

INTERVIEW: THE EU, TURKEY, AND NEIGHBORS BEYOND

In this exclusive interview for Turkish Policy Quarterly, as the Swedish Presidency draws to an end, Foreign Minister Bildt assesses the trends in Turkey's relations with the European Union.

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Does Turkey's new foreign policy approach strengthen its bid for EU membership or strengthen the conviction that Turkey does not belong in the EU?

Turkey has always been geo-strategically important but it was previously a fairly passive player – and some appreciated it precisely because it was passive. Now Turkey is a very active player. I think Turkey's foreign policy is essentially an added value for Europe and for Turkey's EU aspirations.

The foreign policy formulated in Ankara towards its neighborhood is to a large extent like ours, but it is not identical. There are nuances and there have been instances where we felt Turkey went somewhat too far. The statement about Al Bashir/Darfur went one notch too far in our opinion and the level of decibel has been a decibel too high in certain other cases. There is a great deal of understanding that Turkey and Iran are neighbors and accordingly one needs to have decent relations. We cannot pressure Turkey to confront its neighbor if it does not want to. On the other hand, being a good neighbor does not mean that you have to overlook what is happening in a country. This balancing act is a very difficult one.

Overall, we see Turkey playing a more important role in virtually all of the areas we are dealing with. There have been very positive developments in Turkey's approach to Iraq – both Baghdad and Erbil. This is highly significant. Though some complain about Turkey's improving relations with Syria, the EU is now also seeking to normalize relations with Syria. In the southern Caucasus, Afghanistan, Pakistan, for all sorts of reasons, Turkey is a major player. And in Tehran, Turkey has an amount of access that few others have.

For some it has been difficult to digest the change of Turkey from a passive partner to the far more active role Turkey is playing now. One thing is certain: we need more dialogue with Ankara on all these issues now than before. Intensified dialogue is indeed taking place. I have met Foreign Minister Davutoğlu fairly often, on a wide range of issues in the course of Sweden's EU Presidency.

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On Bosnia, we have suggested to the Turkish Foreign Minister to go not only to Sarajevo –Sarajevo is already an open door– but also to Banja Luka (Republika Srpska). Not Belgrade, but Banja Luka, for reconciliation *in* the country. Turkey can do more than Turkey has been doing to contribute to reconciliation inside the country. Silajdzic is playing the Ankara card but this is not necessarily what is going to bring a solution.

How have the Western Balkans fared this year? Is there a risk Bosnia falls behind?

Bosnia *is* falling behind. Since the spring, I have spent much time with Bosnian political leaders, warning them that if they do not get their act together and speed up reforms, the other countries will move ahead of them in visa liberalization, and then again in the membership application process. But the politicians were preoccupied with internal quarrels and issues of the past. So, when as expected Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro forged ahead in visa liberalization, the Bosnians were upset. The Commission has suggested starting accession negotiations with Macedonia. The applications of Albania and Montenegro are in the Commission. Serbia is ready to take the next step. But Bosnia is not.

Visa liberalization is one of the most important and complicated issues in our near abroad policy. The EU has a relatively harmonized policy towards the Western Balkans on this issue; however needs more of a harmonized policy towards the six Eastern Partnership countries and Russia, which is somewhat controversial within the EU. We have now started moving forward with Georgia because Georgia has gone quite far when it comes to biometrical passports and so on.

Visa liberalization is a very powerful instrument in the EU arsenal of policies. But it is also a difficult one to handle. It is in the hands of interior ministries, not foreign ministers, and with regard to opening up Europe, their agenda is not necessarily the same.

In the last few months we have gotten the Western Balkans moving again. Visa liberalization is the most significant thing that has happened in the last decade for ordinary people in this region.

Bosnia risks falling a number of years behind. One factor that makes it even more risky is the upcoming parliamentary elections in Bosnia, scheduled for the coming October. Elections by their nature tend to be fairly divisive in every country, but in Bosnia they are divisive along ethnic lines. Willingness to compromise will decrease with the election campaign. This is a problem - however it is one that the Bosnians have to deal with. And if the OHR (Office of High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina) is still functioning, it is not going to work. The EU is a union of sovereign democracies, not protectorates. Bosnian leaders need to demonstrate that they are a country and they can only do this by working among themselves. All in all we have gotten the Balkans moving forward. Bosnia should be able to move forward as well.

Sweden is known for supporting Georgia. Has Georgia lived up to your efforts on its behalf or has it let you down?

Back and forth but broadly, yes it has lived up.

It is very important that the opposition and the government agree on the rules of the game. Recently a dialogue has been going on between the government and the Alliance for Georgia, which is headed by Irakli Alasania, about the process to elect a Tbilisi mayor. More progress on this dialogue would have been preferred. Essentially the opposition would like to see a run-off if any one candidate does not get more than 50 percent of the vote. The government favors a 30 percent threshold for a candidate to be declared the winner. The reason for this is that the government predicts its mayoral candidate can receive 30 percent however, not 50 percent and if there is a run-off then the opposition could unite and win. The disagreement is about figures and is a power play; they should be able to get together.

The fact that there has been more dialogue between government and opposition is a sign of their evolving democratic maturity. Georgia is well ahead the standards of the rest of the region however not at EU standards.

Georgia has also been handling economic issues relatively well but one should not underestimate the economic difficulties ahead in the economy.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia will take time to resolve. And what happened in August last year happened. We will stay firmly committed to Georgia's territorial integrity. But we need to wait for the constellation of stars to change in some sort of way for a full solution to be achieved. And in the meantime Georgia should concentrate on democratic and economic reforms along the Europeanization path. This will also provide the best possible grounds for the solution of the Abkhazia and South Ossetia problems.

Does the region have a European perspective? An EU membership perspective?

A European perspective – yes. In terms of economic and political integration there is no question that the region has a European perspective, however, whether this will ever lead to membership, it is too early to tell, it is too far in the future to say.

Georgia is quite considerably ahead of the other two South Caucasus countries which means it will move faster, but we have to also involve Azerbaijan and Armenia. We have no interest in creating new divisions in the Caucasus. Association Agreements with all three are on the agenda. We will take a decision on the mandate of the Association Agreements. This development could create an incentive for the countries to move forward with the necessary economic and political reforms. And it could also hopefully create an incentive for the resolution of regional disputes. All three countries clearly have much to gain from working together, also in economic terms.

Regarding the Karabagh conflict, the elements of an agreement are on the table, however whether the necessary political will in Baku and Yerevan to move ahead exists... I do not know. The longer time goes by the more it becomes obvious that an agreement needs to be reached. Those among the Armenian diaspora who think it is shameful to move ahead with reconciliation with Turkey think it is doubly so to compromise for the settlement of the Karabagh conflict. So it is not easy for the political leadership in Armenia.

How do the recent political developments in Turkey affect the country's accession process?

The intention of the Turkish government with the reforms is clearly to take Turkey in a European direction. We have applauded the recent “democratic/Kurdish initiative”, it tackles one of the most difficult problems for the country. However there is significant opposition and it is building up quite substantially. The DTP closure is part of this domestic opposition. The effects of this closure remain to be seen. We are concerned. There are question marks not about the intention but about how far and fast the government will go to overcome the opposition. The fact that the vote to close DTP in the Constitutional Court was unanimous was disturbing. The Kurdish issue is perhaps the most critical issue in the modernization and Europeanization of Turkey.

The Alevi question is also on the agenda. In fact, quite a lot of issues have been on the table at the same time in Turkey, requiring strong leadership. The prime minister has driven a bold modernization agenda. While AKP has been effective in bringing new social classes in Anatolia into the modernization project of Turkey, there should be other political forces that support this process.

The Turkish army in a sense created modern Turkey and got rid of all the problematic aspects of the Ottoman system that needed to be changed for evolution into a modern nation. However, the recent disclosures of Turkish military plans are highly disturbing. The positive side of the picture is that they are being dealt with in the Turkish legal system. This would have been unimaginable five to ten years ago.

Cyprus is going to be very critical for Turkey’s accession process. Although there are no formal links between the two, reality being reality, it will be very critical. I would have hoped that more had been done by now towards a solution. But clearly a deal is within reach. We also have, in my opinion, a historic opportunity, which we cannot know when we could have again. The two leaders on the island are committed to a solution, and reaching a deal is in both Turkey and Greece’s strategic interests. It should be possible. But it requires political leadership in all of these places. Brussels cannot have a role in these talks and because Nicosia and Athens are members the EU as such is looked upon with a certain amount of suspicion by Turkey in terms of this process. It is a regrettable fact that direct trade between Northern Cyprus and the European Union is blocked. A settlement on the island would sort out a number of issues in one stroke: the direct trade problem, the chapters of the *acquis* blocked, the EU-NATO coopera-

tion problems... It would be an island of bright sun as opposed to the cloudy sky we see now. Add to that, the economic opportunities that would arise. A settlement would bring a cost at first, however it would offer huge economic benefits, not least for the Greeks. Cyprus is located perfectly in terms of benefiting from the developed port infrastructure on Turkey's southern coast and the vast trade network they are linked to.

How will the Lisbon Treaty affect Turkey's accession process?

Formally speaking there will be no effect. The accession process remains inter-governmental, it is essentially a negotiation between Turkey and the 27 EU member states, and on behalf of the member states, it is handled by the Commission. This will not change with the Lisbon treaty. Having a long-term President of the European Council and a High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy will, I hope, bring continuity to the strategic dialogue with Turkey. Catherine Ashton will hold this position for five years and she comes to this position with already a knowledge of Turkey. I also think it is a good thing that the new EU Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fuele will also have the neighborhood policy in his portfolio.

The conviction that EU membership will never be possible is growing in Turkey. Do you have any messages to those who think this way?

Within the EU, during the Swedish Presidency, I have witnessed more speaking up *for* Turkey than against. When in the European Parliament we discussed the progress report, other than the French, mainstream voices were either supportive or with uncertainties. Uncertainty is fine and merely calls for an in-depth debate.

We recently had a dinner of EU foreign ministers where we had much more forward-looking strategic debate than I would have thought was possible, in terms of understanding the importance of Turkey's accession process. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu recently said Turkey would be an EU member by year 2023. I think this is somewhat pessimistic. During our presidency the strategic element of Turkey's prospective membership has become more obvious. It is true that this is an elite debate however in all honesty the important steps in the EU project have been elite driven. The EU project was not the result of a groundswell of love towards each other among different European nations. The euro was also

not an initiative driven by demand of the people. In fact very little would have happened in the last 50 years without political leadership. Political leadership is critical. The same applies to Turkish leadership. Both sides need to overcome the burden of the past. And this is what the EU is all about.

What have you done to facilitate the EU process of Turkey in the course of your Presidency?

We have kept the pace up. During the intergovernmental meeting next Monday –21 December– the environment chapter is set to open and this is highly significant. And I do hope we have been able to lay the ground for possibly another chapter opening during the Spanish Presidency. Within the limitations the EU finds itself constrained by, we have also tried to create conditions for the resolution of the Cyprus problem. In one way or another we will be in a new situation in one year, hopefully a fundamentally better one, with regard to the Cyprus issue. We have tried to stimulate a strategic debate about the future of Europe’s position in the world and in doing so, we have pointed out that while the Union has grown from one of six member states to nine to 12 to 15 to 25 to 27, each step had two things in common. One is that all these enlargements were opposed. The French opposed British membership. Sweden’s membership was opposed with the argument that it would dilute European core values. And second, all the enlargements were later, in retrospect, seen as successes. In today’s world, if the EU were composed of six or 12 or even 15 member states, it could not be a serious actor. The world of tomorrow will be more multi-polar. Asia is rising; the relationship with the one billion person Muslim world is increasingly important. With Turkey as a member, the EU will be a far more effective global actor and will have more influence in the entire area ranging from Europe to China. Though the EU is still not very good at strategic debates, we have managed to stimulate the strategic debate about these issues.