlarda-hep-birbirlerinin-yaninda-oldu.html>

India has continuously upheld the position that negotiations on Kashmir's role in South Asia will be conducted on a bilateral basis, without third-party intervention. It had earlier emphasised its desire to cooperate with Turkey on any bilateral concerns, stating that "India-Turkey relations should stand on their own footing", according to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs a few days before the state visit by President Erdoğan, during a media briefing on the state visits by both Turkey and Cyprus to India.⁸ The President of Cyprus conducted a state visit to India from 25 to 29 April 2017, just prior to President Erdoğan's arrival in New Delhi.⁹ Turkey has historically had contentious relations with Cyprus, which it does not recognise.

India's membership bid for the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), of which Turkey is currently a member, was one of the issues discussed during the visit. It was met with resistance from countries opposed to India's membership, in particular China and Pakistan, which maintained that India's membership is likely to upset the strategic balance in South Asia. While Turkey has long been a supporter of India's participation in international dialogues, and has already given its backing to India's bid for permanent membership on the United Nations Security Council, it chose to maintain a neutral stance regarding the NSG, stating that India has the right to "aspire for NSG membership", along with Pakistan, as countries which are not signatories of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.¹⁰

While the two nations have traditionally not agreed on political issues such as Kashmir, they have sought to deepen ties by expanding trade, economic, counter-terrorism and cultural cooperation. Indicative of this desire was the five agreements and memoranda of understanding signed during the recent visit.¹¹ Bilateral trade volume, however, has been shrinking, year-on-

⁸ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs. (27 April 2017). Transcript of Media Briefing on visits from Cyprus and Turkey. Retrieved from Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs: <http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28432/Transcript+of+Media+Briefing+on+visits+from+Cyprus+and+Turkey>

⁹ State visit of President of Cyprus to India (25-29 April 2017). Retrieved from Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs: http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28432/Transcript+of+Media+Briefing+on+visits+from+Cyprus+and+Turkeyhttp://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/28411/state_visit_of_President_of_Cyprus_to_India_2529_April_2017

¹⁰ Ramachandran, R. (2017, May 1). EXCLUSIVE: India, Pak both have right to aspire to NSG: Erdogan. Retrieved from WION: <http://www.wionews.com/world/exclusive-india-pak-both-have-right-to-aspire-to-nsg-erdogan-15068>

¹¹ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs. (2017, May 1). India-Turkey Joint Statement during the State Visit of the President of Turkey to India (30 April to 1 May 2017). Retrieved from Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs: <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28433/IndiaTurkey+Joint+Statement+during+the+State+Visit+of+the+President+of+Turkey+to+India+30+April+to+1+May+2017>

year, with latest figures at US\$6.4 billion, with the trade imbalance in favour of India. Both leaders pledged to spur on the growth of commercial and investment links between their countries to achieve US\$10 billion in trade by 2020.¹²

Conclusion

The relationship between Turkey and India did not progress much in the initial years of India's independence, due, in part, to differing political alliances. Relations only thawed in recent years due to common strategic goals in the South Asian and Middle Eastern regions, with the recent state visit by the Turkish president designed to spur on the progress of bilateral cooperation between the two countries.

While Turkey's stance on Kashmir did, somewhat, dampened the meeting, it, nonetheless, marked a significant step for Turkey in its strategic pivot to capture the opportunities offered by South Asia as a region, strengthened by its improving bilateral relations with both India and Pakistan. India's renewed focus on the Middle East has been reinforced by its position as the fastest-growing economy in the world. Its partnership with Turkey is set to further the momentum for closer interaction between South Asia and the Middle East in era of an emerging Asian century, away from the East and the West.

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¹² Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (n.d.). Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Retrieved from Turkey-India Economic and Trade Relations: http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-commercial-and-economic-relations-with-india.en.mfa