

TURKEY HEDGES ITS BETS

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From the sixteenth century Turkey has been preoccupied with the West. Though Turkey wanted to first emulate Western institutions and then join the West, the West has remained suspicious at best. First, Turkey was the indisputable enemy of Christian Europe. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Turkey began to adopt Western institutions. And, in the 1920s, in the era of the founder of modern Turkey, during the time of Kemal Atatürk-until well after Atatürk's death in 1938-a Westward orientation all but dominated Turkish public and private life.

By the onset of the 1990s, Turks felt they were almost within reach of the long sought full embrace of the West. Turkey's President, Turgut Özal, after all, was the linchpin of the war in the Gulf. Without Turkish airfields, and most important, Turkish co-operation in the embargo of Iraqi oil, the isolation and defeat of Saddam would have failed. Without continued Turkish co-operation, the containment of Saddam would be impossible.

Then there was the issue of economic integration in the then confident European Community. Turkish economic growth at the onset of the 1990s was the strongest in Europe. Turkish democracy, three times impugned by the Turkish military (there were military coups in 1961, 1971, 1980), seemed to have stabilised. And, in 1991, a customs union with the European Union (EU) seemed assured. Turkey's prospects for prosperity in league with Europe's brave new future, seemed bright.

But Turkish fortunes changed. Inflation re-appeared with vengeance after the Gulf War. Long simmering Kurdish insurgency flared anew. The claims of Kurdish separatist gave rise to an ever uglier war. The Kurdish Workers Party's (PKK's) assassination of Turkish diplomats proceeded apace across Europe. Turkish-language school teachers, administrators, police officials and, in fact, every aspect of the Turkish state are considered legitimate targets by the PKK terrorist.

The European view of Turkey's response to Kurdish terror has been less than generous. True enough, the Turkish official response to the Kurdish terror has been heavy-handed. Prisons now swell to bursting point, while 'body counts' regularly exceeded 200 people a month. But European human rights organisations evince little sympathy for Turkey's contention that the PKK is a threat to Turkey's existence. In March of 1995, when Turkey committed some 35,000 regular troops for the first of several operations against suspected Kurdish strongholds in Northern Iraq, the German foreign minister, Klaus Kinkel, stated, "Ankara must understand that the political damage to Turkey gets worse every day the military presence continues." In September 1996, the European Parliament passed a resolution demanding that all EU aid to Turkey be frozen with the exception of funding for projects to promote human rights. Ankara's claim, raised in the early Fall of 1996, to a 10-mile security zone at the frontier, augured no improvement in its external image in Europe.

For Turks, the old psychoanalytic axiom that anticipation always exceeds realisation seemed to be validated anew, when, at the end of 1995, the EU and Turkey signed the long promised customs union agreement. At first blush, many of the hopes élite Turks had pinned on the customs accord-for both its symbolic value and real value-seemed warranted. The EU accord offers Europe's co-operation in energy, banking, modern data collection, police co-operation in combating drugs and terror, and of course, a more open door to Turkish manufacturers. The accord also made it easier for foreign investors. New capital, indeed nearly doubled at once. The investment boom, in turn, abetted the long cycle of strong economic growth.

But many of these benefits for Turkey may be more apparent than real. In the short run, the Turkish Treasury will collect many fewer duties from imports. For instance, once well protected and well-subsidised Turkish companies now face unrestrained European competition. On the other hand, Turkey's most efficient manufacturing sector-textiles-will suddenly find that it is required by EU rules to pay extra and unaccustomed duties on once duty-free raw materials imported from third

countries. Only the most efficient mills and clothing manufactures will survive. More unemployment is all but certain. Then, too, the inevitable influx of lower priced consumer goods and heavy machinery from Europe will make Turkey's unfavourable balance of trade worse-and thus erode even more the Turkish currency. In consequence, there is a more than reasonable chance that inflation, now at 80 per cent, could go to 'hyper' levels in the not too distant future. The chimera of full membership in the EU will then recede to ever more distant dates. The reaction may be widespread bitterness and a fillip to those who argue that Turkey's fortune and future can be secured not with the West, but only with kith and kin of the East.

A turn away from the West is abetted by the unending hurt of rejection. The fact that Europeans are uneasy with a Moslem state as an intimate associate in any enterprise-including the abortive separate Western European Union defence compact of the early 1990s-is not just a hurt but a humiliation given, especially, Turkey's steadfast front line exertions through the Cold War. The exclusionist mindset of the Europeans is not solely discriminatory to the Turks. Others suffer prejudices, including Czechs, Hungarians, Poles, and, of course, Bosnians. But for the Turks, a paucity of European goodwill, is an immeasurable insult.

With all the burden of rejection, the once solidly secular pro-Western face of the Turkish Republic is turning into a more Janus-like balance between East and West. There are several aspects to the new turn in Turkey's foreign policy, not a little abetted by the odd rise of religion in the once stridently secular Turkey. Religious schools and religious training in all schools is now mandated by law. Tarikats, secret Mason-like societies, once banned in the time of Atatürk, are allowed to flourish undisturbed.

Refah, the Islamic party, gained steady ground. Tansu Çiller was also excoriated until recently, by Refah 'ultras' as a 'devil' given to 'striking erotic poses in order to lure foreign capital.' More unsettling, is the appearance of extremist religious violence. A Jewish archaeologist was killed and a secular writer critically injured when a bomb exploded on 30 December 1994 in central Istanbul. At the funeral, hundreds of thousands of Turks gathered to chanted anti-Islamic slogans. The bombings had little public support. But the fact remains that in cosmopolitan Istanbul religious violence is no longer unthinkable. Beer halls, banks, churches and even a university hospital have been attacked.

Refah has gained apace. Part of Refah's success has been its ability to portray itself as the unsullied defender of the under-class. Refah's gains became a plurality by late 1995, going from seven per cent in 1987 to a bit over 20 per cent. At the same time, mainstream politicians, including Mrs. Çiller suffered under the press of inflation and accusations of self-dealing. By mid-1996, Refah's seventy year old leader, Necmettin Erbakan, could rightfully claim the premiership and was able to form a working majority with Mrs. Çiller holding the foreign secretary's portfolio. The alliance of opposites, shaky at best, has caused more than a few misgivings in the West.

In Turkey, there is no alarm and indeed, a great deal of satisfaction that Turkey remains committed to secular democratic goals, even under a leadership heavily identified with Islam. But it is nonetheless true that Mr. Erbakan leads a foreign policy that has, for some time, found itself hedging its bets. In mid-August 1996 Erbakan signed a long-planned gas supply deal with Iran. The \$20bn contract calls for Iran to supply gas to Turkey's desperately poor and energy starved southeastern provinces. The arrangement flies in the face of a new US initiative, passed two weeks earlier in Congress, that would penalise governments and companies that invest more than \$40m in Iran's oil and gas sectors.

Senator Alphonse D'Amato, the author of the law to impose sanctions on firms investing in Iran, called for sanctions to be applied to Turkey. Congressman Robert Menendez, closely identified with the Greek lobby, demanded the deal be annulled at once. But it was problematic whether the Iranian-Turkish agreement fell within the purview of the new American legislation, which punished new investment, as distinguished from any kind of barter or purchase.

But Turkey's independent energy concerns help reinforce the sense of a change in Turkish attention from the West to the East. The question of Caspian oil is emblematic of Turkey's new orientation.

Some reports have the Caspian fields' potential as second only to the oil fields of the Persian Gulf. For technical reasons, new pipelines must avoid the rugged Caucasus mountains between the Caspian and Black seas. The remaining choices are a complicated northern route through Chechnya which poses obvious risk or a southern route through Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkey-which would exclude the Russians. The Turkish route would reduce Europe's vulnerability to cutoffs, protect the Bosphorus from environmental damage, and bring together old antagonists in common prosperity. And the southern route for Caspian oil would also foster Turkey's growing influence in Central Asia, and perhaps even touch or pass through Iran.

Turkey was the first country to unconditionally recognise the new republics of Central Asia-all of which, save Tadjikistan, share a linguistic affinity to Turkey. By their own count, the Turks now have some 200 economic, cultural, educational, communication and transport, technical assistance and training accords signed and under way in the region. These include over 400 investment projects worth an estimated \$4.44bn.

Another indication of Turkey's partial turn East is Turkey's Black Sea Economic Co-operation (BSEC) project begun in 1992. The BSEC has 11 members-Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine -and it envisions a free trade zone, a development bank, and includes an international secretariat based in Istanbul. So far, Turkey has extended some \$4bn in private investment, \$900m in Eximbank and other bank credits and established several billions of dollars in new training arrangements.

All this new attention to the East is considered in Turkey, as Mr. Erbakan put it while in Washington on an unofficial visit in 1994, as part of the process of moving Turkey from a "single dimensional country to a multidimensional country."

In power, Mr. Erbakan has not been wholly successful in soothing US official concern that Turkey, if not defecting from its former solidarity, is certainly placing itself at more of a distance from US policy. It must have been a bit disconcerting for US policy makers, for instance, when Mr. Erbakan averred in Tehran that Turkey would have to "take seriously" statements of senior Iranian officials who, not withstanding Turkish military intelligence reports, denied that Tehran aids the PKK. And, though Ankara diplomatic and military officials have consistently charged Syria with supporting the PKK, Syrian sources recently claimed prime minister Erbakan was aiming to establish an "Islamic political alliance" with Iran, Syria, Iraq and the Central Asian Turkic republics of the former Soviet Union.

Some of this new attention to the East is posturing. Some of it is good business. Some of it is good sense. After all, as Turks untiringly point out, they live with 'neighbours from Hell'. The UN embargo, Turkey claims has cost \$27bn so far and, some estimates are as high as \$60bn in oil transit fees and cross-border trade. "How much," ask well-informed Turks, "should we pay to punish a neighbour with whom we must live and who will not, no matter how much we might devoutly wish go away."

Now that the US has really only mounted a token response to the Iraqi intrusion of recent weeks (albeit with the invitation of some of the same Kurds that the US has counted on in the past), it would surprise few close observers if the Turks would not renew Operation Provide Comfort. Indeed, Mrs. Çiller told the New York Times in late September 1996 that Turkey had just begun to urge Saddam Hussein "to impose central authority" in Northern Iraq. Mrs. Çiller's remarks, as one State Department official surmised, were probably "Turkey's way of signalling it has alternatives" to US policy.

There is, however, from the US perspective, much in Turkey that seems hopeful. The water of the Euphrates are now held back and controlled by the enormous high-tech Atatürk Dam. Much of the area, once so rich in trees in pre-Roman times that squirrels were said to skip from Damascus to Istanbul without having to touch the ground, still looks like a moonscape. But well over four million acres, a good section of the Anatolian plain, is now irrigated and lush with fruit, cotton, and even new growths of timber. The southeastern part of Turkey is blooming. Even the temperature is coming down.

Turkish democratic institutions under the press of the ghastly and expensive war against the PKK have inevitably suffered. But Kurds retain unquestioned rights as Turks. There is no prejudice based on ethnicity and indeed, there's an abundance of high Turkish officials who proudly claim a Kurdish background.

There is an open political system with a full range of parties of the left and right. Elections are hotly contested. The Turkish Grand National Assembly remains fractious, factious, but indisputably sovereign while the judiciary is independent and operates with a fully developed Western legal system. The press is constrained, but still manages to be critical and the long standing Ottoman tradition of religious freedom remains intact. The new Turkish prominence in world affairs, Turkey's official designation by the US as one of the "ten big emerging markets" of the future, Turkey's role in NATO, and Turkey's intimate association with the US are sources of undiminished pride. In the end, it seems likely that Europeans will come to see Turkey, as Turkey sees itself, as a partner-indisputably Western but also as a bridge to the East.