At the outset, it may sound like another clichéd attempt to discuss the same topic once again, which gets revived time and again but the EU membership of Turkey is a topic always under discussion. Sometimes, it is a ‘privileged partnership’, which talks about a membership but falls short to provide the definitive status. Sometimes, the EU-Turkey is ‘special’ but unannounced, undefined concerns, obstacles crop up which so far have remained the permanent features in the EEC-EU-Turkey relationship, which is almost half-a-decade old started with the Ankara Agreement in September 1963. While the current buzz has been about an ever-closer European Union and the Lisbon Treaty which not only envisages about eliminating the inner conflicts but presenting the Union as a unified actor to the global stage, the procrastinating ambiguity about the EU membership of Turkey has again been glossed over by the speech of the British Prime Minister, David Cameron in Ankara on July 27.¹

Observations pro and contra have already been made against Cameron’s depiction of Gaza as ‘a prison camp’. But if the main focus of the speech has to be prognosed textually, the British premier’s strong advocacy for a Turkish membership aims at tackling the challenges posed by three ‘P’s namely the polarised, protectionist and prejudiced. While in his speech Cameron has attempted to respond the basic foundations of these three apprehensions, analysts should delve deeper to analyse promotion of the Turkish membership by the new British government, which have not received with same enthusiasm in other European capitals.

Undoubtedly Cameron is trying to readjust UK's position in a changing global political economy. His strong opposition to protectionists and citing the account of the first Turkish Ambassador to London two hundred years ago does indicate an aggressive trade-driven orientation of the UK foreign policy in future. The British PM posits Turkey in this frame and wants to double the existing trade of $9 billion with Turkey in coming five years. In addition Cameron has announced Turkey as ‘a great unifier’ in Ankara by rejecting polarised argument which forces Turkey to make a choice between the East and the West. His reference to Ankara’s role in especially Iranian nuclear issue, Afghanistan, Palestine-Israel and Balkans is the strongest single that at least the UK has started to value Turkey’s contribution to regional and global peace and its unifying role. Cameron’s tackle with prejudiced about the compatibility of Islam with European values points out the existing sharp debate in Europe about Turkey. His stand that the Europe is not defined by religion but by values is quite reasonable and well-taken by Turkey as part of ongoing legal reforms, while this is also the strongest argument against Turkey’s membership of the EU.

In his Turkey visit, Cameron has gone beyond the diplomatic rhetoric and argued that ‘a European Union without Turkey is not stronger but weaker, not more secure but less secure, not richer but poorer’. The obvious questions are: Why Cameron was so straightforward? Why did he connect the future of Europe to Turkey in economic, political and security terms? In other words, why is the UK is so much interested in perceiving Turkey as part of the EU, while at home the British government has to persistently respond to the old and new ‘Euromyths’?

There may be several explanations for this: historical, economic and global influence-wise. From a historical point of view, until 19th and 20th century Britain was a little island. With the 21st century as the global politics are shifting from the Euro-Atlantic pivot to Eurasia, Britain does not want to stay out of this new power configuration. Britain clearly sees Turkey as a gate
to open West and Central Asia. As the UK sees India as the centre of its Asia strategy, Turkey is the only country that can offer such a possibility to the UK in West and Central Asia.

From an economic point of view, there is little debate about the EU’s need of younger population. As the EU population ages and birth rates are going down, the only option to keep the Europe as an economic hub is to tie with a country having huge young population. 60% of Turkey’s 72 million population is below 30 years old. There is a larger debate in Europe related to economy and the future of the EU itself. With Germany as the leading protagonist, a group of countries favour more deepening of the EU and eventually turn it into a single entity. Euro as a single currency and a European Common Security & Defence Policy (CSDP) are indicators of steps towards that direction. Another group of countries, especially the UK, are more in favour of enlargement and expanding the Eurozone. Cameron’s increasingly huge support to Turkey’s membership is meaningful because with the Lisbon Treaty which envisions a more united and deepened EU. Cameron’s speech should be seen in this context and may even be considered as a counterbalance to the post-Lisbon process in Europe.

As the global shift is changing, Britain knows that a new reconfiguration of national strategy is indeed needed in order to maintain its global influence. This now depends on having a strong and equal relation with regionally influential states like Turkey and India. Take note that there was not a single mention of contentious issues in his speeches in Ankara and Bengaluru. Cameron knows that now stakes are high and a new British national interest not entirely depends on what the British want, rather how to co-opt others.

What will be the response to this British charm offensive interest to re-formulate relations is not clear yet from Turkish side. However, as Turkey grows economically and deepens its democratisation, their Euro-skeptics
increase there day-by-day. The question Turks ask to themselves, whether the EU will be a burden or a benefit for Turkey in the longer run. As of 2010, many consider that it will bring more burdens and even dilute increasing Turkish influence in various regions. The domestic Turkish discourse on the EU membership, against the backdrop of the Ankara speech, should therefore be interesting to observe in the coming months.

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30th August 2010.