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Turkey's Foreign Policy: A Success Benchmark For The Eurasian Region

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Turkey is a salient and a pivotal actor in international relations, regionally and globally. Turkey's foreign policy is heavily characterized by geopolitical factors in its region. It functions as a natural bridge with its territories in both Asia and Europe, which portrays

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Turkey as a model Eurasian state. Remarkably, this Eurasian pillar of Turkish foreign policy was first brought to light during the post-Cold War period as a result of the state's geographical proximity to various sub-regions of the Eurasian continent. Furthermore, Turkey's role as an influential actor in this region was consolidated under AKP's government in Turkey which took significant measures to enhance its bilateral ties with the emerging Eurasian power such as China, India and Russia.

Turkey's foreign policy shift towards Eurasia: -

The Eurasian continent became the center of the geopolitical sphere when it was termed as the 'grand chessboard by geo-strategist Zbigniew Brzezinski which will become a geopolitical battlefield for the rising powers for economic and political fortunes. This perspective heavily influenced the thinking involving this region in the coming decades. With the change in time, the dimensions of the world economy continue to shift from the West to the East and the international system is undergoing a transition towards multi-polarity as a result of the rise of new powers. In this geopolitical transformation, Eurasia is being perceived as a geopolitical counterbalance against Western influence in the international sphere.

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Turkey is most affected by this arising geopolitical reality since it is geographically situated in the middle of Eurasian region and due to its increasing shift towards fostering profitable strategic relations with emerging Eurasian powers. Therefore, Turkey's approach towards the Eurasian politics is a vital element in maintaining its dominant role in the region and regards changes taking place in the global political world.

Another contributing factor that has significantly influenced the gradual shift in the foreign policy of Turkey towards the Eurasian region is the rapid deterioration of Ankara's ties with its Western allies and NATO forces. Moreover, Turkey's strategic rapprochement with Russia and Iran over the issue of Syria in the last few years has provided a significant impetus to the claims about a strengthened Eurasian orientation in Turkish foreign policy as a counter to Western-centric approach.

At the systematic level of analysis, Turkey's approach towards the Eurasian region was motivated by the fall of US hegemony in world politics and the rising powers in the international system which symbolizes the emergence of a multi-polar world. Hence, to emerge as a 'new power' in the changing international and regional politics, the main goal of Turkey's foreign policy was to search for 'strategic autonomy' from the West.

Moreover, from an economic viewpoint, the Eurozone crisis hampered the global image of the European Union as an economic safe point for investment. The highly influential business elites of Turkey regarded the EU as a less potential partner for economic investments and this view was further strengthened by the increasing economic problems of the EU. Therefore, they decided to expand their reach by fostering economic relations with other regions which proved to be a wise decision as Turkey managed to emerge as a regional power due to its rapid economic growth.

At the domestic level analysis, the recent failed coup of 15 July 2016 caused the death of 200 people. The coup was successfully crushed by the Turkish forces, however, the Western allies failed to show support for the Turkish government and there was speculation made by the Turkish media that the West favored the military coup as they were showing concerns regarding the domestic and foreign policy of the JDP government. While Moscow and Tehran showed full support to Erdogan against the coup plotters. Thus, Turkey's shift towards Eurasia can also be associated as a direct outcome of the aftermath of the domestic political scene.

Previously, Turkey's foreign policy was highly influenced by its Western orientation as its leaders wanted to uplift the traditional identity of Turkey and transform it into "the level of contemporary civilization" as quoted by Mustafa Kemal and to gain wide recognition from the European World of its liberated regime. In contrast, the foreign policy pursued by Erdogan has been in light of reviving the legacy of the Ottoman Empire by following a pro-Islamic approach in the hope to regain the influence in the neighboring areas.

A success benchmark for the Eurasian region: -

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, there was a geopolitical vacuum in the region which was seen by Turkey as an opportunity to increase its influence in the region and emerge as a regional power. The Turkish foreign policy re-adjusted towards the Eurasian corridor and improved the relations with the Turkic states by playing the 'cultural' card to enhance its influence in the social, economic and political spheres of these newly emerging states.

Turkey's grand ambitions were started in the Central Asian region where the states were economically poor and were looking for financial support after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The trade links were fostered in the energy sector. Moreover, to pursue its foreign policy objectives to provide assistance to the states, it started joint ventures between Turkish and Central Asian Banks to develop the banking sector. Another common feature was the infrastructure developments in the states. Turkey financed the modernization of their transportation systems. Numerous Turkish

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construction firms were investing in the construction of hotels, airports and industrial plants in the region.

Turkey's key foreign policy feature was to reduce its dependency on Russia for energy imports. This was planned to be achieved by the development of profitable energy cooperation with Central Asia. Since the Central Asian oil and gas reserves had the potential to enable Turkey's main goal of an important strategic player in the region by swiftly gaining the role of a transit energy hub between Caspian-Central Asian producers and the EU markets.

Similarly, through 'soft power' Turkey increased its cultural influence in the region. It initiated cultural exchange programs and provided scholarships to students to study in Turkey. Turkey also constructed five universities: two in Kyrgyzstan, two in Kazakhstan and one in Turkmenistan along with numerous secondary schools in Turkic countries. (Indeo n.d.)

Moreover, Turkey considers that the Caspian-Central Asian region has the potential to act as a strategic hub for energy and transportation projects which will connect the Eurasian region. This perspective has led to the emergence of strong economic ties between Kazakhstan and Turkey. Turkey was named as Kazakhstan's seventh-largest trading partner as in 2016 their shared revenue of almost US$2 billion. Turkey has invested a total of US$2.7 billion in Kazakhstan which includes 70 projects, 31 are already implemented. The main goal of these investments is to finance the

development of the food sector, pharmaceutical and chemical industries and manufacturing industries.

The significant economic cooperation between the two states led to the creation of the 'Foreign Investments Council' with the purpose to ensure the integration of Kazakhstan's economy with foreign investments and promote profitable dialogue among investors to invest, manage and solve any potential problems. Also, the visit of President Erdogan to Astana in 2017 further strengthen the economic ties among the two states as they signed investment agreements worth US$590 million. Hence, the salient objective of Turkey's foreign policy to obtain unlimited access to regional markets comprising of 200 million people through Kazakhstan is becoming a reality as Kazakhstan is one of the founding members of the Eurasian Economic Union.

Similarly, Turkey fostered cultural, historical and linguistic ties with Turkmenistan to enhance its bilateral ties with the state. It used the concept of 'one nation, two states' to further its political relations. In 2015 Turkey became Turkmenistan's third-largest trading partner. The political stability in Turkmenistan attracted huge investments

from the public and private sectors from Turkey, particularly the textile, tourism and construction sector. Further, Turkey decided to upgrade and modernize the port of Turkmenbashi on the Caspian Sea for a cost of US$2 billion. The Caspian Sea contains 48 billion barrels of oil and 9 trillion cubic meters of natural gas. The completion of this project will boost the strategic importance of the region and will attract huge investments and promising trade opportunities in the region.

This will transform Turkmenistan into an economic hub with an increase in its energy and textile exports to Europe through Azerbaijan and Turkey. It will also place it an immense trading position between Asia and Europe. The political and diplomatic ties between Turkey and Turkmenistan achieved a new hallmark with the presence of Erdogan and Turkmen President at the construction ceremony of new Turkmenbashi port.

Furthermore, the Turkmenbashi port will be connected with the Lapis Lazuli railway corridor connecting Afghanistan to Turkey via Turkmenistan which will increase regional interconnectivity. The strategic alignments of common interests have enhanced the efforts of Turkey and Turkmenistan to strengthen cooperation in the energy sector as well based on natural gas and export infrastructures since Turkmenistan has 17.5 trillion cubic meters of natural gas reserves.

The next potential prospect for Turkey has been Uzbekistan because of its geographical importance which places it in the heart of Eurasia. It has the largest population in Turkic Central Asia, promising market and presence of large oil and gas reserves. Turkish

President Erdogan toured Uzbekistan with a high-level delegation which was a promising step to enhance diplomatic relations between the two states. The increased cooperation in the trading sector helped generate revenue of US$1.2 billion between Turkey and Uzbekistan. Currently, there are 441 Turkish firms and companies operating in Uzbekistan in different sectors including in the textile, food, hotel management and plastic. Another cooperation venture was signed between the two states to further boost economic relations.

In addition, Turkey aimed to stabilize the regional security in the South Caucus which deteriorated due to a 5-day war between Russia and Georgia. Turkey's diplomatic effort led to the formation of the Caucasian Stability and Cooperation Platform which seeks to resolve the security tensions in the region.

The stability and prosperity of the Eurasian region can be furthered guaranteed by the active involvement of Turkey with Russia and China as key geopolitical players in the region. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) are both promising economic opportunities that will create trading space and investment in Asia. Each project has the potential to construct a trading network in Central Asia that connects East and West through Turkey, fulfilling once more the state's economic role as a "bridge" nation.

BRI and EEU projects have the ability to shift the geopolitical balance in the region in favour of Turkey. However, in order to utilize the maximum benefits from these projects Turkey is investing in developing its transportation infrastructure to enhance the East-

West connectivity. This will place Turkey as the key player in these trading networks which would make it easier for Turkey to fund its infrastructure projects by appealing to development banks and funds. Secondly, Turkey is aiming to expand its export markets in emerging Asia to increase its revenue and escape the middle-income trap. These steps will place Turkey at an equal footing in its political relations with both China and Russia.

Future implications for the region: -

The Eurasian region can further improve its standing in the global political sphere by overcoming its barriers with the help of Turkey. The most significant barrier to expanding Turkey's trade with Asia is the lack of connectivity. The only available route is through land which proves to be expensive and hinders trade with Asia. Therefore, investment and construction of railroads is a necessity to diversify the trade relations in emerging Asia.

At present three routes connect Turkey with the Central Asian market: the northern route via Russia, the trans-Caspian Central Corridor, and the Southern Route via Iran. The Southern route has raised concerns as relations between Turkey and Iran are at the developing phase and the domestic crisis in Iran makes it a liability that makes Iran not suitable for trade. However, the ruling elites of Turkey see Iran as a reliable trading partner to expand Turkey's reach to Asia. This can only be possible if sanctions are eased and investments can influx in to upgrade the railway lines in Tehran to improve connectivity and solve its domestic problems.

The most promising route is the 'Central Corridor', which links Xinjiang province in China, passes through Kazakhstan, and goes through Turkey into Azerbaijan and Georgia. Yet to tap the true potential of this route the ongoing conflict among Uighur people in China must be resolved. Turkey has closed ethnic ties with the religious minority of Uighur Muslims in China and the deteriorating relations of the Chinese government with Uighur Muslims can jeopardize the relations among two states.

Moreover, the inclusion of Turkey in the EEU corridor or its relation with it depends on the bilateral relations between Russia and Turkey since Turkey is not a former Soviet Country. Turkey and Russia have managed to enjoy close diplomatic relations over the common perspective for the US and EU. However, there are differences involving the Syrian factor and the 2015 economic sanctions imposed by Russia on Turkey in aftermath of a Turkish F-16 fighter shooting down a Russian Su-25 aircraft have created an environment of mistrust among the two states.

The two countries are interdependent on each other; Turkey is dependent on Russian gas to fulfill its 50% needs, the huge influx of tourists from Russia visited Turkey every year which accounts for a major chunk of its tourism industry and Russia is a major market for Turkish products and construction companies. Likewise, Turkey is the second-largest consumer of Russian gas and any further sanctions on Turkey will not only result in a huge economic loss for Russia but will also project its image as an unreliable gas importer which will make its clients shift towards West. Thus, the improved bilateral relations between Turkey and Russia will favour their economies

and improve the regional environment for interconnectivity and diversify trade relations in the region and beyond.

The current geopolitical tilt will enable Turkey to consolidate its role as the key player in the region and may facilitate the rising of Turkey as a new power in international politics as well.

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