



Center for Iranian Studies in Ankara

INDIA-IRAN-TURKEY STRATEGIC COOPERATION

Mukhtar Ahmad Bhat





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Center for Iranian Studies in Ankara

India-Iran-Turkey Strategic Cooperation

Hindistan-İran-Türkiye Stratejik İş Birliği
همکاریهای راهبردی هندوستان، ایران و ترکیه

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SUMMARY

- With the beginning of the 21st century, the global power structure, in general, and of the Middle East, specifically, has witnessed drastic change. Economic cooperation and integration have taken precedence over military influence.
- The emergence of the new economies, regional organizations, and different power centers undermined the US dominant uni-polar order.
- In the Middle East, the dwindling Saudi Arabia dominance is paving the way for other countries, particularly Iran and Turkey, to play an active role and to create a favorable regional power structure.
- The unrolling of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative is transforming regional geopolitics into geoeconomics.

Keywords: Changing Regional Scenarios, Turkey, India, Iran, Trans-Continental Integration.

ÖZET

- 21. yüzyılın başında küresel güç yapısı ve özellikle de Ortadoğu, köklü bir değişim geçirmiştir. Askerî güç seçeneğinin önüne ekonomik iş birliği geçmiştir.
- Yeni ekonomilerin, bölgesel kuruluşların ve farklı güç merkezlerinin ortaya çıkışı ABD'nin tek kutuplu baskın düzenini baltalamıştır.
- Suudi Arabistan'ın bölgedeki baskın gücünün azalması, başta İran ve Türkiye olmak üzere bölgedeki diğer ülkeler için daha aktif rol oynayabilecekleri uygun yeni bir bölgesel güç yapısı oluşturmuştur.
- Güney Asya bölgesel politikalarında Çin'in "Bir Kuşak Bir Yol" girişimi bölgesel jeopolitiği jeoekonomiye dönüştürmüştür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Değişen Bölgesel Senaryolar, Türkiye, Hindistan, İran, Kıtalararası Entegrasyon

چکیده

- با آغاز قرن بیست و یکم ساختار قدرت جهانی به طور کلی و بطور خاص خاورمیانه شاهد تغییرات بنیادین بوده است. ترجیح همکاری و همگرایی اقتصادی بر قدرت نظامی ماحصل این تغییرات است.
 - ظهور اقتصادهای نوپا، سازمانهای منطقه ای جدید و مراکز مختلف قدرت، نظام تک قطبی به رهبری ایالات متحده را تضعیف کرده است.
 - کاهش قدرت و نفوذ عربستان سعودی در منطقه، راه را برای سایر کشورها به ویژه ایران و ترکیه برای ایفای نقشی فعالتر و ایجاد یک ساختار قدرتمند منطقه ای هموار می کند.
 - پروژه «راه ابریشم جدید» چین وضعیت ژئوپلیتیک منطقه را به ژئواکونومیک تغییر داده است.
- کلید واژه ها:** سناریوهای منطقه ای متغیر، ترکیه، هند، ایران، همگرایی بین قاره ای

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, the global power structure has undergone a drastic change, particularly in the Middle East. At the global level, with the emergence of new economies, regional organizations, and different power centers, the US dominant uni-polar order is now undermined by the inception of a multi-polar order. This shift empowers other countries to strengthen their influence and position regionally and globally. Currently, economic growth and development have replaced military warfare, and, thereby, determine a country's global policies and rank, and provide leverage to turn the tables in its favour. The world is witnessing the deterioration of the US' most advanced defence technology and military forces in Afghanistan at the hands of a few hundred less trained and equipped Taliban guerrilla fighters. While on the other hand, with its growing economy, China is playing a progressively influential role by dominating world markets, which has played a major role in subverting US global hegemony.

Furthermore, China unrolling the Belt and Road Initiative gives the best insight into the changing dynamics of international politics. The Belt and Road Initiative has given precedence to geoeconomics over geopolitics. The initiative is considered a face and game-changer for both regional and global politics. The project has a significant role not only in promoting the economic prosperity of the countries along the Belt and Road and bolstering regional economic cooperation but also in increasing direct contacts, cultural exchanges, and in maintaining, as well as, fortifying long-term regional peace and security. The project is proposed to span over seventy countries, cover more than two-thirds

of the world population, and have a collective GDP equivalent to thirty-three percent of the world's wealth. Moreover, the initiative incorporates around \$4 trillion worth of projects including areas like investment in infrastructural development by constructing new roads and routes, transportation, increasing trade and market access, energy security and also targeting invigoration of cultural exchanges, and enhancing direct contacts. From the beginning, the Belt and Road Initiative received a strong response, representatives from over a hundred countries were present at the inauguration ceremony and with each passing day, the strategic significance of the project is increasingly accepted by countries around the world. In 2017, almost thirty heads and representatives attended the Belt and Road Initiative Forum from the over one hundred and ten countries (Hillman, 2018). The initiative is regarded as a step towards economic integration, cultural diversity, free trade regime, and multi-polarity. It is an attempt to promote and coordinate economic policies and jointly create an inclusive, balanced, and open regional economic architecture that benefits to all stakeholders. In the short-run, the initiative endeavours to set up a multi-tiered, all-dimensional, and composite connectivity networks across Asia, Europe, and Africa and their adjacent seas. In the long-run, it would establish a system of "greater benefits in deep interdependence" where each country would be responsible to maintain the system, as failure would result in increased damage costs. The initiative is composed of two projects, (a) the Development of the Silk Road Economic Belt and (b) the Development of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The Silk Road Economic Belt is designed

to interconnect China, Central Asia, and Eastern and Western Europe via the Mediterranean Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Middle East, and South-East Asia (Action Plan on the Belt and Road Initiative, 2015). The main emphases of the Belt and Road Initiative are on the cooperation of five major areas: (i) coordinating development policies, (ii) developing infrastructure and networks facilities, (iii) deepening investment and trade relations, (iv) increasing financial cooperation, and (v) expanding social and cultural exchanges. The initiative gives a new perspective on global and regional politics; if implemented successfully will set new precedence and will be a turning point in contemporary regional and global politics.

Some liberal theorists consider modern civil society and a capitalist economy as a source of human progress and superior life with a much higher level of material prosperity, in other words, the “greatest happiness of the greatest number,” moreover, their belief in mutual interests and engagement in collaborative social actions domestically and internationally would result in a win-win situation and yield greater benefits at home and abroad (Jackson Robert and George Sorensen, 2010). Furthermore, their concept of greater interdependence, belief that pursuing economic cooperation and foreign trade rather than a military means increases a country’s influence and raises its global and regional stature, in addition to the possession of extensive territory, natural resources, military power, technological advancement, highly qualified labour forces, and economic development, are the keys to success.

Recently, there has been a major transformation in a large number of issues in Asia and

the transformation seems to continue in foreseeable future. Due to these recent developments, the article aims to analyse and highlight a new area of inter-regional cooperation, particularly between Turkey, Iran, and India (Satapathy, 2009). Considering the above mentioned points, using a liberalist approach, the article will try to highlight that cooperation between India, Iran, and Turkey would not only facilitate access to available markets in India and Iran but also would provide a transit or corridor that would interconnect the three countries and their neighbouring countries, with which they have already established transit routes, and ultimately would provide another option of intra-regional cooperation.

Turkey as an Emerging Regional Power

With its notable history and strategic geopolitical and geoeconomic location, Turkey is strategically vital in world politics. At the crossroads of the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East, as well as, the Mediterranean region, Turkey bridges numerous economies, cultures, and peoples by linking Europe with Asia. Geographically, the Black Sea is to the north, Armenia and Georgia are at the north-eastern border, Iran and Azerbaijan to the east, Iran, Iraq, and Syria are to the south, to southwest and west there are the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas, and to the northwest lies Greece and Bulgaria (Yapp, Malcom Edward & Dewdney, John C. 2019).

Over the past seventeen years, Turkey, under the uninterrupted rule of the AK Party, has witnessed a period of political stability and rapid economic growth. By establishing inter-

nal peace, stability, and economic growth, and through steady policy implementation, Turkey has obviated/eased its internal challenges and security threats and begin a new chapter in its approach and outlook towards its political role. In addition, the new realities of globalization and power structure enabled Turkey to reformulate itself as an aspiring political, economic, and diplomatic power.

During the Ak Party era, in the foreign policy front, Turkey played more proactive role in the region comparing with the past. Until end of the 2015, the proactive policies intensified but due to Syrian conflict, the policies seem to be more balanced. Strategic Depth doctrine introduced by Ahmet Davutoglu deserves some explanation in order to understand foreign policy configuration of Turkey during mid 2000s and early 2010s. Under the doctrine of “Strategic Depth”, Turkey initiated the process of redefining its geostrategic prominence; the doctrine embraces Turkey as a fundamental player in the region over several dynamic issues in the region and also the doctrine dismisses the passive role that portrays Turkey as a link between the East and the West. Augmented by its Ottoman legacy, Turkey may play pivotal role not only in securing national interest but also for other countries by utilizing proactive policies that can be based on and strengthen from her geographic, cultural and historical roots. The doctrine advocates to sideline Turkey’s militaristic image and promote conflict resolution and a regional economic integration approach. Turkey must present a soft image, adapt and implement policies like “Zero Problem with Neighbours,” call for political and economic justice, balance security and freedom, and trade and economic

development, as the foreign policy parameters for its new regional and global role (Grigoriadis, 2010). Moreover, Turkey works to be a major actor and role model for regional war-torn countries. To emphasize its leading role in the new regional configuration, and advocating, as well as working on, these lines, Turkey has earnestly raised its voice for UN reforms and spoken out against the autocracies committed by Israel in the occupied territories, as well as calling for the end of the illegal Israeli occupation. Regionally it strives to strengthen relations and collaboration with regional countries, through resolving disputes, particularly with its neighbouring countries. Furthermore, Iran, Iraq, and Syria are no longer considered enemies but as partners in establishing a peaceful, stable, and secure region. Seeking regional power, Turkey acts as a mediator for regional conflicts and ventures to expand its influence in the regions that are once part of the Ottoman Empire and reach out to previously neglected areas. By conducting high levels of engagement with the leaders and populace of neighbouring states, highlighting the importance of internal links between security, democracy, and trade, as well as transforming the regional order, set by former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, for carrying out relations with neighbouring countries, Turkey endeavours to secure new heights (Davutoglu, 2011). However, Syrian conflicts changed many things including the application of the doctrine. Syrian conflict is a multilayer conflict with large number of actors with conflicting interests and the intensification of Syrian conflicts has caused Turkey to re-calibrate foreign policy posture. Although Turkish foreign policy is still very active in a large number of domains, in the regional issues Turkey has switched to more balanced path.

Shifting to a pro-active approach and having constructive diplomatic engagement could expand and reinforce Turkey's multidimensional ties. As mentioned earlier, the centrality between various regions, countries, cultures, and traditions facilitates opportunities and challenges for Turkey. Nevertheless, Turkey's Vision 2023 focuses on transforming Turkey into one of the world's top ten economies and improving the trade, healthcare, and transportation sectors. This vision aims to reduce the unemployment rate to 5 percent, and achieve a GDP of \$2 trillion. In addition, to maintain a stable reduction in inflation, keep interest rates at a single digit, increase annual exports to \$500 billion, and increase per capita income to \$25,000, thereby, giving Turkey a new image and position in global politics (Political Vision of Ak Parti (Justice and Development) 2023, 2012). Subsequently, Turkish foreign policy must focus on two important elements, (a) the deep structural transformation in its economy from inward-looking to robust export-driven and in continuous search of new markets for its goods and services, (b) to transform Turkey into a respectable and responsible global actor (Barkey, 2011). Greater energy security, access to technology, and a new market will constitute the main foundations for securing the mentioned objectives and strengthening Turkey's regional and global position.

India-Iran-Turkey Cooperation Trans-Continental Integration

For Turkey, the changing regional and global situation provides a unique opportunity to boost its economic and political position by utilizing its geostrategic location. As stated previously, Turkey is at the crossroads of the Balkans, the

Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean region. Turkey can act as a bridge, which joins economies, cultures, and people by linking Europe with Asia. No doubt, Turkey has established a transit route with its neighbouring countries; however, it has neglected the vast market available in Asia; particularly India and its neighbouring market. Based on Asia's rapid economic growth in the past years, this period of economic growth and development is considered the century of the Asian region. As per the Asian Development report, the regional GDP is expected to increase to \$174 trillion in 2050, which will constitute half of the global GDP. The main countries expected to lead the regional economy are China, India, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, and Korea (Asian Development Bank, 2011:5). Turkey's Vision 2023 and objective of becoming an influential power, and developing economic relations with the region, particularly with India, could play an imperative role. By 2050, India may replace the US as the second-largest economy in the world in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP). The Asian Development Bank report 2015 predicted that India's share of global GDP in PPP terms could increase to 13.5 percent by 2050 and overtake the EU and the US in terms of global GDP in terms of PPP share by 2044 and 2049 respectively (Asian Development, 2015).

Despite the slowdown of its economic growth due to an economic recession and other domestic factors, India has maintained an economic growth rate of seven percent per year. However, rapid economic growth, population size, and industrial and technological development have increased the demand for new markets for manufactured goods and services, investments in

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agriculture, healthcare, and poverty alleviation projects. Conversely, being an energy deficit country with alarming depletion of its energy resources has turned India into one of the largest energy importing countries. Presently, India meets 75 percent of its total energy demands by imports and the demand is furiously rising with each passing day, as per BP Energy Outlook 2018, the demand is expected to double by 2040 (BP 2019). Over the years, energy security has become one of India's major security challenges and, consequently, has forced India to ensure a safe, adequate, and uninterrupted supply of energy. In addition to that, India has been eager to expand its reach to new export markets and secure foreign investment in its domestic market. Sectors such as automobile, aviation, biotechnology, chemicals, construction, defence manufacturing, food processing, healthcare, leather, medical devices, mining, oil, as well as gas, ports and shipping, renewable energy, roads and highways, and thermal power provide great opportunities for investment in India. Therefore, the situation is ideal for Turkey to economically engage with India, which not only opens the Indian market but also the market of neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar. India has already established many transit routes with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Myanmar. With Nepal, it has regular bus service, operating from four different stations. Moreover, India has suggested opening new routes. With Bangladesh, along with shipping services, there are four operational inter-country buses and three train services and India has proposed the operationalization of one new bus and three train routes. A few shipping service and transit routes exist with Myanmar and Nepal.

Utilizing the developing Iran-India relations provides Turkey a valuable opportunity to gain access to the region, particularly, the Persian Gulf and South Asia. India and Iran have been collaborating on projects ranging from infrastructure development, energy, trade, and transit routes. For that purpose, India, which was given a sanctions exemption from the US, has been developing the Iranian Chabahar Port for the past several years and has recently operationalized one portion of it. The Port ensures Turkey access to Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf, in addition to South Asian markets, particularly India and its neighbouring countries, which have a prodigious untapped market and a low price labour force. Linking the Chabahar Port with the International North-South Transportation Corridor (INSTC) has long been a priority for India and Iran. Further, being a signatory of the International North-South Transport Corridor facilitates Turkey the shortest transit and access route to India and its neighbouring countries. The INSTC provides India a 40 percent shorter and 30 percent cheaper route when compared to the Suez Canal for reaching Russia, Europe, and Central Asia and in the same manner, it will shorten Turkey's distance and freightage for reaching India and its neighbouring countries (Roy, 2015). India can play a pivotal role in realizing the objectives of Turkey's Vision 2023. With a population of over 1.3 billion, India is one of the world's fastest-growing economies, which constitutes 15 percent of global growth (IMF, 2018). Iran, also in search of foreign investors in the development of the Chabahar Port, has declared the port a free trade zone and invested almost \$2.5 million to increase the port's annual capacity from 2.5 million tons to 12.5 million tons in order to trans-

form the Chabahar Port into a commercial hub (Ramachandran, 2014). Iran has envisaged developing the Chabahar Port into the third-largest hub for petrochemicals after Assaluyeh and Bandar Imam and intends to build 16 basic petrochemical complexes in three different phases containing urea, ammonia, and methanol producing plants. Moreover, Iran plans to lay a rail line between the Chabahar Port, Zahedan, and Mashhad, and to transport ethane gas from South Fars to the Chabahar Port, furthermore, provide Turkey huge investment prospects (Behuria and Razvi, 2015).

Bangladesh has set a target of becoming a hub for regional commercial and economic activities by 2021 by offering low-cost labour and a huge domestic market of 170-180 million people, as well as working to develop a clear marketing strategy to attract foreign investment. The country offers investments in areas such as developing a transit route with neighbouring countries, an international airport, ports, and cyber parks, in addition to energy security and regional economic integration (Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), 2007). Moreover, the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry, in its Vision 2030, emphasized on making Bangladesh one of the largest thirty economies of the world. The normal growth rate of Bangladesh's GDP is 5.5 and for achieving the Vision 2030, the country must maintain a higher economic growth rate, therefore, a study has been carried out on different frameworks for estimating the increase in the country's GDP. The study estimates that under the average GDP growth of 5.5%, GDP would increase to \$274 billion by 2030; in case of maintaining a 7% GDP growth rate, the country's GDP would increase to \$3686 billion by

2030; in case of an 8% increase, GDP would be \$448 billion; at 10% GDP would reach \$658 billion, and in case of 12% it would hit \$962 billion by 2030, therefore, the estimates provide Turkey tremendous opportunities for deepening its relations with the country (DCCI, 2010).

Nepal has also been working to accelerate its economic growth and to assume an active role in regional integration. In terms of accelerating broad-based economic growth, agricultural transformation, and industrial development, Nepal tries to learn from the experiences of its successful neighbours. Under the Vision 2030, Nepal has set the objective of bringing the country out of the least developed category into a developing category by making major socio-economic transformations. Therefore, it offers expansive areas where countries can invest, particularly agriculture, forestry, tourism, health, hydropower, and transportation. Although these areas are the least developed and lack modern and scientific technology, they have the potential to act as roots for economic growth and development (Asian Development Bank, 2016).

Trilateral cooperation with Iran and India offers economic integration for Turkey and helps facilitate it to become one of the world's top ten economies. The Middle East region, particularly its neighbouring countries, especially Iran, can act as an access route to India, a prime IT hub of the world, and provide a comprehensive market for Turkish good and services. Their collaboration would open a new chapter in the realm of regional integration. Access to India would open new areas within India for investing in infrastructural development, agriculture, water management, tourism, and other areas,

furthermore, ingress to India's neighbouring countries' market on its southern border, which would ultimately boost Turkey's global stature. Therefore, multi-regional cooperation would be advantageous for the three countries, as well as regionally, in almost all aspects of social, economic, political, and cultural life. In such a scenario of intense economic interdependence and radical shift in the nature of global politics, undoubtedly, Turkey has started to search out the ways and means to develop and support its economic, commercial, and investment-oriented relations beyond its neighbouring countries, like the multi-national 'Middle Corridor' initiative that connects Turkey with China by a road link passing through Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia. However, it has neglected India, one of the fastest-growing emerging economies and markets; therefore, Turkey needs to explore the considerable available markets in India and its neighbouring countries.

Conclusion

Considering the changing regional and international power structure, as well as the policies about their future regional and global roles, India, Iran, and Turkey, will play an essential and dominant role economically, politically, and militarily in the emerging political scenario. Moreover, the three countries are making a strong presence. As mentioned earlier, in addition to being an IT hub, India is becoming one of the fastest-growing economies of the world with a huge market for foreign investment.

Turkey has been pro-active, taken center stage in Middle Eastern affairs, and made various reconciliatory steps for strengthening peace

in the region by developing trade relations, increasing direct contacts, and by mediating conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, as well as in the Israel and Palestine peace process. In the rapidly changing geopolitical and geoeconomic structures, Turkey employed a fresh perception of turning adversaries into allies, is one of the biggest trading partners of the Kurdish Regional Government, and developed close relations with Iran. It now considers those countries as a source of strength for transforming into a prospective global power.

Recently, Iran has been intensifying its presence in the region. Since the end of the Saddam regime and the emergence of subsequent events, particularly instability, civil war, and the fall of decades-old monarchical regimes, Iran has considerably tilted the Saudi Arabia regional power balance in its favour. On a global level, Iran has reinforced its trade and energy relations with EU member countries, China, India, and Russia, and has used these relations to mitigate US imposed sanctions. All these things have provided breathing space, which has helped Iran emerge as an ambitious power.

In conclusion, we can say that the cooperation between the three countries is important for overcoming internal challenges such as energy security, market access, and increasing trade and investment, as well as external challenges like enhancing their global position by assuming an active role in global affairs. In this respect, collaboration would allow them to strengthen their mutual relations, satisfy the needs and demands of other countries, and ultimately act as a turning point in regional and global affairs.

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