

Turkish Foreign Policy:

Opportunities and Risks

Jul 26, 1995



Brief Analysis

On July 26, 1995, Dr. Emre G nensay, ambassador-at-large and chief advisor to Turkish Prime Minister Tansu  ziller, addressed a session of The Washington Institute's Policy Forum on Turkey's foreign policy and security interests. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

Turkey's New Geo-Politics

When Mustafa Kemal Attaturk founded Turkey on the ashes of the Ottoman Empire in the 1920s, he limited Turkey's borders and instituted an inward-looking policy of "peace at home, peace abroad." Turkey's focus was on internal developments, with the "official orthodoxy" that Turkey was a homogenous nation with no particular interests outside its borders. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, however, Turkey discovered a new reality. It has found cultural, linguistic, and religious links throughout the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, and is now at the center of many regional issues and interests. Accordingly, Ankara's foreign policy has broadened in scope. In the "distant future" these links could be of benefit to Turkey, particularly if these regions develop economically. In the shorter term, however, these links "pose more problems than benefits" for Turkey, particularly since ethnic strife and other problems in these regions always seem to involve Turks or "people very closely related to the Turks."

Foreign Policy Objectives

In today's "new world order," Turkey is guided by three basic foreign policy propositions:

  Turkey should not take unilateral action in an international dispute; it should always act in cooperation with the international community. Turkey's incursion into northern Iraq may have appeared as a unilateral action; yet, because of Turkey's involvement in Operation Provide Comfort (OPC), it had an aspect of multilateral action. The action was not "part of OPC," but OPC controls only the air, and Turkey had to do something about the power vacuum on the ground which allowed the PKK terrorist threat to develop.

  Turkish membership in the European Union (EU) and Customs Union is now more important than ever -- for security, as well as political and economic, reasons. EU membership would mean achievement of Turkey's historic goal of integration with Europe. Also it would enhance Turkey's role as a force for stability in its region. Turkey expects to join the Customs Union in January 1996, pending ratification by the European Parliament. Expecting to achieve full EU membership at least by 2001, Ankara realizes that it first must undertake further economic reform to conform to European standards. Europe's willingness to accept Turkey has been questioned, but Turks are confident that the EU will accept them when Turkey meets the economic and political criteria. Turkey is sensitive to European concerns about free circulation of Turkish workers and will be flexible on this issue.

  Turkey will work towards regional economic development, cooperation, and interdependence to foster peace and stability. By developing projects that build cooperation, tensions will be defused. To that end, Turkey has developed the Black Sea economic cooperation project, which includes all of the Black Sea states plus Greece and

Albania, and the Economic Cooperation Organization, which includes Pakistan, Iran, and the Muslim states of the former Soviet Union, as well as Turkey. The Caspian Sea oil pipeline also breeds interdependence. In the Middle East, Turkey is involved in discussion of several projects in pursuit of regional economic interdependence, including a Free Trade Area with Israel; the sale of water to Israel and the Middle East either directly or through an overland pipeline; and the Middle East Development Bank, proposed at the Casablanca summit. Turkey is on the task force for the Development Bank but will not benefit economically from it; this role may even be a burden. Thus, Turkey's involvement with the Bank is a clear sign of its commitment to regional economic interdependence. Turkey also is implementing three policies to form a "strategic backbone" for regional stability:

1) Attaining membership in the EU.

2) Establishing close relations with the United States and Russia to form a triangular relationship. Turkish-U.S. relations are "excellent, perhaps at an all-time high," and Russian-U.S. relations are also "excellent." To develop the Russian-Turkish leg of the triangle, Ankara is giving Moscow an "urgent message of cooperation." Cooperation on the Caspian Sea oil pipeline project would foster the triangular relationship and help solve some of the problems of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Russians are beginning to show similar thinking. They have accepted the idea of multiple pipelines, meaning that nobody will have a monopoly.

3) Establishing a "southern triangle" relationship with Israel and the United States. This relationship, currently at a beginning stage, is being explored and developed. PM Erdoğan's visit to Israel last year, the first by a Turkish prime minister, was clearly a positive step. The Turkish government also supports the Israeli-Syrian negotiations; if Israel can resolve its numerous differences with Syria, perhaps Turkey's problems with Syria e.g., water and the PKK, will also be solved as part of efforts to resolve outstanding regional issues. Turkey is also willing to take a more active role in the peace process, if asked.

Turkey, Europe and Democratization

To win approval of the European Parliament for entry into the Customs Union, Turkey is improving its "democratic situation." To date, Turkey has achieved two-thirds of its goals.

Decentralization. Three weeks ago Turkey decentralized its government by giving local administrations more power. This was a part of the seventh five-year-plan.

Constitutional Reforms. Three days ago the parliament passed seventeen constitutional amendments, including: lifting restrictions on political participation by professional and other associations; allowing trade unions for civil servants to bargain collectively; and allowing university professors to become party members and political figures.

Individual Freedoms. Turkey still must reform its laws on freedom of expression. When it reconvenes in October, parliament will change article eight of the counter-terrorism law (which criminalizes separatist "propaganda") to fit "contemporary democratic tradition." Almost all restrictions on freedom of expression will be lifted, except for that "propagated for violence, secessionism, and terrorism." In regard to the Kurdish question, Turkey is attempting to increase individual liberties, but does not believe in granting "group liberties," which then become privileges; otherwise, it might have to extend these collective rights to all thirty of its ethnic groups.

Other Foreign Policy Issues

Cyprus. When Turkey joins the EU Customs Union and is "on the road" to full EU membership, the time will be opportune for tackling the Cyprus problem. The Turkish government and PM Erdoğan personally are determined to resolve it. Bosnia. Lifting the arms embargo is moral, but it won't solve the Bosnian problem. A tragedy would occur before the Bosnians reach arms parity with the Serbs. The "only solution" is for Western countries to show "the political will" to commit "massive ground forces."

Northern Iraq. The PKK presence in northern Iraq presents "serious threats" to Turkey. Even if Barzani's KDP and Talabani's PUK stop fighting one another, it is doubtful they would rein in the PKK. Because of their "ethnic relationship," there will always be tremendous moral pressure on them to look the other way.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Lauren Rossman. ❖

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