

Türkiye's Transregionalism with South Asia: Geoculture-boosted Multifaceted Bilateralism

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ABSTRACT

Transregionalism is identified with loose and less-institutional interactions functioning via both state and non-state actors. Its lesser need for multilateral and ruled-based institutions makes transregionalism naturally flexible, multifaceted, and more bilateralism-oriented. Türkiye's enthusiasm to deepen relations with Asia, which was officially encapsulated within the Asia Anew initiative (2019), is a good example of such multifaceted transregional bilateralism. The initiative prioritized this interaction scheme by stressing the importance of inter-agency mechanisms operating via state and non-state stakeholders. Accordingly, this study argues that Türkiye's interactions with South Asia, especially regarding state/people-to-people relations, which merge state with non-state actors can be analyzed within the conceptual framework of transregional bilater-

alism. Departing from this premise, this study argues that the geocultural affinities between the South Asian and Turkish communities perform as the main "booster" of this framework.

Key words: Geoculture; transregionalism; bilateralism; Türkiye; South Asia.

TRANSREGIONALISMO DE TURQUÍA CON ASIA MERIDIONAL: BILATERALISMO MULTIFACÉTICO IMPULSADO POR LA GEOCULTURA

RESUMEN

El transregionalismo se relaciona con interacciones más laxas y menos institucionales, que funcionan a través de actores tanto estatales como no estatales. Su menor necesidad de instituciones multilaterales y basadas en las normas hace que el transregionalismo sea naturalmente flexible, multifacético y más orientado

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al bilateralismo. El entusiasmo de Türkiye por profundizar las relaciones con Asia, que quedó oficialmente plasmado en la iniciativa Asia Anew, es un buen ejemplo de ese bilateralismo transregional multifacético. La iniciativa priorizó este esquema de interacción al enfatizar la importancia de los mecanismos interinstitucionales que operan a través de actores estatales y no estatales. En consecuencia, este estudio sostiene que las interacciones de Türkiye con el sur de Asia, especialmente en lo que respecta a las relaciones Estado/persona a persona, que fusionan actores estatales con actores no estatales, pueden analizarse dentro del marco conceptual del bilateralismo transregional. Partiendo de esta premisa, este estudio sostiene que las afinidades geoculturales entre las comunidades del sur de Asia y turca actúan como el principal “impulso” de este relacionamiento.

Palabras clave: geocultura; transregionalismo; bilateralismo; Türkiye; Asia del Sur.

INTRODUCTION

Today’s multipolar international ecosystem requires more flexible, or even ambiguous, terms to conceptualize the interactions between state actors and similarly flexible schemes for better functionality of these interactions. What is meant by flexibility here is less rigid and less institutionalized engagements and more ad-hoc activities. Searching for such flexibility also increases the importance of the interactions between non-state units, which are abstracted as people-to-people links.

Three concepts due to their interlinking features can be utilized in conceptualizing Türkiye’s interactions with South Asia: geo-

culture, transregionalism, and bilateralism. Geoculture is still not a very widely used term to conceptualize inter-state affairs since it does not provide a standalone and clear meaning. Yet, its amorphous, i.e., flexible, nature allows international relations (IR) scholars to use it as a blanket term. It can be used in an interlinked sense with a multiplicity of related concepts, such as imagined communities, soft power, and cultural diplomacy. In IR, particularly in regionalism studies, another flexible term is transregionalism, which is also quite useful for conceptualizing interactions transcending national and regional borders. Transregionalism is not only less institutionalized and less rule-based but also puts a special emphasis on non-state actors’ interactions. Bilateralism is also flexible, especially when it is utilized in a transregional sense. Since it allows the parties to give certain privileges to each other without giving the same commitment(s) to the others, bilateral schemes can be established and terminated more easily than multilateral structures.

Türkiye’s geocultural relations with South Asia, fit into the conceptual framework of transregional bilateralism and within this premise, geocultural affinities play a boosting role. This was well-underlined in Ankara’s Asia Anew initiative by stating ‘the deep-rooted historical and cultural ties’ between Türkiye and Asia (MFA, 2019). To prove this boosting effect of geoculture, this study focuses on the sub- and non-state interactions between Türkiye and South Asia, rather than high-political and inter-state diplomatic affairs.

The study carries out this analysis in four parts. It first discusses why transregionalism is preferable in today’s global ecosystem and

how it is linked with bilateralism. Second, it describes the concept of geoculture and what type of basis it provides for transregionalism. Third, it explains how geoculture operates in international affairs via cultural diplomacy and why it is becoming more important for transregional interactions. Fourth, it elaborates on how Türkiye's geoculture-boosted transregional bilateralism operates in its state/people-to-people interactions with South Asia.

In a more empirical sense, the article interprets how geocultural elements influence the interactions of Türkiye's state and non-state elements with their counterparts in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, and Sri Lanka, where Türkiye had strong geocultural links due to cultural, particularly religious and historical, affinities. India, on the other hand, is a peculiar case regarding these interactions in South Asia. Türkiye's geocultural interactions with India are heavily focused on its Muslim communities. In other words, state actors' interactions with each other are not particularly strong between Türkiye and India but non-state interactions due to religious affinities are relatively stronger.

In a nutshell, this study examines the patterns of culture-based state/people-to-people interactions. And regarding this examination, the Türkiye - South Asia relations case shows that if utilized smartly, geoculture could provide a very significant foundation for soft power to increase the influence of cultural diplomacy.

TRANSREGIONAL BILATERALISM: A FLEXIBLE AND PRACTICAL PATTERN

Regionalism, as a concept, is quite amorphous since it operates on multiple layers, e.g., politi-

cal, economic, strategic, etc.; on various levels, for instance, intra-regional, inter-regional, extra-regional; and via multiple types of actors, such as governments, NGOs, non-state elements and international organizations which makes the concept mean 'different things to different people in different contexts' (Söderbaum, 2016, p. 17). This multiplicity not only generated several prefixes for regionalism such as inter-, trans-, extra-, cross-, pan-, overlapping-, and mega but also prevented the formulation of a global theory to canvass the concept comprehensively (Börzel, 2016).

Transregional interactions in such amorphous conceptualizations of regionalism have some distinctive characteristics, which make them preferable to institutionalized and strictly rule-based schemes for today's international community. Transregionalism is a blanket concept for looser and less-institutionalized interactions (Aggarwal, 1998; Köllner, 2000; Yeo, 2000; Rüländ, 2002). The concept particularly focuses on amalgamated relations between state and non-state actors (Ribeiro-Hoffmann, 2016). In this sense, it goes beyond narrow interaction patterns operating within formal and intergovernmental frameworks (Baert *et al.*, 2014). Transregionalism's flexible format counts non-state actors as significant elements of cooperation in cross-regions (Aggarwal & Fogerty, 2004).

Transregional interactions do not aim to deepen institutionalization but mostly focus on agenda setting, policy planning, and developing mutual policy aims. This is more of a dialogue process with diffuse membership (Hänggi *et al.*, 2006). Since transregionalism does not require institutional frameworks,

states could act in their individual capacities (Baert *et al.*, 2014) without being restrained by strict community rules, such as the *acquis communautaire* of the European Union (EU).

To make it clearer, transregionalism needs to be differentiated from interregionalism. The latter demands institutional interchanges between at least two regions which are embodied in formal regional organizations (Mattheis & Litsegård, 2018). These regional organizations inter-regionalize in three forms: 'relations with regional organizations in other regions', 'relations with third states in other regions', and 'direct or indirect involvement in other interregional (or transregional) mechanisms' (Hänggi, 2006, pp. 33-34). 'These forms depict that interregionalism requires well-functioning regional organizations capable of representing their region, and cohesive and autonomous enough to carry out relations, symmetrically or asymmetrically with their counterparts bearing, more or less, similar characteristics' (Baba, 2023, pp. 492-493). Such requirements pushed the discussions of interregionalism into the realm of the EU due to its regional representative status, strong mandate, and institutional capacity underlining its actorship and coherence (Hill, 1993; Bretherton & Vogler, 1999). Therefore, three well-known examples of interregionalism are dialogue partnerships between the EU and Mercosur and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, and also between ASEAN and the EU. Unlike transregionalism, interregionalism aims to strengthen regional identity and cohesion which again requires institutionalization (Gilson, 2002; Hänggi, 2003) and intraregional

interdependence. Transregionalism, on the other hand, could operate even between two states, which makes bilateralism a useful tool for it.

In bilateralism, the actors have a normative belief that the issues should be resolved, or the interests should be developed with one-to-one links (Pempel, 2004). This creates an element of exclusion, with which parties give particular privileges to each other. Due to such practical advantages, bilateralism has become a fashion in international schemes of trade, investment, and security (Heydon & Woolcock, 2009).

In addition to their usefulness, bilateral schemes are easier to establish than multilaterals. Bilateralism needs less structured organizing principles than multilateralism to regulate the conduct of parties. In bilateral schemes, the relations are formed and maintained according to the needs, interests, and expectations of the two parties on a case-by-case basis (Ruggie, 1992; Tago, 2017). It is particularly useful for relations that require functionality through informality (Cha, 2014; Rochester, 1990).

Unlike rule-based multilaterals, bilateral arrangements do not have checks and balances, which helps the stronger to achieve more profitable outcomes (Dent, 2006). In this dynamic relationship, asymmetries are not unusual due to an 'imperfect balance of power' or 'to a difference in the nature of actors' (Renard, 2016, pp.19-20). Yet, this does not mean that bilateralism is completely imbalanced. On the contrary, it operates with a 'simultaneous balancing of specific quid-pro-quo by each party' (Ruggie, 1992, p. 572).

GEOCULTURE: AN ALTERNATIVE BASIS FOR TRANSREGIONALISM

Immanuel Wallerstein's (1993) argument was that in the period 1945-1970, the people of the periphery organized themselves and one form or another achieved two principal objectives: greater political autonomy and greater wealth. Yet, this achievement did not eliminate the gap between the North and the South, even in the second decade of the 2000s. This gap in addition to politics and economy has also been discussed as a result of the culture. The traditional culture of the periphery has been seen by the literature on development debates between 1945 and 1970 as an obstacle to peripheral countries' development (Wallerstein, 1993, p. 213).

With the rise of the non-west via the emerging powers, including China, India, Brazil, South Africa, and Türkiye in the 1990s and 2000s, culture began to be discussed by these powers as an element of resistance to "degeneration" and "disintegration" posed by the "western" values. Culture here acts as both a unifying and dividing force. (Wallerstein, 1991). This cultural resistance goes back to the 'sociological invention of antisystemic movements' of the 19th century. The emphasis of these movements was that the opposition against the dominant or elite cultures of the West 'must be organized' if it aims to be successful in 'transforming the world'. Therefore, 'cultural resistance today is very often organized resistance – not spontaneous or eternal, but planned'. This organized cultural resistance is 'part and parcel of political resistance', which 'deliberately' asserts (or reasserts) 'particular cultural values that have been neglected or

disparaged in order to protest against the imposition of the cultural values of the strong upon the weaker'. In this way, it strengthens the weaker in its 'political struggles' against the strong (Wallerstein, 1991, pp. 193-194). Regarding the above-mentioned examples of the non-Western emerging powers, this cultural resistance unifies the non-West against the West. The reason for this non-Western unification was that the West, represented mainly by the Europeans, imposed its values on the rest of the world as universal by furthering through domination and material interests (Wallerstein, 1993).

This interpretation takes culture to an elevated point in international politics. It can now be used to mobilize socio-economic elements for particular ends between states and non-state actors, i.e., cooperation and contestation (Winter, 2021). Geoculture, although is not a very familiar term of IR, provides a useful way of inquiring about how cultural elements are distributed over territories and the people living on them (Hannerz, 2009). Even if Wallerstein (1991, p. 11) defined geoculture as 'the cultural framework which the world-system operates', it is, more evidently, a constructed conception that brings different map-making processes and cultural imaginations through shared ideas, values, history, metaphors, and ideologies (Hannerz, 2009). In this sense, it is also linked with Benedict Anderson's (1991) imagined community, which posits in the socialization of a modern community imagination acts as a transformative force. These imagined communities could be transnational, which are broadly defined as global ethnicities (Brinkerhoff, 2009).

Geoculture, with such post-national/ist features, provides a baseline for transregionalism which relies on cultural practices and beliefs creating a community imagination that can take place across regions. With their increased significance and influence, policies relying on these cultural practices have been gradually becoming preferable. In these applications geoculture does not necessarily create a unified monolithic culture, rather it maps out an empirical mosaic of transnational ethnicities, which fits into many state practices, two examples of which are contemporary Ottomanism and China's Belt and Road. Such a mosaic puts aside nationalisms 'in favour of a patchwork of ethnically determined communities that spill across state borders and demarcate the geography of multiculturalism' (Athique, 2014, p. 9).

Transregionalism – geoculture nexus underlines the changes in geopolitics with the new millennium that border-crossing politics are carried out by a collaboration between state and non-state actors. In a conventional understanding of geopolitics, the latter needed the former. In transregionalism, it is almost the opposite. Transnational businesses, NGOs, media, and second-track diplomatic elements are quite useful for the state to make its cultural imagery attractive. This attractiveness helps the diffusion of one country's cultural ideas, symbols, and practices and to be received in other territories. This understanding of geoculture also touches upon Nye's (2004) conceptualization of soft power which posits a projection of cultural values in a variety of ways such as foreign policy, higher education, and popular culture.

Here, geoculture does not give "magical" powers to state actors but a new channel

or a strand of interactions that could complement their traditional commercial and diplomatic relations. Countries prioritizing geoculture, such as China, insert a new discourse based on 'historical networks of [the] silk trade, seafaring, market cities, and cross-cultural encounters' (Winter, 2019, p. 18) in their transnational initiatives. Geoculture in these initiatives develops a type of magnetism that countries such as Iran, Türkiye, and the Gulf states see. For example, the Belt and Road Initiative amplifies the Chinese culture's international recognition and develops politico-economic loyalty between its members.

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: GEOCULTURAL APPLICATIONS IN STATE-MANAGED PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE (STATE/PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE) INTERACTIONS

Geoculture's role in foreign policy, due to its links with soft power and emphasis on historical and cultural affinities between nations, is quite visible in cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy resting on cultural affinities provides new agendas 'leading to a more vigorous and creative and strategic communication system' which is 'dynamic and flexible' (Waller, 2009, p. 403). With these very features, cultural diplomacy is quite adaptable to the rapidly changing environment of global politics. This environment is a product of the transformation from high to low politics, in which the heavy influence of security has been replaced by more humanitarian, cultural, and environmental aspects. Cultural diplomacy aims to address these aspects.

Cultural diplomacy's usage has expanded in the last decade, and it is now applied to almost any type of cultural cooperation managed by first and second-tier diplomatic agents/initiatives (Ang *et al.*, 2015). This way, it walks hand in hand with soft power and public diplomacy. More precisely, cultural diplomacy is a sub-element, if not a tool, of public diplomacy through soft power, providing the necessary ingredients for its successful operation.

Within these interlinked conceptualizations and usages, culture becomes a tool of diplomacy through which states not only develop soft power-based influence over others but also open new channels for cooperation in addition to economic and strategic realms. In these interactions, culture deepens mutual understanding, strengthens national reputation, and combats stereotypes (Mark, 2009).

The way cultural diplomacy is interlinked with geoculture rests on the ambiguity of the definition of culture. This ambiguity gives the joint operation of these two terms a broad scope of practice to cultivate cultural recognition between different nations (Ang *et al.*, 2015) and to deepen cultural affinities between nations with similar socio-cultural backgrounds. The same ambiguity also weakens the possibility of achieving concrete and precise objectives. In other words, some of these geoculture-boosted cultural diplomacy objectives could be 'ambiguous and overstated' (Cull, 2009) which can turn them into an 'overplayed hand' (Isar, 2010).

Since cultural diplomacy works through multiple channels, state, and non-state institutions operate in it mostly in a cooperative sense.

This makes it a suitable setup for transregionalism, due to its operational pattern embracing state and non-state actors together. Aid agencies, conventional and social media, religious organizations, and environmental and human rights NGOs are all instruments of cultural diplomacy. Through these instruments, it creates multiple networks for cultural and intellectual exchange. These exchanges with the help of geocultural affinities could construct, as the constructivists argue socially shared beliefs (Wendt, 1999). Cultural diplomacy fertilizes these shared beliefs with 'fine and performing arts, language education, and intellectual tradition' (Ogoura, 2009, p. 45). Today, social media and popular cultural components such as influencers, movie stars, and series have become the new instruments of cultural diplomacy. Not only they can be easily disseminated by the state and non-state actors but also, they can be easily accessed by millions and therefore these components can mobilize and reshape the cultural understandings of mass audiences. In other words, cultural diplomacy operates via both high cultural (education, art, and literature) and popular cultural (series, movies, social media) instruments.

TÜRKIYE-SOUTH ASIA TRANSREGIONALISM: AN EFFICACIOUS COMBINATION OF GEOCULTURE AND BILATERALISM

Although Türkiye is still being discussed as an assertive middle power proactively engaging with many neighboring and non-neighboring regions, it has relatively lost its proactivity due to domestic politico-economic strains, the exodus of asylum seekers from Syria, Afghani-

stan, and other neighboring regions, and sustained conflicts with its traditional allies and partners, i.e., the United States and the EU. Yet, the legacy of its golden age of proactive middle power-ism (2007-2013) is still quite considerable, especially with the boosting effect of geoculture.

Türkiye's utilization of cultural diplomacy in its transregional affairs coincides with its foreign policy activism. Here, transregionalism is a useful perspective to frame the flexible and eclectic nature of Türkiye's activism. Since Türkiye is not a member of a well-functioning regional organization, such as the EU, that can represent its region and, at the same time, is cohesive and institutional enough to carry out relations directly with its counterparts Ankara's interactions with non-EU countries need to be in a transregional pattern. Transregionalism displays Türkiye's activism regarding its aims as well. Ankara's foreign policy activism in both neighboring and non-neighboring regions focuses on agenda-setting and developing mutual policy aims rather than creating institutional schemes. Regarding Türkiye's foreign policy behavioral patterns, transregionalism is also a useful framework since, Ankara does not rely on institutional support of the organizations that it has been a member, such as the United Nations, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, or the Council of Europe, but mainly on its individual capacities. Since there has been a lack of institutional support in Türkiye's transregional activism, bilateralism provides an additional, or an eclectic, framework. Ankara has been protecting and furthering its interests with one-to-one links and without necessarily in a

structured scheme. Rather, it establishes and consolidates its relations with its transregional partners on an ad-hoc and case-by-case basis. Although Türkiye has been experiencing an imperfect balance of power, regarding its relations with the smaller powers in the Balkans and Africa, the outputs usually balance the specific quid-pro-quo of the parties. Geoculture here acts as a booster that similar cultural practices with these parties create a community imagination in which both state and non-state elements could interact with greater ease, if not trust. Due to the influence of this booster, the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) fueled Türkiye's transregional proactivism, in the form of cultural diplomacy, in the Balkans and the Middle East, and to an extent Africa with a bilateral pattern (Larrabee, 2007; Alpan & Öztürk, 2022).

Most pieces of the literature on AK Party proactivism see Ankara's cultural diplomatic steps into these regions as the result of Türkiye's increasing soft power (Altunışık, 2008; Kalın, 2011; Demirtaş, 2015; Altunışık, 2016; Ekşi, 2017; Tol and Baskan, 2018; Çevik, 2019; Omid, 2021). Cultural diplomacy here performs as an instrument for creating multiple networks of diplomatic, economic, and intellectual exchanges (Baba, 2017). With these networks, cultural understandings of mass audiences in these regions are mobilized and reshaped and to an extent pulled towards Türkiye. Although not well-examined within the literature, geocultural emphasis in such instrumentalization of cultural diplomacy has been more decisive. That is the reason why, Ankara first tried its soft power influence in the Balkans and the Middle East. Through these cultural

diplomatic steps, geocultural affinities, particularly, in history and religion, acted as unifying forces for developing people-to-people and community-to-community links. These affinities were also against the dominance of Western values. As the geocultural paradigm argues these non-western tendencies with historical and religious affinities gave Türkiye a new cultural framework to impose its influence. This new geocultural framework also had transregional features as seen in Türkiye's relations with Africa and Asia. AK Party governments even implied their enthusiasm to be the leader of this geocultural imagined community. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's famous quote "the world is bigger than five" (Erdoğan, 2016) asserts this tendency.

Türkiye's interactions with South Asia particularly fit into this transregionally bilateral geocultural framework. Neither Türkiye nor the countries of South Asia are members of, EU-style, strongly institutionalized organizations, which are autonomous enough to carry out relations with each other. The lack of such an institutional scheme led these actors to look for developing mutual policy aims to satisfy their own foreign policy needs. This development has been more easily carried out via bilateralism and on a case-by-case basis. In conformity with the state plus non-state features of transregionalism, and the less institutionalized and less rule-based nature of bilateralism Türkiye utilizes its geocultural affinities with South Asia by fusing state and non-state elements of its cultural diplomacy.

Türkiye's cultural diplomacy operates in South Asia, as in many other places, via a variety of state institutions including the Turk-

ish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), and the Türkiye scholarships program of the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB). They all aim to develop state/people-to-people links and promote Türkiye's national brand through strategic and sustainable communication. In almost all their objectives and actions, cultural affinities have been providing a useful base.

TİKA, particularly after 2011, has been the most influential cultural diplomacy instrument of Türkiye. TİKA has been functioning in every South Asian country via a variety of humanitarian and developmental projects. The core of these projects has geocultural connotations aiming to develop transregional imagined communities as it is expressed on the official website of TİKA. Several emphases on the website underline these connotations:

The character of our work in our flourishing and improving ancestral lands changed over time. ... TİKA accelerated its education activities in the ancestral lands after 1995 - schools, libraries, and laboratories were built and provided universities with technical equipment. ... In parallel to the acceleration achieved on the subject of development in the countries with whom we share the same language, the projects that TİKA carried out in these regions have turned into projects that increase institutional capacities. The projects that our country and TİKA realize the ancestral lands with the proper pride of being the inheritors of a common history still continue. (TİKA, 2023)

Although it has a geocultural motivation, TİKA's activities mainly focus on the develop-

ment of communities in the target countries all over the world. And South Asia is not an exception to that. In Lahore, Pakistan, TİKA established a Textile Training Centre (TİKA, 2017), a professional education center (TİKA, 2019), and set up two water sediment filter facilities in Karachi and one in Mithi together with ten water wells in Tharparkar (TİKA, 2017). In Afghanistan, TİKA constructed Martyr Bülent Aydın Mosque as a part of the Mosque construction project under the command of Kabul International Airport (TİKA, 2017). TİKA also provided drugs and medical consumable material support to health institutions in Cevizcan Province Shibrgan District of Afghanistan (TİKA, 2018). In Bangladesh, TİKA opened a Chemotherapy Unit in Shaheed Suhrawardy Hospital, (TİKA, 2017a), and carried out aid activities in the fields of education, health, emergency assistance, water, and sanitation and provided infrastructure to 750 thousand Rohingya Muslims who fled from Myanmar (TİKA, 2018). The Agency opened the Bangladesh-Turkish Technology Institute in Lalmonirhat City, with the aim to teach the local communities basic and advanced level computer skills, computerized graphical design training, and stitching and textile skills (TİKA, 2019). In Makunudu Island of the Maldives, TİKA opened a lab for the Makunudu Primary School (TİKA, 2015). In Sri Lanka, the Agency constructed a village for the settlement of the Muslims, who migrated because of terrorist activities. This village, which is 300 km away from Colombo, is comprised of 100 houses and was completed in 2015 (TİKA, 2017b).

Diyanet's role in Türkiye's geocultural interactions with South Asia has been func-

tioning in the humanitarian aid domain. The contents of Diyanet's humanitarian aid have been various, including direct money transfers (Yeni Asır, 2021), dry food (Yeni Haber, 2022), frozen meat (Doğru Haber, 2023; Anadolu Ajansı, 2023), construction of orphanages (Diyanet TV, 2018), cleaning materials, shelter and kitchen equipment (Hukuki Haber, 2018; Anadolu Ajansı, 2017; Milliyet, 2015). In Afghanistan, Diyanet provided food assistance to 2,000 Afghani families in Kabul (Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2021). In Pakistan, the Diyanet Foundation also provided food assistance to 25,000 families (Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2019) and helped the Pakistanis who were hit by the monsoon floods (Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2022a). Similarly, Diyanet sent humanitarian assistance to 2,500 families in the Kerala state of India which was also hit by floods (TRT Haber, 2018). Diyanet also delivered humanitarian assistance to Rohingya Muslim refugees in Bangladesh (Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2022b).

From the perspective of geoculture, both TİKA and Diyanet's activities are means of maintaining a transregional imagined community linking the culturally connected communities of South Asia and Türkiye. As humanitarian assistance and development projects are claimed to bolster soft power (Vuving, 2009), TİKA and Diyanet's humanitarian and developmental aid projects not only keep these transregional links fresh but also strengthen Türkiye's soft power attractiveness for the communities of South Asia.

YTB's Turkish scholarships also serve for the soft power connotation of geoculture intending to improve mutual understanding on the individual level. Their objective is to turn

Türkiye into an attractive and new center of education and research. This has been repeated in several statements of President Erdoğan (Erdoğan, 2015; Erdoğan, 2018; Erdoğan, 2022). What makes geoculture meaningful in these statements is the emphasis on common norms and values between Türkiye and the nations/communities of prospective bursaries. The scholarship covers all the educational and living expenses along with the travel expenditures of the candidates to study at Turkish universities. Regarding the application to these scholarships, South Asian candidates have a very significant percentage. In 2019 it was 19% (Türkiye Bursları, 2019), in 2020 it was 28.50% (Türkiye Bursları, 2020), in 2021 the percentage was 25.6% (Türkiye Bursları, 2021)¹. This implies the geocultural attractiveness and influence of Türkiye over the region's youth.

On the non-state level, Turkish NGOs, and on the popular cultural level Turkish series play an important role in the constant construction of an empirical mosaic of transnational communities. One major Turkish NGO is the Yunus Emre Institute established by the law numbered 5653 and dated May 5, 2007. Although it is a public foundation, it operates like an NGO with the aim 'to promote Türkiye, Turkish language, its history, culture, and art, to make such information and documents available to all interested persons around the world, to provide services abroad to those who want to learn Turkish language, culture and art, improve friendship and in-

crease cultural exchange between Türkiye and other countries' (MFA, 2023). As seen in its very aim, the geocultural essence has been the main foundational and practical element of this institute. The Yunus Emre Institute can be accepted as a high cultural instrument of Türkiye's cultural diplomacy due to its emphasis on teaching Turkish and carrying out art activities and supporting scientific research. The institute has branches in almost every major South Asian country or liaisons functioning within the Turkish Embassies. In Kabul, it has been actively teaching Turkish, especially to Afghani women, and increasing cultural exchanges and interactions between Türkiye and Afghanistan via seminars, conferences, and Turkish national day commemorations (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü Kabil, 2023). In Pakistan, in addition to teaching and cultural exchanges, the Institute has also been functioning as a cultural diplomatic platform that hosts high-level Pakistani officials including the consultants of the Prime Minister. In India, and Sri Lanka, the Institute has been offering Turkish language scholarship programs, teaching Turkish language and literature, and has been supporting Turkology studies (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2023).

Another similar institution which is also a "semi-official" NGO is the Türkiye Maarif Foundation. Its official personality is slightly more emphasized than the Yunus Emre Institute since Maarif has the authority to deliver education services on behalf of the Republic

¹ The 2022 Yearly Report of YTB's Turkish Scholarships does not indicate the percentage of South Asian applicants, see <https://tbbsweb.azureedge.net/tbbsweb/Page/About/TB-Rapor-2022-TR.pdf>, Accessed on June 26, 2023.

of Türkiye. These services cover every level of education from preschool to university. In this sense, it is another high cultural instrument of Turkish cultural diplomacy. One main target area of Maarif is the non-western world. Via building and operating new schools/universities in this sphere of the globe, the foundation not only opens new centers of education but also disseminates Turkish cultural norms and values. In South Asia, Maarif's actions are very substantial in Pakistan. Under the brand of Pak-Türk Maarif International Schools and Colleges, the Foundation provides education services to more than 13000 students in 10 different cities and within 28 campuses. The Pak-Türk brand has become the top school system in the country. In Afghanistan, Maarif functions under the label of Afghan-Türk Maarif Schools. Currently, they have 6,500 students. Here the geocultural attractiveness of these schools for the war-torn nationals of Afghanistan is augmented by the opportunities that Maarif provides to them to continue their graduate studies in Türkiye (Akgün, 2022). These educational opportunities of Maarif unquestionably serve Türkiye's soft power and in a way illustrate how geoculture and soft power complement each other.

Turkish series, especially with historical connotations have been generating a great cultural influence for Türkiye in the region. Resurrection Ertuğrul (*Diriliş Ertuğrul*) and Magnificent Century (*Muhteşem Yüzyıl*) are the two main examples. The former is about the era of *Ertuğrul Gazi*, the father of Osman Bey who founded the Ottoman state in the 13th century, which later turned into an empire. And the latter narrates the early

to mid-16th century of Ottoman rule by the Süleyman “the Magnificent”. Before the Taliban, *Ertuğrul* was broadcast on more than 30 TV channels in Afghanistan. The influence of the show over the masses was so visible that people put Turkish flags on their midi-buses and taxis (Akşam, 2017). After the Taliban came to power regardless of several social restrictions, *Ertuğrul*, together with other Turkish TV series ‘continue to be the primary choice’. The sales of its recorded episodes, especially by the rural inhabitants who cannot access satellite TV channels and the Internet, ‘increased even more after the Taliban banned the broadcasting of foreign serials’ (Daily Sabah, 2022, p. 6). In 2012, *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* also broke sales records in Afghanistan (Milliyet, 2012). The influence of the series impacted the market value and demand for Turkish goods in Afghanistan. The Trade Representative at the Turkish Embassy in Kabul stated that the increasing awareness of Turkish culture boosted the demand for Turkish goods for both high and low-income groups (Sadat, 2019).

Muhteşem Yüzyıl's popularity in Pakistan has also been quite notable. Especially, the Turkish actor *Halit Ergenç* who portrayed *Süleyman* the Magnificent has a remarkable fan base in Pakistan (Gabrالی, 2017). *Ertuğrul*'s impact, though, has been much larger. The show has broken television records to the point that its Urdu version has ‘attracted over 240 million viewers on YouTube’ (AFP, 2020). This impact of *Ertuğrul* in Pakistan underlines the geocultural effect on Turkish cultural diplomacy. The Turkish geocultural influence through these series, particularly

with *Ertuğrul*, embraces 'an enthusiastic audience in a country that struggles with Saudi and Western influence' (Bhutto, 2020, p. 1). There are a couple of reasons why Turkish series, as a part of cultural diplomacy, have been quite influential in Pakistan. First is the historical background. Türkiye was one of the first countries which recognized Pakistan and supported its UN membership. This is a major reason why the two countries historically see each other as brothers. The second reason is more contemporary and religion-oriented. The pressure that Pakistan has been facing from Saudi Arabia's rivalry with Iran and India's with China makes Türkiye's moderate and modern version of Islam more attractive. Therefore, *Ertuğrul*, representing this version, has become so influential in Pakistan that even ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan mentioned it in several speeches (Bhutto, 2020).

Both series also achieved a notable number of viewers in Bangladesh. The geocultural influence of the series, with a particular emphasis on religion, was mentioned by the ex-Turkish Ambassador to Bangladesh who stated that 'people of Bangladesh learn about the history, culture, and norms of Türkiye through Turkish series thus a cultural bond is developing between the people of the two Muslim countries' (Anadolu Agency, 2021, p. 12).

Muhteşem Yüzyıl was quite popular in India as well (Isacotur, 2019). Yet, *Diriliş Ertuğrul* has, like in outer South Asian countries, achieved even larger popularity that even some entrepreneurs name their restaurants "Ertuğrul" (Taşcı, 2020).

Both *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* and *Ertuğrul* are clear examples of the influence of geocultural

connotations creating transregional imagined communities. Both reminded the South Asian Muslim communities of the lost glory of Muslims. More precisely, the heroism and success of the pre-Ottoman and peak-Ottoman periods amalgamated with Islamic values have an imaginary unifying role between Türkiye and certain Muslim communities in South Asia. And this role is pretty important for the success of Türkiye's cultural diplomacy.

CONCLUSION

Transregional bilateralism provides quite a significant flexibility in high-political inter-state affairs. Yet, it is equally, if not more, useful in low-political, particularly state/people-to-people transactions. These interactions are the foci of cultural diplomacy. Geoculture via its potential to create transregional imagined communities stipulates a very powerful base for cultural diplomatic actions. Since the early 2000s, this potential has been utilized by Turkish policymakers. Neo-Ottomanism and Ummah have been the two major displays of this utilization.

State and non-state elements coalesce with each other in Turkish cultural diplomacy practices in South Asia. Education institutions, scholarships, series, embassies, public religious institutions, and aid agencies all work for the same aim of boosting Türkiye's national branding. In other words, Türkiye's people-to-people interactions are mostly managed by an amalgamation of Turkish state and non-state elements.

The role of geoculture in Türkiye's transregional interactions with South Asia is clear

in the sense that Türkiye targeted to increase its influence in the nations not only are more influential in the region but also have cultural affinities, particularly in historical and religious realms. Accordingly, Türkiye's cultural diplomacy has been more effective in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and within the Muslim communities of India. Maldives and Sri Lanka were not prioritized to the same extent. India's case also requires special consideration regarding the impact of geoculture. Although state actors' interactions are not necessarily strong, the Turkish non-state still successfully operates in Muslim communities of India due to a religion-oriented geocultural impact.

These transregional geocultural interactions are multifaceted in the sense that they operate via both high and popular cultural elements and a variety of state and non-state interactions. They embrace students, television audiences, women, entrepreneurs, disadvantaged communities, and state officials. The bilateralism here, from the cultural diplomacy perspective, operates mostly on the non-state level.

Emphasizing geoculture does not nullify the importance of soft power in Türkiye's interactions with South Asia. In other words, geoculture and soft power do not mutually exclude each other, on the contrary, they are complementary. What is significant about geoculture is that it can draw a new map canvassing the transregional cultural affinities that transcend beyond national borders. This map provides a fertile ground making soft power influences more vivid and effective.

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