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India Hyphenates Turkey

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Coincidence or diplomatic convenience! If India describes its diplomatic engagements with Turkey and its two regional adversaries, Cyprus and Armenia, along those lines, then something is amiss. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit, which begins on Monday, was preceded by the visit of his Cypriot counterpart Nicos Anastasiades. If this was not sufficient, a couple of days earlier Vice President Hamid Ansari completed a successful visit to Armenia. It is not accidental that Turkey has strong and controversial historical baggage vis-à-vis these two countries which has only intensified under Erdogan.

Armenia is a sad chapter in Turkish history. Turkey's role and involvement in the large scale killing of Armenians in the dying days of the Ottoman Empire have been controversial. Rejecting the claims of genocide, Turkish leaders have been refusing to come to terms with the killing of an estimated 1.5 million Armenians during the First World War. Describing the deaths as 'genocide' has been a punishable offense in Turkey. And any reference to the Armenian genocide has been a cause of tension between Turkey and its Western allies.

Though Indian soldiers took part in the liberation of Arab territories from the Ottoman yoke, nationalists and post-1947 India had viewed the First World War merely as a British colonial policy. Hence, it carefully eschewed depicting the Armenian killings as genocide and normalization of relations with Armenia did not alter this position; that is, until this week.

The highpoint of Vice-President Ansari's engagements in Armenia was his visit to the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute at Tsitsernakaberd in the capital. Meeting students and faculty members of the Yerevan State University, he conveyed a powerful message: "There cannot be two opinions regarding the killings of the innocent people, be it in this region, Asia, Africa or in

Latin America. We are obliged to adopt the universal values.” Responding to questions about the Turkish denial, Ansari remarked that the Armenian killing “raised a question certain states would find it hard to reply to.” The inference was simple. Despite the nomenclature, Turkey cannot run away from its historical responsibility vis-à-vis the Armenians.

If this were not sufficient, India hosted Cyprus President Nicos Anastasiades a couple of days before Erdogan's arrival. In July 1974, the Turkish armed forces occupied northern Cyprus and paved the way for the Declaration of "Turkey Republic of Northern Cyprus" in 1983. No country in the world has recognized, let alone condoned, the Turkish occupation and international efforts towards ending the division of Cyprus have been unsuccessful. Erdogan's hard-line positions are partly blamed for the stalemate in the UN-mediated peace efforts.

But are these engagements coincidental? While Cyprus and Turkey are looked after by the Central Europe Division in the Ministry of External Affairs, Armenia comes under the Eurasia Division. However, Poland comes under Central Europe, and the Vice-President visited Poland from Armenia. One can easily exclude 'coincidence' as the explanation for this week's parleys. What then could be India's message to Erdogan?

Despite winning all the elections since he first became prime minister in 2003, Erdogan's domestic popularity is on the wane and is manifested by his narrow victory in the recent referendum for a change over to the presidential system. His foreign policy successes are also limited. In recent years, especially since the onset of the Arab Spring protests in Tunisia in December 2010, the Turkish leader has turned belligerent and mercurial towards his neighbours and allies. By depicting Turkey as the model for Arab countries facing domestic upheavals, Erdogan revived the historic Arab-Turkish animosity and fears of neo-Ottomanism. As a result, some of his erstwhile allies became his new adversaries.

Erdogan also has frosty relations with some of India's close friends in the region. The killing of 10 Turkish citizens by Israel during the Gaza flotilla controversy in May 2010 resulted in the breaking of diplomatic relations between the two countries which were restored only in 2016. Erdogan, however, faced his own Mari Marmara moment of apology and remorse following the shooting down of a Russian Sukhoi-24 attack aircraft in November 2015. Above all, his professed bonhomie with Bashar al-Assad nose-dived following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war.

The diplomatic row over the participation of Turkish citizens in EU countries in the recent referendum and Erdogan's comparison of some European leaders with Hitler only made matters worse. Thus, while Turkey is important, Erdogan is becoming a new Ahmadinejad – a controversial and divisive figure.

For long, India was at the receiving end. Both during and after the Cold War, Turkey has been closer to Pakistan than to India. This has not changed significantly under Erdogan and on core issues like Kashmir and admission to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (of which Ankara is a member), he is less than forthcoming. Though not opposed to India's entry, Turkey also wants its long-time ally Pakistan to simultaneously join the NSG.

While Turkey is still a major regional power in the Middle East, New Delhi would not be able to ignore its diminishing fortunes and fault lines. The timing of its engagements with Armenia and Cyprus is a clear indication that India is hyphenating its relations with Turkey. By simultaneously engaging with his regional adversaries, India is hoping to influence Erdogan's attention and priorities.

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