The world is undergoing a period of profound social, economic, and cultural transition. How to handle the risks and opportunities offered by this historical moment is the pre-eminent challenge of our times – one that all states and societies have to address. Turkey and Australia, though geographically far apart, are nevertheless politically and psychologically closer than many would think. Dialogue between these two countries on issues of common concern can make a significant contribution in this regard. In light of the centenary of the Anzac landing on the Gallipoli peninsula in 2015, the different historical trajectories and emerging shared paths of Australia and Turkey are ready for critical examination.

Reflecting on the ‘special relationship between Australia and Turkey’ during the 90th anniversary of the Gallipoli landing, Turkish-Australian politician Adem Somyurek spoke of a shared commonality: both countries have been ‘culturally isolated within their regions’. Though this may be an overstatement, there is much to be said for the proposition that, in forging their cultural and political identity, both Australia and Turkey have sought – and in many ways are still seeking – to reconcile their history with their geography. As traditional allies of the United States, both Australia and Turkey are finding it necessary, albeit for different reasons and in different ways, to review and redefine that relationship in an increasingly multipolar world.

In Australia’s case, its economic interdependence with a rising China has reignited a debate over the need for a more ‘durable (regional) Asia strategy’. Likewise, in the wake of its frustrating experience with the European Union (EU), Turkey was drawn to a regional and eastward policy orientation, ominously tagged ‘neo-Ottomanism’, which offered both economic and political incentives. From their respective vantage...
points, Australia and Turkey have invested heavily – diplomatically, economically, and strategically – in the security of the Middle East, a region of multiple tensions and conflicts, the resolution of which is pivotal to international peace and prosperity.

Alongside these international concerns are domestic issues, which are inexorably linked with the international. Turkey is still engaged with the legacy of its Ottoman past, including the shifting relationship between majority and minorities, as well as the tensions between its project of secular modernity and re-emerging Islamic religiosity. Australia too is grappling with its own ethnic and religious diversity by revisiting a debate – believed to be long settled – over multiculturalism. These domestic preoccupations cannot but interconnect with foreign policy and the wider regional and global context.

The ties that bind: the first encounter at Gallipoli

There is no better place to begin our understanding of Australian-Turkish relations than at their first contact, deep in the conundrums of the Great War (aka the First World War). At first sight, the ties that bind Turkey and Australia seem somewhat peculiar, as they are immersed in enmity and warfare at the outbreak of the First World War. Young (male) Australians and Turks confronted each other on the battlefields of Gallipoli and in their deaths, suffering and sacrifices, unbeknown to them, forged two new nations out of the shackles of the Ottoman and British empires. At least that is the prevailing narrative in the nation-building discourse between Australia and modern Turkey. In this mythologized rendition, Gallipoli has become the touchstone for both nations⁴ – even though, as Adrian Jones explains in Chapter 2 – Gallipoli has become more momentous to Australia’s nationalism than for the Turks.⁵

The Ottoman Turks, led by Lieutenant Colonel Mustafa Kemal, prevailed at Gallipoli in a campaign that lasted from 25 April 1915 until 8 January 1916, at the cost of 8,159 Australian lives.⁶ The estimated 42,000 strong Turkish contingent launched one of its most aggressive attacks at Anzac Cove (Ari Burnu) on 19 May, in an attempt to stem an Australian invasion that saw more than 3,000 Turks killed and 7,000 wounded. Similarly, at Lone Pine, the Australians exacted revenge in a ferocious battle in which they stormed the trenches and fought in close quarters. In the maelstrom of bullets and bayonets, some 6,000 Turks and 2,000 Australians were killed. However, the victory proved pyrrhic as the Lone Pine attack was a diversion for the main Allied assault on Chunuk Bair – which ultimately failed and brought the campaign to a halt.⁷