

COMMENT 260 – Deciphering Turkey's Anti-India Stance Aimed at Gaining Regional and Global Prominence

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Erdoğan's Dig at India in the UN

During the high-level 78th session of the UN General Assembly on September 19, 2023, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan once again brought up the Kashmir issue in his speech to global leaders.

Erdoğan said, 'Another development (the first development refers to achieving inclusivity in Afghanistan's present government) which will pave the way for regional serenity, stability and prosperity in South Asia will be the establishment of a just and lasting peace in Kashmir through dialogue and cooperation between India and Pakistan' (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 2023).

He immediately added, "Türkiye will continue to support the steps to be taken in this direction. On every occasion, we underline that we respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of China. However, we will continue to express, and keep on the agenda, our sensitivity regarding the protection of the fundamental rights and freedoms of Uyghur Turks, with whom we have strong historical and social ties" (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 2023). The Turkish Premier's speech conveys a subtle message that he is striving to expand Turkey's influence across all Muslim countries in Asia, particularly in South Asia. Erdoğan has reaffirmed his country's unwavering support for both Pakistan and China in terms of their territorial integrity, essentially appeasing both sovereign governments. He has also employed rhetoric portraying Turkey as the New Ottoman Empire, integrated into the affairs of the Orient (Asia), with his country now positioned as a protector of all Muslims, not limited to the Uyghur Turks alone. This aligns with Russian President

Vladimir Putin's efforts among Slavs worldwide, especially those residing in Central and Eastern Europe.

Erdoğan speech has generated ire in India's diplomatic circles and even among some policymakers. They see Turkey as meddling in India's internal affairs by defying Kashmir's status as an integral part of India. However, the reality is that Pakistan has deceitfully and forcibly held control over a sizeable portion of Kashmir, known as Azad Kashmir, for decades, thereby perpetuating the status of the valley as a disputed territory in global forums, even at the United Nations.

Turkey's chain of anti-India events

On the very day (August 5, 2023) when India abrogated Article 370 and 35-A which granted special status to Indian Jammu and Kashmir, Turkey expressed its concern over India's allegedly unilateral move. The Turkish Foreign Ministry emphasized in an official statement that "Turkey is ready to contribute to efforts to reduce tensions in the region if the parties agree" (Düz & Bayar, 2019). This statement can be seen as Turkey's proposition to mediate between India and Pakistan. Starting from the first anniversary of the abrogation, Turkish media began aligning with Pakistan's stance, adopting a new terminology for Jammu and Kashmir - 'Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK),' which was promoted by Pakistan (Das, 2020).

As a response, India has markedly reduced its defense exports to Turkey (Statecraft, 2022), and Indian leaders have refrained from visiting Turkey in recent years (FirstPost, 2019). India's strengthening ties with nations that have complicated relations with Turkey, such as Israel, Greece, Cyprus, and Armenia, also signal a shift in India's foreign policy (Pubby & Chaudhury, 2019; Guptaby, 2022). While this may not signify a formal breakdown in relationships with Turkey, it serves as a message to Turkey regarding India's strong condemnation of Turkey's involvement in matters related to Kashmir and Pakistan.

Turkey, led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has opposed the proposed India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor by asserting that there cannot be a trade corridor between the East, Middle East, and Europe without Turkey (The New Arab, 2023). This opposition is seen as a reaction to the corridor announced on the sidelines of the New Delhi G20 Summit (9–10 September 2023) (Press Information Bureau, 2023), which aims to connect India with the Middle East and Europe, bypassing Turkey. Erdoğan argued that Turkey, being an important production and

trade base, is crucial for east-to-west traffic, emphasizing the significance of Turkey's role in such corridors.

This opposition is not unexpected, given Turkey's complicated relationships with nations that stand to benefit from the project, including Greece and Cyprus, both of which are long-standing adversaries. It is worth mentioning that Armenia, another likely member country to the corridor project, considers Turkey a patron state supporting Azerbaijan – which also played a crucial role in Azerbaijan's seizure of the ethnic Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh in the 2020 Second Karabakh War (Jones, 2020; Yalçinkaya, 2021; Agence France-Presse, 2023).

Turkey's anti-India position in recent times, primarily led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, serves as a strategic move to enhance both its domestic and international prominence. By reiterating support for Pakistan and China while advocating for the Kashmir issue, Erdoğan aims to position Turkey as a prominent player in Muslim-majority countries across Asia, particularly in the Indian subcontinent (or Hindustan, which shared people-to-people relationships with the stans in Central Asia as well as Tibet and Xingjian; Stobdan, 2020). This stance reinforces Turkey's role in global affairs and portrays the nation as a protector of Muslim rights and freedoms. In line with that, *Diriliş: Ertuğrul*, a Turkish historical fiction and adventure television series created by Turkey's national broadcaster (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation [TRT]) and supported by Erdoğan, has gained a global following in 72 countries and is popularly nicknamed the 'Muslim Game of Thrones' (Subramanian, 2021).

At the domestic front, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan led the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) to win both the presidential and parliamentary elections in Turkey held in May this year, focusing on the "Century of Türkiye" vision. The vision promised his countrymen (over)-ambitious projects and developments to propel the country into its second century as a republic. Moreover, AKP created a narrative that positions Erdoğan and the party as the guardians of Türkiye's future.

It is now time for Erdoğan to deliver his pre-election promises; however, Turkey is facing a myriad problems. In August 2023, the Turkish Lira fell to 29.01 against the U.S. currency, while Turkey's annual inflation rate surged for the second consecutive month to 58.9% (Trade Economics, 2023). This increase can be attributed to tax rate hikes (the Turkish Central Bank raised interest rates by 30% in September, which preceded another 15% hike in August as part of its policy

tightening measures; Turak, 2023), escalating food prices (annual food inflation rate has been continually rising since the end of 2019; Yülek, 2022), and the devaluation of the lira (as mentioned above).

Emerging Reality

Erdoğan's AKP government is facing pressure to address mounting public discontent in the country, especially among youngsters (Kirişci, 2023). Hence, Erdoğan is pursuing tactics to strike an emotional chord with his countrymen, mainly the ardent supporters of AKP and those who have swung between AKP and other parties. An easy strategy of this sort regards focusing on the dilapidated and oppressed condition of Muslims residing in Kashmir and of Chinese Uyghurs. Unlike hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs in China's concentration camps, most people in India's state of Jammu and Kashmir are content and have embraced the changes after Article 370 was revoked (Joshi, 2023).

It will be difficult for Erdoğan to sustain this tactic of targeting India to do away with his own set of growing problems, including heightened tensions at Turkish borders and the US' government relegation of Turkey from its previous favored nation status (Kirişci, 2021; Mortimer, 2019). Moreover, India's friendly overtures towards Turkey in recent times, for instance the Indian army providing medical and humanitarian aid to earthquake-stricken Turkey, has drawn public admiration for India (Hindustan Times, 2023)

Erdoğan's Critical Crossroads

Erdoğan needs to urgently re-strategize his anti-India rhetoric to avoid backlash from unexpected quarters. He risks isolating Turkey on the international stage, especially in the face of India's growing global support, and notably among EU countries (Mohan, 2021; WION, 2023; Sengupta, 2023). It's essential for Erdoğan to adapt his approach so as to maintain Turkey's influence and reputation in a rapidly changing world.

At this juncture, the most advantageous strategy for Erdoğan should involve charting a more nuanced and diplomatic course aimed at fostering cooperation and a constructive engagement with India rather than provoking confrontation.

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