

TURKEY'S EU MEMBERSHIP: SEEING THE TRANSATLANTIC GAINS

As Turkey advances in its process of accession to the EU, the transatlantic relationship is in need of dispelling the ominous discussions –overrated at times – regarding its future. This is a complex task. Yet, Turkey can contribute to this process in its own way. Many of the policy issues that create tensions across the Atlantic involve the regions with which Turkey has close ties. Turkey's own political, economic and social experience, its geopolitical perspective, foreign policy approach and its place within both the Western and non-Western institutions are assets for both the EU and the transatlantic partnership.

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By Way of Introduction: The State of Turkey's EU Accession Process

Much is said and written on Turkey's prospects for membership in the EU as we approach the European Council meeting in December 2004. We in Turkey have made our case for membership in all our contacts with European partners from all political backgrounds and with the EU bureaucracy which will play a central role in forming EU's considered opinion on opening accession negotiations with Turkey. The Turkish Government and Turkish civil society also continue to explain to the European public the advantages of its membership for the EU. Most importantly, however, the progress Turkey has made in meeting the Copenhagen political criteria and the distance covered by the on-going implementation of reforms speak for themselves. And here lies the strength of the Turkish case from a legal, moral as well as political point of view. Having abundantly shown its determination and capability to hold its part of the deal, Turkey now expects the EU to follow suit. Our expectation from the EU is merely to make an objective appraisal of the situation and act wisely and fairly. This should lead to a decision by the political leaders of the EU in December to start accession negotiations with Turkey early in 2005.

Paradoxically; though, perhaps understandably for some, as Turkey's prospects for membership become more real, the arguments expressed against Turkish membership, albeit limited in number and scope, have also been voiced more openly in the last few years. Some of these have referred to economics and demographics. This we do not resent, for neither of these disciplines lend themselves to gross misrepresentation if properly analyzed. On both accounts, given Turkey's economic potential and dynamism on the one hand, and the demographic trends in Turkey and Europe on the other, one can make a convincing case for a win-win situation for both parties in the long run. Our more informed European interlocutors recognize this fact.

Many of the arguments against Turkish membership also reflect cultural and social attitudes, varying between hesitation due to lack knowledge and sheer anachronistic prejudice. Such arguments are refuted by good knowledge of history and the present, coupled by a visionary outlook of the future. Yet, humility being our defining cultural trait, we Turks are not at ease when we have to propagate ourselves. It is therefore very fitting that the loudest reaction to such views are most effectively made by Europeans themselves who know better, whether at the level of politicians, intellectuals or ordinary citizens.

Important as they are, I shall, nevertheless, not elaborate on the above arguments. In many respects, we should be past these discussions. Instead, it would be more helpful to look ahead and try to make sense of what Turkish membership will mean for the EU and West especially in political terms. And in this context, Turkey's significance for the transatlantic partnership deserves greater emphasis.

The Big Picture

Ironically, at a time when Turkey is coming ever closer to its historical objective of full integration with the West while preserving its uniqueness and its historical roots, the very notion of the "West," some argue, is being questioned by the transatlantic differences. We must neither rush to shelve the Western Alliance in the annals of world history, nor be complacent about the challenging way, to say the least, in which it is changing. In this respect, I will argue that, with its foreign and security policy approach, its geopolitical stance, cross-

cultural assets and its on-going accession process to the EU, Turkey would be one of the factors contributing to the process of adapting the Transatlantic relationship to the new conditions of our era.

Given the magnitude and scope of the change experienced since the end of the Cold War, it is understandable for transatlantic relations to face tensions which were avoidable throughout most of its history. In a way, during the post Cold War period the Euro-Atlantic solidarity began to feel the negative side effects of its own victory. With the demise of the common threat, some began to question the common purpose and thus the *raison d'être* of the Alliance. Yet, though different in nature, common threats and risks which are asymmetric and transnational still face the transatlantic community.

As importantly, the core of the community, that is, the common political ground formed by a sense of shared values representing liberal democracy in its wider definition is firmly in place. The new dynamic affecting this politico-philosophical core is the challenge to redefine the transatlantic community's common purpose in tune with today's realities and needs. This is an on-going process whereby the notion of collective defense of the Alliance is being complemented by an understanding of collective security that carries an increasingly political orientation. Moreover, this will entail new cooperative and inclusive approaches towards neighboring regions and beyond. Both NATO and the EU must be up to the job. For its part, Turkey is ready and well placed to contribute to this process.

The EU and the US can both contribute to world peace in their own ways and more so in cooperation. It is with this understanding that Turkey values the transatlantic relationship and does not see rivalry as an option over partnership. It is not too much to expect from the collective wisdom existing on both sides of the Atlantic to jointly create a global force for good with the right mix of soft and hard power. Such a force can effectively take on the threat of international terrorism and proliferation, and also work to address the causes of terrorism and encourage peaceful coexistence and democracy throughout the world.

As the defunct geopolitical divides of the Cold-War era are replaced with renewed dynamism at the regional and global level, the West and the East have been brought closer to each other, not by choice necessarily, but by strategic exigencies. The continuing eastwardly out-reach, of both NATO and the EU, has been accompanied by a shift in geopolitical priorities that puts an added emphasis on the Mediterranean region and the Middle East in its wider sense.

Turkey is increasingly being recognized as a stabilizing factor in the regions that it borders. The challenge faced by all nations in adapting to the changing international circumstances in the last 15 years was particularly acute for Turkey. Moreover, Turkey could not enjoy the "peace dividend" that the end of the Cold War signaled especially for Europe. Nevertheless, Turkey coped well. This was possible as Turkey coalesced its traditional foreign policy principles and the requirements of the day into a practical vision. In this sense, we believe in conflict resolution through a problem solving approach. A static outlook in foreign policy which portrays one's interlocutors as the ultimate adversaries is bound to lose against a dynamic approach which can, instead, tackle problems in win-win terms. This latter approach helps regimes in the neighboring regions feel more confident to interact with the international community and to remain within international law. Turkey's affinity and historical ties with the regions surrounding it facilitates such a process.

As an advocate and initiator of regional cooperation, Turkey strives to make use of interdependence as a confidence building dynamic, eventually forming common interests favoring peaceful relations. Turkey is therefore working to establish a culture of reconciliation as the basic working ethic among countries in its region. This is evidenced by the positive trend that Turkey's relations with its neighbors reflect for the last decade and more so recently. One area where Turkey's initiatives are paying off is the Black Sea region which is drawing increased attention from the EU and the US.

Turkey can help Europe extend its direct contacts over geopolitically significant regions including the Caucasus, Middle East and Central Asia. This should not, of course, be understood in military terms. Also, Turkey's contribution to the efforts of the EU to play a greater role in Europe's own security and defense and to reach a higher power status in a wider geography through a common policy will also make a difference. One important added value here is that, as a country which believes in the continuing merits of NATO as an organization transforming itself, Turkey's support for the security and defense dimension of the EU could not be viewed as detrimental to the Alliance.

In this context, Turkey's close relations with the US, going back half a century, are important. This relationship rests on a basis that is strong and comprehensive enough to withstand specific differences of opinion that might arise occasionally. Both parties recognize and respect the other's interests. Belief in democracy and common position on peace and stability ensure that these interests converge.

Turkey can help the transatlantic community to foster a better understanding between the Euro-Atlantic societies on the one hand and Middle Eastern and Muslim societies on the other. The geopolitical commotion that we experience on the north-south and east-west axes around Turkey does not occur in a cultural vacuum. The human and social factors are part and parcel of the flux in international relations. Consequently, cultural perceptions have become ever more important, affecting both the study and the conduct of international relations. All sides must refrain from attitudes and actions which could increase the chances of the thesis of "clash of civilizations" to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Socio-economic or cultural explanations are often cited in the West to argue for the incompatibility of democracy with non-Western, for our purpose, Islamic, societies at large. Such a view fails to give credit to the case of Turkish democracy. Not all Muslim societies would be expected to follow a historically identical path. Turkey is in many ways unique. However, there is enough substance in the Turkish experience, first, to refute theoretical and practical objections about the possibility of democracy taking root in a Muslim society, and, second, to form an inspirational push for those countries who wish to find their own solutions.

The deceptive dichotomy that some have been led to believe to exist between Islam and the West amounts to reductionism on the part of those who hold such views on either side. We in Turkey refuse and refute this fallacy. The Muslim identity of the Turkish population has not prevented it from interacting intensely with the West in general and Europe in particular, or from becoming an effective member of European institutions and organizations. Nor, has it been a hindrance to Turkey's transatlantic orientation. Indeed, the successful conclusion of Turkey's accession process to the EU will represent the harmonization of a predominantly Muslim society with the peoples of Europe on the basis of common universal and democratic values. This will on the one hand facilitate the better integration of the millions of Muslims living in Europe within their host societies, and on the other hand, demonstrate to the Muslim

world that Europe is serious about overcoming its exclusive reflexes when parties gather around shared values.

One of the basic benefits of this harmonization is the positive effect it will have towards the espousal of these values we consider to be universal in nature by the countries that surround Turkey. In this sense, the role Turkey's EU membership can play in correcting the self-complacent – intended or not – body language of the West should not be underestimated. The transatlantic community stands to benefit from such clarification as well.

The challenge, of course, is not exclusively for the West. Turkey continues to voice its opinion that the Islamic world needs to address its problems in a realistic manner and to assume responsibility rather than blame others. In this connection we place emphasis on such concepts as democratization, human rights, the rule of law, good governance, accountability, transparency and gender equality. It is heartening to see that the support for these values and the recognition of the need to reform are growing throughout this geography. As an important member of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), Turkey has for long expressed the view that the desired change has to be fed and grown from within, but that help from outside can be useful. Outside help, Turkey has argued, needs to be internationally sponsored and locally consulted.

Recently, international efforts to support reform in the broader Middle East is being pursued with a partnership approach that takes the views and needs of the countries in the region as a central input and does not discard the difficulty posed by regional political problems, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The G-8 initiative to help the region reform itself promises to become a good example of an effective multilateral effort. Turkey, invited to this initiative as a democratic partner, will contribute to the process and share its own experience of home-grown political, economic and social development and reform which has benefited much from an interactive relationship with the West.

By Way of Conclusion

Turkey is destined to grow in strength as a vibrant society with vast human resources enjoying democracy in a secular state. Turkey will be a reliable power for the maintenance of security, a partner for economic development and an ally in overcoming existing instabilities in its vicinity. It makes its decisions based on the democratic dynamics of the country, taking into account the time proven value of Allied solidarity and the rich perspective that it has cultivated by being part of different geographies at the same time, willing to bring them closer in mutual understanding and cooperation. By providing the West with an insider's input from the East, and providing the East with an insider's input from the West, Turkey is a unique asset for the EU, the transatlantic partnership and the regions within which Turkey has been historically interacting.