

TURKEY AND LATIN AMERICA: FROM A REGIONAL POLICY TO A QUASI-INTERREGIONAL APPROACH?

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Publication Date: 1 March 2015

The international system is in the middle of a transitional age. The non-Western world is rising and there are plenty of examples about the rise of a novel geopolitical axis. Unipolarism, beyond the role of US as the main great power, does not mirror the real condition of the World Order. On the contrary, there is a rising multipolarism exemplified in the alteration of the sources of power from the traditional Western nations to emerging powers, from the “developed” North to Global South and from the Atlantic to the Pacific. China as the second military – based on annual military expenditure - and economic - GDP at purchasing power parity (PPP) power, is the best example of the geopolitical axis alteration. In this context, Turkey and Latin America are not secondary players in this game and both have strong bets to promote their normative values, gain more strategic autonomy and achieve a more prominent role in the concert of nations. The recent visit of the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Colombia, Cuba and Mexico is an important indicator of the growing ties.

Turkey has been one of the leading countries who changes its own cultural, political and international identity in a new global stage. Since early 2000s, Ankara has developed a different approach trying to break off the traditional western orientation of its Foreign Policy towards new “old” regions. The conceptual base of Turkey’s new foreign policy, driven by

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Justice and Development Party (AKP), states that Turkey is not only the “bridge” between the West and the East but a Central country. His mentor, the current Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, argues that Turkey is playing an increasingly central role in this new world by promoting international security and prosperity². The notion of central country means an actor that is geographically and geoculturally located at the intersection of self-contained regional systems³. This notion locates Turkey not in the West neither in Eurasia. However, due to the old-style orientation of the Turkish foreign policy, there was an increasing de-Westernization and Eurasianization that, at the same time, does not signify the abandonment of the Europeanization project⁴. AKP’s foreign policy is characterized by an emphasis on the use of soft power, developing the friendly relations with all neighbors – especially before the Arab Spring –, showing regional and international activism and opening relations with new regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Latin America, among other characteristics.

The political project of AKP is based on historical and civilizational backgrounds which forms the identity of the “New Turkey”. The norms, values and experiences, especially related with the Ottoman and Islamic Heritage, play a key role in the identity change. In general terms, the identity of the “New Turkey” - and their main decision-makers - perceived itself with high self-esteem and proud of their imperial past. Moving to today, Turkey is trying to cross the barrier of a Middle Power becoming a new emerging power, a global actor like the BRICS countries. The concept of “central country” started to “open up towards other regions such as Asia and Africa with an institutionalized partnership and wanted to play a more active role in international relations”⁵.

Then, in the AKP era, Latin America is one of the new regional dimensions of the Turkish Foreign Policy, although the more complex due to a geographical distance, cultural remoteness and the shortage of contacts. Along with Oceania, Latin America has been a distant reality not only for Turkey, but also for the Ottoman Empire during its Golden Age. In

² Davutoğlu, Ahmet (2010) “Turkey’s Zero-Problems Foreign Policy”, *Foreign Policy* at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/20/turkeys-zero-problems-foreign-policy/>

³ Kardas, Saban (2012) "Turkey on NATO's Role in the MENA: Perspectives from a “Central Country”", EDAM/Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p. 1

⁴ Ziya Öniş & Şuhnaz Yılmaz (2009) “Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign Policy Activism in Turkey during the AKP Era”, *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 10 (1), p. 20.

⁵ Ozkan, Mehmet (2011) “Turkey’s ‘New’ Engagements in Africa and Asia: Scope, Content and Implications”, *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 16 (3), p. 116.

the 19th century, there was some attempts but it did not work⁶. Nonetheless, Ankara has developed a series of bilateral and multilateral diplomatic initiatives increasing its role in the region as a new emerging actor. From 2002 until now there was important high-level visits and opening of new embassies from both sides, number of agreements increased geometrically, trade has grown considerably, and cultural links are in the best moment thanks to the expansion of the Turkish series in Latin America in addition to touristic, cultural and sportive links. Finally, Turkey has tried to transform the positive bilateral links into an interregional platform but the results are still limited.

Regarding this last point, the Interregional theory literature points that is an original and multidimensional phenomenon⁷ that can be interpreted as a ‘new layer’ in an increasingly differentiated global order⁸. According to the interregional literature, there are two kinds of interregional forums, the triadic (Western Europe and East Asia) and non-triadic (the rest) that reflected the locus of the economic and political power of the Post-Cold War. From an empirical perspective, there are three forms of Interregional Relations: relations between regional groupings; biregional and transregional arrangements; and hybrids relations⁹. The hybrid form or “quasi-interregionalism” is used to describe relations between a regional organization or group, and a third country in another region. In other words, a ‘region-to-state’ relation¹⁰.

The nature of the quasi-interregional system depends on three factors: capabilities, perceptions and influences of the units of the sub-system¹¹. In terms of capabilities, Turkey is not a great power with global projection. It is still an emerging regional power with certain limitations even in their own region¹². In terms of perception, Turkey is seen in Latin America as an emerging regional power and a key player in Middle East, Caucasus, Mediterranean and Eastern Europe and the new regional policy toward the region has been well-welcome. In

⁶ Cfr. Sochaczewski Goldfeld, Monique (2012) *O Brasil, o Império Otomano e a Sociedade Internacional: contrastes e conexões (1850-1919)*, PhD Thesis, Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação de História Contemporânea do Brasil, Fundação Getulio Vargas.

⁷ Baert, Francis, Scaramagli, Tiziana and Söderbaum, Fredrik (2014) *Intersecting Interregionalism: Regions, Global Governance and the EU*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism, New York: Springer, p. 4.

⁸ Krishnan, Venkata and Dhal, Gayatri (2014) “India-African Union: An asymmetric Quasi-interregional Subsystem”, *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 157, p. 266.

⁹ Hänggi, Heiner (2000) “Interregionalism: empirical and theoretical perspectives”, *Workshop “Dollars, Democracy and Trade: External Influence on Economic Integration in the Americas”*, Los Angeles, p. 3

¹⁰ Baert, Francis, Tiziana Scaramagli, and Fredrik Söderbaum (2014) *Op.cit.* p. 4.

¹¹ Krishnan, Venkata and Dhal, Gayatri (2014) *Op.cit.*, p. 269

¹² Cfr. Dinçer, Osman y Kutlay, Mustafa (2012) “Turkey’s Power Capacity in the Middle East Limits of the Possible: An Empirical Analysis”, *USAK Reports*, N° 4, International Strategic Research Organization.

sum, the increasing diplomatic and commercial presence is positive both for Latin America and Turkey. Finally, the symmetry or asymmetry of material and ideational resources between the single power and the region is the key factor. Normally, the more asymmetric the relation, the more likelihood to establish an informal or formal arrangement between the actors.

In the case of Latin America, we can say that the relation between Turkey and the main Latin American countries is symmetrical, or close to it. There are no big differences at the individual level. For example, Turkey has an important military power and a relevant geographic position but the Brazil and Mexico's economies are stronger than Turkey. Lastly, in terms of membership and international status, all these countries along with Argentina are members of the G-20, the most important international forum in terms of global governance. But if we take Latin America as a single actor there is no point of comparison.

The interregional initiative came from Turkey. Ankara tried to develop high-level contacts, agreements and meetings permanently with regional organizations in Latin America. For example, it is a permanent observer to the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) in 2004 and the Organization of American States (OAS) since 2011, joined the Pacific Alliance in 2013 as an observer member, accomplished a meeting with the Troika of Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in October 2013, organized a "quasi-interregional" meeting with the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) in July 2014 and prepared the first Latin American Muslim religious leaders summit in Istanbul in November of the same year in addition to the Free Trade Agreement negotiations with the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) since 2008.

Beyond well-intentioned Turkey, the emerging association between the country of the Bosphorus and Latin America has not yet reached the level of a quasi-interregionalism relationship. However, Ankara can continue developing quasi-interregionalism interaction with small regions inside Latin America, such as the Caribbean or the Central American countries and trying to gain more space as a global actor in other sub-regional organizations, especially the Pacific Alliance.

The Turkey's attempts to establish a stronger multilateral base in Latin America are a good example of the increasing importance of the non-triadic quasi-interregional relations between two former strangers. The rise of Turkey's crescent and star at the regional and global level, surely will lead to a strengthening of the regional policy and the materialization of the quasi-interregional relations with Latin America.