

# *Trade, BRICS and Geography: Why Turkey Matters*

By: Bhaso Ndzendze

2 August 2018

bndzendze@uj.ac.za

The invitation of the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to the BRICS summit this year was a logical step by the association if its aim, as appearances suggest, is to enact multilateralism in the global arena. Turkey's enthusiasm for joining the association was on demonstration in the recent suggestion that a 'T' be added onto the acronym. As a country embarking on major reforms, and increasingly entertaining global ambitions, as well as a holder of the keys to a crucial sea route, Turkey's association with the BRICS could see much-needed enhanced trade between Russia and the other BRICS countries. But many questions and controversies await, among which are issues around the future of internal consensus as well as the functionality of the formation.

With formal diplomatic relations going back to 1947, Turkey and India's trade relations total around US\$6.409-billion, with a massive US\$5.105-billion deficit in favor of India. Though slim, within Sub-Saharan Africa, SA is the leading trade partner of Turkey. Turkey's trade with South Africa constitute approximately 40 percent of Turkey's trade with Sub-Saharan African countries. Annual trade volumes between two countries are around US\$1.40-billion, with South African exports from Turkey registering US\$489-million, and South African exports to Turkey amounting to US\$918.5-million. Both these figures are respectable, but are dwarfed by China's trade relations with the Middle Eastern power, with a total volume of US\$27.76-billion, with yet another trade deficit for Ankara, of a staggering US\$23.12-billion. Already some patterns are discernible here: with all these countries, Turkey has a trade deficit, which may arguably be the cause behind Turkey's acceptance of the invitation. But it is in Turkey's relations with a particular BRICS country that things get interesting, Russia; the country, also, with whose leader the Turkish President held a bilateral meeting after the summit.

As the only BRICS country geographically close to Turkey, Russia has had the most interesting history with the country. The Cold War reinforced an adversarial relationship, with Turkey, as a US ally and a NATO member, being pivotal to containment attempts against the Soviet Union.

However, over the last fifteen years, cooperation between the two countries has significantly expanded, especially in economics. Indeed, the transformation of the Turkish-Russian relationship is the most important development in Turkish foreign policy in the last decade. Russia is presently Turkey's largest trade partner and supplies Turkey with over 65% of its natural gas. The growing economic interdependence has reshaped Turkish foreign policy and security outlooks; Turkey has become more sensitive to Russian security concerns and has been reluctant to adopt Washington-suggested policies that might cause disaccord with Moscow and damage the relations.

Geographically, Turkey is uniquely endowed. Not only is Turkey a virtual land-bridge between Europe and Asia, but more crucially for Moscow, it stands between Russia and the Mediterranean Sea and therefore between Russia and the world; although Russia is

surrounded by ocean on its eastern and northern borders, these are frozen over through most of the year, and the maritime borders are shared with Finland in the North Sea and Japan in the Pacific, both astute American allies. Turkey can no longer be described in these terms. The change is important for Russia, and for BRICS at large. As the most penetrable of Russia's coasts, it has given way to more Russian trade (and some suspect also militarily) activity. In a summit pierced by soundbites around tearing down barriers to trade, gaining Turkish concessions around access to the Bosphorus straits could be historical. For BRICS, newly-heightened access to markets would no doubt garner noticeable increases in Russian trade with the more distant BRICS countries, especially Brazil, India and South Africa.

But far from being a mere gateway, however, the BRICS move by Turkey is indicative of a state eager to play a leading role in international politics in its own right – Istanbul was once the metropole center of an empire that spanned three continents after all. There is evidence of Turkish hopes for reforming the global arena. The usual place to start for any would-be global player is Africa. In the last 15 years, trade between Africa and Turkey has grown by 600% (currently at US\$17.5 billion). Ankara has also increased its diplomatic presence on the continent to over 40 embassies. Turkey's interests in Africa arguably rival those of the EU (especially France).

All this occurs against the decline in Turkey's relations with the US and the EU. We can (simplistically) distil the vast interaction of forces in the decline in the US/EU-Turkey relationship as follows. Due to the historically political (Cold War-originated) nature of the relationship, not much emphasis was placed on economics and trade. As a result, in the post-Cold War era, these minimal trade relations do not compensate for a lack of political consensus borne of diverging national interests. Specifically, Turkey's preoccupation with resisting secession and attack by Kurdish nationalist forces has made its participation in the Syrian conflict lacklustre, and in turn eroded consensus within NATO, and has seen it get closer to Russia. This in turn has seen Turkey's entry into the EU get delayed. Trump's steel tariffs against Turkey have not abated the situation.

Turkey's association with the BRICS carries another importance for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) conceived by China and explicitly endorsed by Russia and South Africa (with reservations by India which is working on its own maritime trade route with Japan, named the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor).

Turkish association is likely to garner some criticism, however. Erdoğan's consolidation of power and the recently-lifted state of emergency in place since 2016's failed coup in particular has been a major discouraging factor in Turkey's ascension into the EU, and the choice of Turkey as an associate may affect the BRICS' appearance, as they enlist "yet another flawed democracy". But this will miss the point completely, as human rights are at the bottom of BRICS' goals. This also means that despite Erdoğan's attempts to push Turkey towards a being a more Muslim state, and Turkey a Muslim power, there is to be no Turkish protestations – such as were seen at the behest of civil society in South Africa in the past number of weeks, with calls for Indian PM Narendra Modi's arrest – against alleged Indian state suppression of Muslims in India, especially in Kashmir. So disaccord on account of this can be discounted. Indeed, perhaps motivated by its own Kurdish question, Turkish silence has already been seen over Chechnya in Russia, and there is no Turkish disgruntlement in its bilateral relations with India over the treatment of its Muslim minority.

Questions remain, however and many more are likely to arise. The first question is one of whether Turkey will be entering the BRICS formally or whether a new class of membership or association being will be put in place? What will either of these structural changes render the BRICS; will it be an association of a strata of memberships, with invitations extended or applications accepted? Moreover, how will this new player in the BRICS association affect internal balance?

Based in Johannesburg, Bhaso Ndzendze is Research Coordinator at the University of Johannesburg Confucius Institute. He is the author of the *Beginner's Dictionary of Contemporary International Relations*.