

THE AKP'S FOREIGN POLICY : LEARNING IT THE HARD WAY

Turkey is the center of international attention once again for a host of reasons which have to do with her geo-strategic location, and the unique fact that she has a secular parliamentary democracy despite being a predominantly Islamic country. The landslide victory by the “Islamists” in the November elections merely heightened this interest, leading many to question what the “Justice and Development Party’s foreign policy priorities would be. It did not take long before it became apparent that this party was not going to align with people’s prejudices. The party’s leaders, on the other hand , received a crash course on the realities facing those in power.

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Writing about the foreign policy of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) basically involves writing about a work in progress. This is not due to anything that is amiss with the AKP. It is a function of the circumstances that this inexperienced party found itself in on the foreign policy front as soon as it came to power.

As matters stand, more than one analyst has likened the AKP's position here to someone who is getting intense on-the-job training, where the risks and pitfalls reveal themselves at the moment of decision. Given this "ongoing situation" it is only appropriate that this article, written by a professional journalist and not an academic, should have the flavor of a correspondent's report on an unfolding news story.

It is true, of course, that the AKP included foreign policy issues in its manifesto released prior to the general elections on November 3, 2002 – which it went on to win. The fact is, however, that few people paid much attention to what this party was saying in this area. Neither did the AKP make foreign policy a major item in its political campaign prior to the elections.

The public focus was rather on the "domestic aspect," because of the party's clearly Islamic political identity. Speculation, for example, concentrated more on what the AKP's approach would be to topics such as allowing headscarves to be worn by female university students. This notion, which Islamists in Turkey had turned into a "flagship issue," is of course rejected by Turkey's staunchly secular establishment.

The general feeling was that Turkey's foreign policy administration, traditionally considered to be the domain of the "high priests of the foreign ministry," would continue much as usual, with the AKP having little opportunity, or desire for that matter, to put its own brand on it.

The fact that another Islamist Prime Minister, Necmettin Erbakan, had tried almost immediately after assuming office, to toy with Ankara's traditional foreign policy orientation, only to find that this rebounded badly and led many people to assume that the AKP would remain standoffish in this area, preferring instead to concentrate on domestic bread and butter issues of more direct interest to the public.

This is why the AKP government, lead by Abdullah Gül, surprised so many people, shattering a lot of prejudices and assumptions with its hands-on approach to the key foreign policy issues that it was confronted with as soon as it came to power.

A Brief Summary

Before turning to foreign policy under the AKP, though, a brief summary may be helpful. The AKP came to power after winning a landslide victory in the general elections held on November 3, 2002, having garnered a surprise 35 percent of the total vote.

It had been over 50 years since a political party in Turkey has gained enough votes, in elections held under normal democratic circumstances, to have a full command of Parliament. This is the situation that the AKP found itself in on the morning of November 4, 2002.

This victory – which exceeded expectations - sent major shock waves through Turkey's staunchly secularist Kemalist establishment. This establishment had suspected all along that the AKP would come out with a significant vote from these elections. But it did not expect it to be so high.

The reason for the deep consternation felt in this camp was the “Islamist outlook” attributed to this party, and claims that it had “a hidden agenda” which was aimed at secretly transforming the political system into a religiously based one, thus leading Turkey away from its traditional Western orientation.

The increased legal hounding of the AKP's charismatic leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan by the secularist Turkish establishment, in the lead up to the elections, was a clear sign that the system was determined in its efforts to undermine him and his AKP.

There was of course some justification for the fears felt in this camp, given certain past remarks uttered by Erdoğan; for example, his reference to democracy as being merely “a means to an end.” The electorate showed however that it was not focused on these issues, and went ahead and voted heavily for the AKP regardless of the accusations leveled at the party and its leaders by the secular establishment.

Neither did the fact that Tayyip Erdoğan could not run in these elections due to a previous conviction for “sedition” appear to deter many voters. This conviction had come after he recited a poem by the famous Turkish writer Ziya Gökalp, which ironically is nationalist in tone, although also containing religious overtones that sent shivers up secularist spines.

Many analysts believe that this hounding actually increased Mr. Erdoğan’s appeal for the electorate, having generated a lot of public sympathy for him. Erdoğan himself tried to assure the public in those days that he was a changed man, having learned from his past mistakes. His success at the ballot box meant that this message had gotten through.

What was interesting, however, was that it was in the field of foreign policy that he was going to be given the opportunity to prove this change, even though everyone was waiting in anticipation to see what the AKP, under its “surrogate” prime minister Abdullah Gül, would do on the domestic front once it assumed the reigns of power.

EU ties under Cyprus’ shadow

It was interesting to note European leaders lined up almost immediately to congratulate Tayyip Erdoğan on the AKP’s electoral victory. Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi were the first to signal, within hours of this victory, that they would like to meet him as soon as possible.

By inviting him to their capitals these European leaders effectively kicked off a period of intense personal diplomatic activity in Europe by Mr. Erdoğan, and Prime Minister Gül. As it turned out, the speed with which Mr. Erdoğan and Mr. Gül embraced Turkey’s EU mission surprised many at home, and even more abroad.

There had been speculation prior to the elections that if the AKP came to power this would obstruct progress with the EU at a time when Turkey was seeking a date for the start of membership talks from the Union’s Copenhagen Summit in December.

Both the AKP leader and the new prime minister came, after all, from a tradition of political Islam which, under its previous leader Necmettin

Erbakan, had looked on all things Western, including of course the EU and NATO, with derision.

Here then was a chance for Mr. Erdoğan to prove he had indeed changed, and for Mr. Gül to show that they would not be satisfying any prejudices, but plowing on full steam ahead with the radical reform process started under the previous government, which was designed to satisfy EU criteria for the sake of a positive outcome in Copenhagen.

Put another way, a party dubbed “Islamist” was embracing a mission that has traditionally been the domain of “western oriented secularists.” In doing so it was also turning the tables on Turkey’s inward oriented “nationalist secularists,” who have always looked on Europe with suspicion, and have had little stomach for the reforms needed for EU membership, such as giving more rights to Turkey’s Kurds.

This surprise was compounded by certain remarks uttered by Mr. Erdoğan on the Cyprus issue suggesting that a much more flexible approach may be dawning in Ankara in this sphere also. For example his assertion that the peace plan submitted by U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan in November was worth looking at, and his remarks in this regard claiming that he was not a defender of the status quo.

Such utterances, of course, sent shockwaves through Turkey’s military and civilian establishments which have always maintained a diehard position on Cyprus, an issue they consider to be a sacrosanct national cause beyond question.

The greatest shock, however, was felt by Turkish Cypriot President Rauf Denktaş, who was now faced with the unpleasant prospect of dealing with a government in Ankara that appeared to be breaking away from the traditional and unified hard-line Turkish stance on Cyprus.

Mr. Erdoğan also gave a clear message to the EU leaders he met that if they helped Turkey in her bid for a date for membership negotiations, this would strengthen his hand on the Cyprus front, enabling him to exercise more pressure on Mr. Denktaş.

It was of course very important for the EU to secure a Cyprus settlement before the Copenhagen Summit, or even during it, because “The Republic of

Cyprus,” a designation that the Turkish side does not accept of course, was slated to be given membership at that summit.

For Turkey this translated into giving the Greek Cypriot community EU membership in the name of the whole divided island, and in total disregard of the existence of the Turkish Cypriot community as a separate entity. The EU, for its part, wanted the divided Island of Cyprus to become a member as an entity unified under the Annan plan.

But Mr. Erdoğan and Prime Minister Gül found their efforts stymied here by seemingly insurmountable factors. The first of these was the mainly French and German opposition within the EU – mainly due to domestic political considerations - to giving Turkey a clear date for the start of membership talks.

The second factor, of course, was President Denktaş’ clear disapproval of the Annan Plan, and his categorical rejection of its entire essence and philosophy. The Greek Cypriot community was also opposed to this plan, of course, although its leadership gave the impression that it would go along with its spirit. It clearly had to do at least this much in order not to endanger prospects for EU membership.

Even the previously unheard of fact of tens of thousands of Turkish Cypriots taking to the streets and demanding that the Annan Plan be accepted, and obstructions to EU membership for Turkish Cypriots, was not enough to sway Mr. Denktaş, and the hardliners in Ankara.

As it turned out, the EU give Turkey a very half-hearted and loose commitment in Copenhagen concerning the start of membership talks, and Annan’s Plan for a settlement to the Cyprus problem produced nothing in the end, even though it was revised three times to try and satisfy all sides.

The AKP thus received its first object lesson in foreign policy. Namely that a landslide electoral victory, a strong presence in Parliament, and a well intentioned effort to try and initiate a new and pro-active approach to old problems, are not sufficient to break the monolithic political moulds which have been established over time.

It was interesting, therefore, to note that Mr. Erdoğan appeared to adopt a more hard line position on Cyprus on the eve of becoming Prime Minister,

after overcoming his legal problems, and winning the make-up elections held in the eastern province of Siirt on March 9.

This inconsistency on the part of Mr. Erdoğan did not portend well for those who had not just expected a breakthrough in Cyprus, but had also been prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt on a broad range of other domestic and foreign policy issues.

The Iraq crisis: A trial by fire

The biggest foreign policy test for the AKP government, however, turned out to be the Iraq crisis. This crisis - which continues to test the government today under Mr. Erdoğan - required the greatest of diplomatic prowess, involving as it did – and does – the most delicate of balancing acts for Ankara.

On one end of the scale is the U.S., which has clearly been clamoring for a war against Saddam Hussein and was relying on its “strategic ally” Turkey to help it in this venture. On the other end is the fact that this war unleashed by America could set in motion regional dynamics that Turkey has traditionally considered to be detrimental to her vital security interests.

The potential financial losses to accrue from this war was also a key consideration in Ankara, given the bitter experiences from the previous Gulf War, when Turkey was left with a bill put at tens of billions of U.S. dollars by Turkish officials, in lost trade and other commercial opportunities.

The choice confronting the Gül government appeared, therefore, to be between “bad” and “worse,” to cite remarks by the Chief of Staff, General Hilmi Özkök. If it refused the U.S. it would be deprived of the support of its key ally in a host of economic and political fields.

Such support was especially vital in the economic field, given that the country has been grappling with one of the worst economic crises since the founding of the republic, and trying to implement a U.S. backed IMF recovery program involving billions of dollars of emergency aid for Ankara.

The government has also been concerned about the prospect of ending up with hundred of thousands of mainly Kurdish refugees on Turkey’s doorstep, as was the case in 1991, in the event of war. Such a prospect

would not only involve a humanitarian disaster, but also represent a demographic bombshell for the country if these refugees were to be let into the predominantly Kurdish Southeast.

The biggest worry, however, was that Northern Iraq's Kurds might use this war as their historic opportunity to declare independence. Such a notion is anathema to the military and civilian establishments in Turkey, who fear the potential spillover effects of this in the Southeast - the scene of a prolonged but largely successful fight against separatist terrorism by the outlawed PKK since 1984.

This concern has always ensured Turkey's strong support for the notion of a unified Iraq, and international respect for the territorial integrity of this neighboring country. There are still serious concerns in Ankara that the U.S. can maintain this after ousting Saddam.

Prime Minister Gül's problems mounted when the public became increasingly aware of the fact that Washington wanted to stage a massive invasion from Turkey into Northern Iraq, by bringing in upwards of 80,000 troops, and also availing itself of all the ports and airbases scattered around Anatolia that it might deem necessary.

The rising tide of anti-war sentiment in the country - where 90 percent of the population is opposed to this war - and the fact that this sentiment was shared by the majority of AKP deputies in Parliament - and not a few cabinet ministers - complicated matters further for Prime Minister Gül and Mr. Erdoğan.

Both of course wanted Parliament to pass a government resolution - as is required by the Constitution - which would allow U.S. troops into Turkey, and - as corollary - Turkish troops to go abroad (i.e. Northern Iraq).

Not willing to seem as if it was caving in to U.S. pressure without getting anything in return, though, Prime Minister Gül sought to negotiate water-tight deals with the American side in the economic, military and political fields.

He felt that with these in his pocket he could turn to AKP deputies in Parliament and confidently encourage them to vote for this motion. This was important since a previous motion designed to allow U.S. military

engineers into Turkey, to carry out the necessary expansion work on military bases prior to the arrival of American troops, had passed only after stormy debates in the AKP and Parliament.

With the opposition vowing to vote against this motion, Prime Minister Gül had to contend with the very real prospect that without a good deal in his pocket many AKP deputies might also vote against it, even if this damaged their party's standing.

While trying to juggle the domestic scene, Prime Minister Gül was also facing increasing pressure from Washington, which clearly wanted things to move along hastily, and according to a time-table set in the U.S. capital and not in Ankara.

There was speculation that Mr. Erdoğan had given signals that encouraged President Bush on this score when they met in Washington in December. Increasing American impatience with the Gül government was attributed to this, with U.S. officials playing the "broken promise" card. That such a promise was given – despite being unconstitutional - has, of course, been denied by Mr. Erdoğan and government sources - even though public suspicions linger on this score.

The government finally submitted the controversial motion to Parliament, but only to see its worst nightmare come true. It was defeated by a mere three votes. The political trauma for Prime Minister Gül and Mr. Erdoğan was compounded by the fact that around 90 of their own deputies, including a number of cabinet ministers, had voted against letting U.S. troops in.

Overbearing U.S. pressure, deemed insulting by many deputies, uncertainties over the future of Iraq and Northern Iraq in particular, and failure to secure the desired economic compensation package from Washington were said to be the main reasons for this outcome, which totally surprised everyone in Turkey and abroad.

This also left Washington's plans for a Northern front against Iraq in shambles. The fact that the U.S. was piling men and material off the coast of Turkey's port of Iskenderun, in the eastern Mediterranean, showed that the American's were looking on the passage of this motion as a foregone conclusion.

This outcome also cast a serious pall over the “strategic ties” that supposedly exist between Washington and Ankara. This whole issue was still in the balance as this article was being finalized only a day or two after Tayyip Erdoğan was appointed by President Ahmet Necdet Sezer to form Turkey’s 59th government.

The four and a half months that the AKP was in power under Prime Minister Gül, was enough, however, to show that a determined unwavering approach, flexibility in keeping in step with developments, and a clear vision of Turkey’s “big picture” interests are vital for avoiding the kind of major debacles we saw in the Cyprus issue, and the Iraq crisis over these past few months.

It remains to be seen what kind of lessons Mr. Erdoğan has drawn from all this. What is certain, however, is that no one is talking about the AKP’s “Islamic agenda” anymore. The focus, rather, is on considerations that any Turkish government, regardless of its ideological tilt, would have had to face if confronted with the same situation.

What is also clear is that Mr. Erdoğan will have to embark on major repair work now in terms of relations with the U.S., due to the Iraq debacle, and with the EU, which wasted no time in warning Turkey of the dire consequences she stood to face because a breakthrough could not be achieved in Cyprus.