

Canada and Turkey

Rethinking the Relationship

Louis A. Delvoie

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Foreword

Since it emerged from the remnants of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War, modern Turkey has always occupied a crucial location in contemporary global politics. At the end of the Second World War, it was embraced by the United States as a country crucial to the interests of Western powers. Not only did Turkey's geographic location enhance its geostrategic importance in the evolving rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War, but its liminal location as a secular Muslim state between "east" and "west" gave it added importance as a bridge in contemporary global politics. In the last decade in particular, Turkey has undergone yet another in a series of political and economic transformations that stretch back to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire as a result of the First World War. With the rise of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2003 following the victory of his Justice and Development Party in the 2002 parliamentary elections, Turkey has seen a period of economic and political reform that has transformed not only Turkish politics but the Turkish economy, a new location underscored by Turkey's membership in the G20. But in the past decade we have also seen the emergence of a transformation in Turkish foreign policy as the Erdoğan government sought to maintain its strong antipathy for Islamist extremism while at the same time pursuing a more nuanced middle power foreign policy that, for example, has seen the government in Ankara take a more robust stance on regional issues.

One would get little sense of these transformations from the Canadian government's contemporary approach to Turkey. For much of the last decade, the bilateral relationship between Ottawa and Ankara has been cool, if not completely sour, mostly as a consequence of the passage in April 2004 of a parliamentary motion that "acknowledge the Armenian genocide of 1915 and condemn this act as a crime against humanity." Although the Liberals had a majority in the House of Commons, the prime minister, Paul Martin, allowed a private member's bill containing the motion to proceed through to final vote (though Martin himself chose to stay away for both the debate and the vote. The Turkish government's anger led to

the withdrawal of the Turkish ambassador in Ottawa. It was no surprise that the anger continued after the Conservatives came to power in 2006: Stephen Harper and numerous other Conservatives had voted for the resolution in 2004, and as prime minister Harper issued a declaration on 19 April 2006 commemorating “Medz Yeghern,” or the “Great Calamity” of 1915, openly declaring his support for the parliamentary resolutions declaring what happened to Armenians at the hands of the Ottoman Empire a “genocide.” And even when the relationship thawed somewhat in 2008, we have not seen the relationship with Turkey accorded much attention by official Ottawa.

In this Occasional Paper, Louis A. Delvoie, a former Canadian diplomat with extensive experience in the Middle East, and now a Fellow with the Centre, argues that the Canadian government needs to rethink its approach to Turkey. While he acknowledges that over the course of the Cold War Canada was never a strong supporter of Turkey, he argues that Turkey’s newfound importance as one of the key emerging economies demands greater attention from Ottawa. At the same time, however, he suggests that Canadians should not ignore Turkey’s continuing importance to the West’s—and thus Canada’s—geostrategic interests.

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Kim Richard Nossal
Director
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Canada and Turkey: Rethinking the Relationship

The need to diversify Canada's international economic relations has been a leitmotif of Canadian foreign policy for over fifty years. In the late 1950s, the government of Prime Minister John G. Diefenbaker proposed to shift fifteen percent of Canada's trade from the United States to the United Kingdom. In the 1970s, the government of Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau sought to create greatly enhanced economic and commercial relations with the European Economic Community and Japan as part of the "Third Option" policy. The governments of Prime Ministers Brian Mulroney and Jean Chrétien placed a heavy emphasis on developing new markets for Canada in the Asia-Pacific region. More recently the government of Prime Minister Paul Martin shifted the focus to newly emerging economies, stating that "Emerging economic powers like China, India and Brazil are the key drivers of a new era of global economic growth. As a result they will have a profound impact on Canada's long term economic future."¹

After a few false starts in the case of China, the government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper has devoted considerable attention to the three major emerging economies identified by its predecessor. It has also sought to pursue the process of diversification through the conclusion of a number of bilateral free trade agreements, albeit some with countries of relatively limited importance to Canada, e.g., Panama and Jordan. In the aftermath of the economic and financial crisis of 2008, and the dramatic shrinkage of the American market for Canadian exports, the Canadian government began the process of initiating free trade negotiations with India and the European Union, negotiations which promise to be of long duration.

What the Canadian government has been somewhat slower to recognize is that a number of second tier countries which have begun to make their mark on the world economic scene, offer immense opportunities for Canadian exports and investment. These are what *The Economist* refers to as "huge overlooked emerging giants," such as Turkey, which it characterizes as "one of the world's most dynamic economies."² In the case of

Turkey, the somnolence of the Canadian government may be explained at least in part by the fact that the two countries have historically enjoyed a relationship largely devoid of bilateral substance. Although diplomatic relations were established in the late 1940s, contacts between the two governments largely revolved around their common membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United Nations. Purely bilateral political, economic and social relations were, to say the least, anaemic. And even in the multilateral domain, the relationship got off to a rather unpromising start.

“Growing Up Allied”

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Turkey was subjected to a variety of threats from the Soviet Union which wished to gain control of the Turkish Straits and to secure the return of Turkish territories that had once briefly been part of Georgia. The Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin brought considerable pressure to bear on the Turkish government to achieve these objectives and to secure for the Soviet Union a position of influence in Turkish affairs. Faced with these threats, the Turkish government turned for help to the United States where it found an administration sympathetic to its concerns. The US administration provided a series of security assurances to Turkey under the Truman doctrine, which also covered Greece and Iran. While grateful for the declarations of support from the United States, the Turkish government, still engaged in a war of nerves with the Soviet Union, was looking for far more precise security guarantees than the United States appeared able or willing to offer on a bilateral basis. This led the Turkish government to turn its attention to NATO and to the binding security commitments embodied in Article 5 of its founding Treaty.³

Securing admission to NATO eventually became the single most important objective of Turkish foreign policy. Not only would membership in the alliance go a long way towards allaying Turkey's immediate security concerns, it would also represent a significant step in Turkey's long term endeavour to become more closely associated with Europe and the West.⁴ The United States saw considerable merit in Turkish membership for a variety of strategic reasons related to both the Soviet Union and the Middle East. Other allies were far more dubious, not to say recalcitrant,

in their reaction to the Turkish candidacy. Among these were Britain, Holland, Belgium, Norway, Denmark and Canada.

When the Turkish ambassador in Ottawa first approached the Department of External Affairs in August 1950 to seek Canadian support for Turkish membership in the North Atlantic alliance, he was given a polite but non-committal response. In fact the policy community within the Canadian government harboured the most serious reservations on the matter. Their objections to Turkish membership were numerous and varied. Some were essentially geo-strategic in character. Turkey was neither a northern nor an Atlantic country and its inclusion would extend the Treaty area a further thousand miles to the east, thus greatly extending the defence commitments of the existing members. Despite the substantial armed forces which Turkey would bring to the Alliance, this could cause existing members "to lose more on the commitment roundabout than they stood to gain on the manpower swing."⁵ Would the admission of Turkey not also elicit candidacies from countries yet further afield such as Iran. Finally there were concerns about the Soviet reaction to Turkish membership: "would it provoke the Kremlin into a new phase of military adventurism?"⁶

Other objections related more to the Canadian government's concept of the Alliance and to the way it had portrayed it to the Canadian public. To admit Turkey would undermine the idea of the Alliance as an association of democratic nations given that the government of Ismet Inonu was hardly notable for its democratic credentials. It would also seriously weaken the idea of the North Atlantic Pact as the basis of a political, economic and social community of nations given the socio-economic gulf which existed between Turkey and other NATO members. Finally there was the largely unspoken objection that Turkey did not really belong in the Alliance because it was a Muslim, not a Christian, country. To quote the elegant phrase of John W. Holmes, "In the often noble concept of the civilization of the North Atlantic there was a trace of the old idea of Christendom, and the Turks hardly qualified for that."⁷

The strength of the Canadian objections to Turkish membership in NATO is perhaps best captured in the uncharacteristically vigorous prose of Lester Pearson, who was then Secretary of State for External Affairs:

I had opposed bringing in these two Eastern Mediterranean countries [Turkey and Greece] since I believed that this made a nonsense of the North Atlantic character of our association,

diminished our credibility as the foundation for an Atlantic community and gave greater validity to the criticism that we were purely and simply a military alliance.⁸

The Canadian government maintained its opposition to Turkish membership for over a year, even though Britain switched sides on the issue fairly early on. At the NATO Council meeting of May 1951, Canada joined forces with Holland, Belgium and Norway in rejecting the Turkish candidacy and proposing a less comprehensive Mediterranean pact to provide security guarantees to Turkey. It was only in the run-up to the Council meeting of September 1951, when it was left isolated with Norway, that Canada finally agreed to support Turkey's admission to the Alliance. In short, Canada was one of the last holdouts in opposing Turkey's achievement of its highest priority foreign policy objective.

Some of Canada's reservations regarding Turkish membership proved to be well-founded in the years after Turkey's admission. The three military coups which occurred in Turkey between 1960 and 1980 made it somewhat difficult for NATO to portray itself as an alliance of democratic countries confronting a totalitarian Soviet bloc. When NATO decided to mount a propaganda campaign against General Wojciech Jaruzelski's seizure of power in Poland in 1981, it was somewhat inhibited in its efforts by the fact that Turkey was then under military rule. And NATO's criticisms of human rights abuses by the Soviet Union and its allies were not exactly strengthened by Turkey's well documented record of abuses against its Kurdish and Christian minorities.

Despite an unpromising start, and these ongoing issues, Canada and Turkey developed a generally positive and constructive relationship within NATO. Under NATO's Mutual Aid Program, Canada provided Turkey with hundreds of millions of dollars worth of military training and equipment, which were greatly appreciated by the Turkish armed forces. But even this highly successful programme gave rise to the odd controversy. Thus in the mid-1960s, Turkey proposed to transfer to Pakistan a number of largely obsolete F-86 fighter aircraft which it had received from Canada and which it no longer needed. This proposal was greeted with an outrage in Ottawa, since the Canadian government had a well-established policy of not exporting military equipment to either India or Pakistan because of the ongoing politico-military confrontation between those two countries. The matter was eventually resolved to Canada's satisfaction, but not before it had given rise to some fairly acrimonious diplomatic exchanges.⁹

Yet another NATO related disagreement between Canada and Turkey was to surface in 1992. With the end of the Cold War and the Soviet threat to Western Europe, and in the face of severe budgetary pressures, the Canadian government decided to withdraw the land and air forces which it had stationed in Europe for the previous forty years. The decision was greeted with relatively mild expressions of disappointment in a variety of NATO capitals, but it was not until a NATO ministerial meeting held in Portugal in April 1992 that it was subjected to severe criticism. On that occasion, Turkey joined forces with the United States and Holland in vigorously attacking the Canadian decision in what one Canadian diplomat called an episode of “Canada bashing.”¹⁰ Needless to say, the Canadian government did not take kindly to these attacks.

The Eternal Cyprus Crisis

The outbreak of civil unrest and conflict in Cyprus in 1964 came to add yet another multilateral thread to the relationship between Canada and Turkey, this one involving both NATO and the UN.

For most NATO members, including Canada, the Cyprus crisis was a matter of deep concern for three reasons. First, officials in Ottawa worried that the erratic Greek Cypriot leader, Archbishop Makarios, might seek the help of the Soviet Union in his confrontation with the Turk-Cypriots and with Turkey. This would provide the Soviet Union with a rare opportunity to engage in mischief in NATO’s backyard. Second, Canada feared that the conflict might imperil the security of the British Sovereign Base Areas on Cyprus, which served not only as intelligence gathering posts but as staging facilities for British nuclear bombers and American U-2 reconnaissance aircraft. Their importance to NATO’s deterrence posture had been re-confirmed in studies conducted by both the Canadian Department of National Defence and the Department of External Affairs in 1960.¹¹ Third, and perhaps of greatest importance for the Canadian government, there was a fear that a war between Greece and Turkey would pose a significant threat to the coherence and viability of NATO, which was the cornerstone of Canada’s defence and security policy during the Cold War era.

This last concern was repeatedly expressed by senior members of the Canadian government. Thus in a speech at the Mansion House in London in 1967, Prime Minister Lester Pearson put it this way:

Undoubtedly a greater immediate menace to NATO is the threatened conflict between two of NATO's members, Greece and Turkey, over Cyprus. If it were not averted, then armed conflict between two NATO members, using military equipment provided by other members for other collective defence purposes, could have a fatal effect on the NATO alliance.¹²

The Cyprus crisis also gave rise to another concern for the Canadian government: the effectiveness of the United Nations as a body capable of playing a constructive role in promoting international peace and security. In conversation with the Greek ambassador in Ottawa in 1964, the Secretary of State for External Affairs, Paul Martin, Sr., claimed that "if the UN is not permitted to keep the peace in Cyprus, then we must admit to a tragic failure for the organization."¹³ Under the circumstances, it was no surprise that the Canadian government played a highly active role in the UN's efforts to come to grips with the crisis. With the encouragement of the US Administration of Lyndon B. Johnson, the Canadian government took the lead in the protracted and difficult negotiations which eventually led to the creation and deployment of the UN Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), and to the dispatch of a Canadian contingent to Cyprus. The Canadian government derived a lot of credit and satisfaction from the outcome of these negotiations. In his memoirs, Paul Martin, Sr. wrote "the launching of the United Nations force in Cyprus may be regarded as one of Canada's more successful ventures in diplomacy."¹⁴

This element of satisfaction was, however, relatively short-lived. The deployment of UNFICYP had originally been envisaged as a short-term measure to allow the parties to resolve their differences in an essentially peaceful atmosphere (its first mandate was only six months in duration). Despite the good offices of a long succession of UN mediators, the parties never did manage to reach a durable solution and UNFICYP became a permanent feature of the Cyprus landscape. Canada's occasional involvement in diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis and its ongoing commitment to troops to UNFICYP did little to foster the development of constructive relations with Turkey. As the dispute dragged on for years, successive Canadian governments displayed a degree of exasperation with the positions of both Turkey and Greece. This was particularly true when the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 made it necessary for Canada to double the size of its UNFICYP contingent.¹⁵ When after nearly thirty years of participation in UNFICYP the Canadian government of

Brian Mulrone announced its intention to withdraw its contingent, the Secretary of State for External Affairs, Barbara McDougall, was fairly blunt in her criticism of both Turkey and Greece. In her words, peacekeeping had become an end in itself and a substitute for “political leadership, honourable compromise and negotiation.”¹⁶

Despite these occasional hiccups, Canada had by the end of the 1990s developed a reasonably amicable relationship with Turkey. But it was a relationship largely centered on common membership in NATO and on mutual interest in the Cyprus issue; it had little bilateral substance. That deficit would only begin to be filled with the remarkable transformation which Turkey experienced in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The New Turkey

During the second half of the twentieth century, Turkey had traditionally been valued in Western countries as either a bridge between West and East or alternatively as a barrier separating a peaceful Europe from a turbulent Middle East. Turkey’s membership in NATO had also been viewed as a matter of great importance to Western security. The sheer size of its armed forces (second only to those of the United States) had throughout the Cold War obliged the Soviet Union to deploy large numbers of troops along its southern border, thus diminishing the number of troops it could concentrate on the Central Front facing Germany and France. And, of course, Turkey had provided the United States with a network of military bases and intelligence gathering stations which were of key importance to American strategic planning vis-à-vis both the Soviet Union and the Middle East.

The terrorist attacks against New York and Washington in September 2001 were to add a new dimension to these perceptions and calculations. In the months following the attacks Turkey emerged as the model of the moderate Muslim country, as proof positive that Islam and democracy were not incompatible, and as a staunch ally in the struggle against Islamist extremism. This was yet another—and highly contemporary—reason for the West to value Turkey.

Turkey’s process of contemporary transformation began with the parliamentary elections of 2002, which saw what is usually described as a “mildly Islamist” party, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, or AK), achieve a clear majority of seats. Under the

leadership of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the AK government embarked on a slow but steady and thorough process of reform of the Turkish state. It launched campaigns against corruption and human rights abuses, took decisive legislative and constitutional action to curb the role of the military in politics and sought reconciliation with the Kurdish minority by extending the latter's social, cultural and linguistic rights. In the economic sphere, the government was successful in controlling the country's notorious budgetary deficits and rates of inflation. It actively encouraged privatization and the development of new manufacturing industries, and campaigned abroad to attract foreign investment, with considerable success. The result has been spectacular increases in the country's annual GDP growth rates.¹⁷

While many of these reforms are still works in progress and while many were primarily motivated by Turkey's desire to gain access to membership in the European Union, their net effect has been transformational. No longer is Turkey the object of a steady stream of adverse reports by human rights organizations and of repeated bail-out operations by the International Monetary Fund. It is a country which now enjoys far more widespread respect in the world, as evidenced by the fact that it was invited to join the G-20 group of leading world economies.

The Canadian Response

The Canadian private sector was far faster off the mark than the Canadian government in recognizing these new Turkish realities. A number of major Canadian companies became active in the Turkish market as both exporters and investors. These included Bombardier, Research in Motion, SNC Lavalin and Eldorado Gold Corporation. Two of Canada's leading pension funds decided to commit some \$230 million to the creation of a partnership focussed exclusively on investment opportunities in Turkey. The Canadian Turkish Business Council took the initiative to organize seminars and conferences to familiarize Canadian companies with priority development areas in Turkey such as energy, mining, communications technology, agriculture and agri-food. And Export Development Canada began to attach much greater importance to Turkey than it had in the past. The results of all of this activity is reflected in trade and investment statistics. Between 1999 and 2009 the value of Canadian direct investment in Turkey increased more than twenty-fold, from \$78 million to \$1.78

billion. From 2006 to 2008 the value of Canadian exports to Turkey more than doubled from \$520 million to \$1.2 billion.¹⁸ This all adds up to a far meatier, and far more promising, bilateral economic relationship.

By contrast, the Canadian government's diplomatic relations with the new Turkish government got off to what can only be described as a distinctly rocky start. In April 2004, the Canadian House of Commons chose to commemorate the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Armenians in 1915 by adapting a so-called "Armenian genocide" resolution, over the strenuous protests of the Turkish government. And despite further warnings through diplomatic channels, Prime Minister Stephen Harper made further references to the "Armenian genocide" in a statement issued in April 2006. Both events were greeted with intense dismay in Ankara where successive Turkish governments have steadfastly denied that the events of 1915 constituted genocide, and have insisted that it is up to historians, not foreign politicians, to interpret those events. The Turkish Foreign Ministry made clear that it considered that Canadian politicians had fallen prey to the pressures of an intensely hostile Armenian-Canadian community, and that the result could only be a "stagnation in bilateral relations."¹⁹ And this is in effect what occurred, with the temporary withdrawal of the Turkish ambassador in Ottawa and the absence of any high level contacts between the two governments for a period of four years.

The ice was finally broken in inter-governmental relations in May 2008 with a visit to Ankara by Leonard Edwards, the deputy minister of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. After these wide-ranging political consultations, the pace of contacts began to pick up thereafter. The minister of foreign affairs, Lawrence Cannon, met several times with his Turkish counterpart on the margins of international conferences and the minister of national defence, Peter MacKay, paid an official visit to Turkey in October 2009, the first bilateral ministerial visit to that country since 2003. In 2009, an air transport agreement, which set the scene for the inauguration of direct flights between Toronto and Istanbul, and a double taxation agreement were also signed. There was also a marked increase in the exchange of parliamentary delegations between the two countries.

Turkey also began to emerge on the radar of the Canadian minister of international trade, Peter Van Loan. In October 2010, Van Loan gave his first speech to the Canadian Turkish Business Council in Toronto. In that speech he announced that the Canadian government had just launched exploratory talks with the government of Turkey with a view

to concluding a free trade agreement between the two countries. He also announced that he would be leading a trade mission to Ankara and Istanbul from December 6 to 8, 2010.²⁰ And at the time of his actual visit to Turkey, the minister opened a new Canadian consulate in Istanbul. As Van Loan remarked,

Canada and Turkey have long-standing diplomatic relations. The opening of the new consulate in Turkey's largest city underlines Canada's priority of expanding bilateral ties with Turkey... The establishment of a Canadian consulate in Istanbul will support Canadian companies eager to expand into Turkey's dynamic market. With one of the fastest economic growth rates in the world... Turkey presents great potential for Canadian companies and investors.²¹

With this statement, Van Loan appeared to recognize, albeit somewhat belatedly, that Turkey had emerged as a potentially important economic partner for Canada. Whether the potential identified will be realized will depend, of course, on whether the minister's mission to Turkey is followed up with the necessary hard slogging on the ground by both the Canadian government and the Canadian private sector.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the economic and financial crisis of 2008-2009, the American market for Canadian exports shrank significantly; for the first time in more than thirty years Canada began to record deficits in its international trade balance. This spurred the Canadian government to renew efforts to diversify Canada's international economic relations. These have produced major thrusts in the direction of China, India and Brazil, as well as the initiation of free trade negotiations with the European Union. And these initiatives are now being supplemented by increased attention to the "overlooked" emerging economies. Turkey falls into that category and is attracting ever increasing interest on the part of Canadian corporations and the Canadian government.

In the pursuit of Canada's economic interests in Turkey, it would be unwise for the Canadian government to ignore that country's geo-strategic importance to the West. Whether as an ally in the struggle against Islamist terrorism or as a conduit to the countries of the Middle East and

Central Asia, Turkey is an invaluable asset to efforts to promote peace and stability in volatile regions of the world. The Canadian government should envisage initiating a broadly based political and security dialogue with the Turkish government and with some of the country's leading think tanks. This would not only serve to support general Western interests, but would also help to create a degree of intimacy in the bilateral relationship, which might in turn be highly useful in the economic sphere.

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About the Author

Louis Delvoie was educated at Loyola College, the University of Toronto, McGill University and the National Defence College of Canada. He joined the Canadian Foreign Service in 1965. Between 1965 and 1980 he worked in Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, Algeria, Belgium and Yugoslavia, as well as in Ottawa. He subsequently served abroad as Ambassador to Algeria, Deputy High Commissioner to the United Kingdom and High Commissioner to Pakistan. In Ottawa, he was Director General of the Bureau of International Security and Arms Control in the Department of External Affairs and Assistant Deputy Minister for Policy in the Department of National Defence. He retired from the Foreign Service in 1995.

From 1995 to 2002, he was an adjunct professor of international relations at Queen's University and at Royal Military College. He is now a Senior Fellow in the Centre for International Relations at Queen's University and a visiting lecturer at the Canadian Foreign Service Institute in Ottawa. He is a frequent commentator on Middle Eastern and South Asian affairs on CBC Radio. His numerous articles on Canadian foreign and security policy, and on international relations generally, have appeared in *International Journal*, *Behind the Headlines*, *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, *Policy Options*, *Canadian Foreign Policy*, *The Round Table*, *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, *Canadian Military Journal* and in a variety of books.

