

Turkey's New Role in International Politics

The disintegration of the Soviet Union seemed to create new opportunities for Turkey. Independent countries emerged in the southern part of the former USSR which were receptive to the reactivation of bonds with Turkey rooted in their Muslim cultural tradition and, to a great extent, their affiliation to the family of Turk peoples. Their impression was that Ankara held the key to sociopolitical modernisation and economic prosperity. As Bahri Yilmaz, Professor at the Bilkent University in Ankara, explains, the means at Turkey's disposal were overrated by far. The reduction of the Turkish influence this implied was compounded by growing Russian efforts to regain lost political and military terrain in Transcaucasia and Central Asia. Consequently, Ankara again finds itself primarily relying on the links with NATO and Western Europe which existed up until the upheavals which reshaped the international political landscape between 1989 and 1991. Bahri Yilmaz works on the assumption that Turkey's traditional orientation towards the political values of the West remains unbroken.

On 10 September 1993, during her first official visit to Moscow after becoming Turkey's new Prime Minister, Tansu Çiller had to publicly backtrack on recurrent slogans which are highly popular among Turkish politicians and the mass media, such as "the historic opportunity from the Adriatic to the borders of China" or "the 21st century will be a Turkish century". She contended that such election and populist slogans, which were mainly geared to the domestic policy context, had harmed rather than benefited relations between Turkey and its neighbours. At the same time, her statements can also be interpreted as an admission that the foreign policy previously pursued by a Turkey which laid claim to a new leading role in the Middle East had failed.

In other words, anyone who has kept track of the foreign policy discussion in Turkey during the past twenty months must gain the impression that, to this very day, the politicians in Ankara have neither elaborated a basic and future-oriented foreign policy which takes into account the transformed international and regional political situation nor redefined Turkey's foreign policy interests and priorities. Through an inconsistent line of policy, Ankara threatens to drift into discredit in this region.

This article presents a comparative analysis of Turkey's political and economic foreign relations prior to and after the collapse of the Soviet Union and of the

Communist economic system in the East Bloc. Furthermore, the question is raised whether, up to now, Turkey has done justice to the role of a leading regional power which devolved upon it following the demise of the USSR. Finally, we shall take a closer look at the future perspectives and priorities of Turkey's international relations.

Turkey's External Relations during the Cold War

Turkey's external relations after the Second World War were determined by the interdependent factors of national security, economic cooperation, and the endeavour to compact the country with Western civilisation once and for all.

At the end of the Second World War, Turkey felt directly threatened by a traditionally expansionist Soviet policy. Despite the Turkish-Soviet Treaty of Friendship in the 1920s and the particularly close economic cooperation during the 1930s, the Soviet Union put forward territorial claims to parts of the Turkish northeast provinces (Kars and Ardahan) in 1945. It also called for the constitution of a joint Turkish-Soviet control regime over the straits (Bosporus and Dardanelles). In view of the threat emanating from the Red Army, which seemed extremely real due to the inadequate equipment of the Turkish armed forces, the government in Ankara at the time, led by Ismet Inönü, decided to adopt the Truman Doctrine in 1948 and join NATO in 1952. The security policy considerations of the West were undoubtedly the key factors for Turkey's accession to the alliance. From then on, Turkey was a reliable NATO partner and ranked as its "southeast pillar" and as a "bastion" against any military expansion by the USSR towards the Mediterranean or the Gulf region. There was a broad convergence of security interests between Turkey and its Western partners.

Leaving aside the Cyprus crisis, Johnson's letter in 1964 and the arms embargo imposed by the USA at the end of the 1970s, the security policy foundations of Turkish foreign policy were hardly a focus of public controversy during this period. Turkey's integration into the Western alliance always remained undisputed. Turkish foreign policy was unreservedly set within the NATO frame. Turkey exerted no decisive influence on international politics. Within NATO, the country was viewed, with tacit consent, as a security policy sphere of influence of the USA. One indicator was the fact that the USA was much more heavily engaged in the region than the European members of the alliance. Turkish governments were extremely keen on maintaining and continuously fostering good relations to Western states, first and foremost to the USA and to Western Europe.

For forty years, this one-way determined foreign policy was hardly questioned by the Turkish governments and Foreign Office; they condoned the definitive decision in favour of the country's incorporation into the Western system. In addition, Turkey became a member of the majority of Western multinational institutions, such as the Council of Europe, the OECD, and the CSCE. During

the entire period, Ankara never tried to seek a foreign policy alternative. Under the given awkward foreign policy circumstances and the resultant involvement in the East-West conflict, Turkey did not want or need to play an active part in developments; its scope of action had been too restricted.

At the beginning of the 1950s, Turkey was indisputably a poor country. Its economy showed the characteristic socioeconomic features of underdevelopment. It had a per capita income level of roughly US-\$ 140, with a population of 20 million people who were mainly employed in the agricultural sector. The striking negative factors were the obvious scarcity of savings and foreign exchange and extremely high hidden and visible unemployment. There was a lack of infrastructure in all fields. The country was clearly unable to overcome its pressing economic problems through its own resources and without outside help. Without military and economic assistance by the West, Turkey would have been unable to do justice to its assigned role when fulfilling its military alliance commitments within the NATO frame. Apart from security interests, therefore, economic considerations — regarding, for example, foreign aid and close economic cooperation with the industrialised NATO member states — had an obvious vital significance for Turkey. The country would only be in a position to promote its economic development and thus meet its NATO commitments with the help of Western economic support.

In line with the assignment of tasks within NATO, military assistance and financial aid were combined; the burden was primarily shouldered by the USA and partly by Germany. The USA took on the lion's share of military assistance in the Western alliance. Ankara's desire to intensify and improve bilateral relations within the frame of cooperation, however, failed to meet with a positive response in Washington. Strange as it may seem, the European NATO states were reluctant to provide the military support Turkey required for the common defence against Soviet expansionism on the same scale as the USA. As opposed to the latter, they tended to offset the costs needed for common defence through economic concessions — in an "Ankara Agreement" with the EC¹.

This was one of the reasons why the EC Commission accepted the Turkish application for association and sustained the prospect of future Turkish EC membership. On the whole, the constellation of interests was clear. For the Western alliance, the USA and the Western Europeans the security interests were crucial, whereas the separation of this sphere from economic aspects² constituted a problem for Turkey. For NATO, Turkey was only then important when security risks were at stake, as, for example, in the context of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, of the Iran crisis, and the Gulf War³.

Turkey's close cooperation with the West was not only designed to serve security and economic policy objectives, but was also an indispensable component of the process of Westernisation which was initiated over 150 years ago and

1 Cf. Heinz Kramer, *Die Europäische Gemeinschaft und die Türkei*, Baden-Baden: Nomos 1988, p. 159.

2 Helmut Schmidt, "Teppich braucht keine Flecken", in: *Die Zeit*, 7 November 1988.

3 Cf. Heinz Kramer, *EC-Turkey Relations: Unfinished Forever?*, SWP Ebenhausen, 1993, p. 6.

which was intensified after the republic was founded in 1923. This process sought to strengthen the bonds with Western civilisation. At the same time, it was hoped that this would overcome economic, technological and social backwardness and help introduce or extend basic democratic and human rights in the country along Western lines.

The policy of Westernisation initially pursued in political life by the Western-oriented elite only gained more popular support over the years despite recurrent fundamentalist opposition. The finalisation of this process still remains the guiding principle and irrevocable goal of Turkish domestic and foreign policies.

Turkish External Relations after the East-West Conflict

Politicians in Ankara were initially uneasy about the Soviet Union's exit as a superpower from the international stage and the breakdown of its political and economic system throughout Eastern Europe. They feared that their country would become less significant in strategic-geopolitical terms for Western partners. The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the resultant disappearance of the common foe for the West threatened, or so it seemed, to condemn Turkey to insignificance on the periphery of the "European House".

However, the situation developed in a completely different direction. After the haze veiling events in Eastern Europe had lifted, Turkey became a focus of international politics. It assumed an important role almost overnight. The elimination of the decade-long military threat led to tremendous relief in the north. Turkey now appeared as an island of stability and as the region's central and pivotal point. Ankara experienced intense diplomatic activity; visitors came from throughout the world. Even the EC suddenly showed considerable interest in reactivating the almost frozen relations. Turkey became a centre of political activities in the "devilish triangle" of the Balkan, Caucasus and Middle East regions. Within a short space of time, it had to unexpectedly and unpreparedly take on a new role — a role which it had already assumed in former years, as the economic and political contact partner of a crisis-ridden region within the frame of the Ottoman Empire. As Peter Scholl-Latour put it, "romantic memories were evoked of the role of the Ottoman Sultan and Caliph as the patron, as the commander of all believers in these tragic times"⁴. Ankara recognised its historic opportunity as a regional power and voiced a view according to which the new foreign policy role should be cast in a different mould to the country's previous role in the Western alliance. Various developments were decisive in this respects.

Both during the Gulf War and after its cessation, Turkey cooperated very closely with the Western allies. It not only demonstrated its loyalty to NATO, but also underlined the importance of its strategic position in the proliferating regional conflicts.

⁴ Peter Scholl-Latour, "Zurueck zum Geist der alten Kalifen", in: *Rheinischer Merkur*, 5 June 1992, p. 4.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union left a political vacuum in Transcaucasia and Central Asia. The opinion was taken in the West that, in this new situation, Turkey had a major mission to perform in these two regions — and especially among the Turk peoples living there. Under Turkey's leadership and in cooperation with the USA and Western Europe, the conditions in Transcaucasia and Central Asia were to be reshaped in such a way as to fill the afore-mentioned vacuum⁵. One central idea was the introduction of the "Turkish model" in the countries of both regions. This is based on three main pillars: secularism in an Islamic society, a Western-style pluralistic-democratic system, and a free market economy. The model was not only intended as a frame for the future political and economic development of these countries, but also as a catalyst for their "Westernisation".

The situation changed fundamentally in the Balkan region following the dissolution of the multinational state of Yugoslavia. Turkey was above all directly affected by the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Due to the historic ties with this mountainous region and the shared religious belief with the Bosnian Muslims which form the majority there, the government in Ankara felt compelled to demonstrate solidarity. After all, the region was under Ottoman rule between 1463 and 1878. What is more, two million or so emigrants and refugees from Bosnia live in a separate Muslim ethnic group, who left their home at the end of Turkish rule. Against this background, Ankara launched several political initiatives to settle the Bosnia conflict. So far, however, it has limited these activities to a joint initiative within the NATO frame and to appeals to the West to send troops to the conflict zone.

These developments suggest that Turkey will continue to view NATO as the best guarantor of its security interests. In addition, Turkey has become an associate member of the Western European Union (WEU). Turkey wants its security policy decisions to be taken in agreement with the Western alliance. However, in comparison with former years, it is asking for a greater say and for more room for manoeuvre in its activities in regional conflicts.

The end of the Cold War not only triggered changes outside of Turkey, but also inside the country. Existing political taboos were broken. Domestic problems which had been suppressed for decades could no longer be shelved; the need for far-reaching reform measures which had been deferred for so long surfaced with increasing clarity. Issues and problems such as human rights, democratisation, national identity and ethnic affiliation were addressed by the media and led to heated discussion. Apart from the country's still unresolved economic problems, the widespread nepotism in the state-owned firms, corruption, the abuse of power by many politicians, and bribery affairs have hit the headlines and top the domestic policy agenda. There is a growing call for a "cleaner society" and for the elimination of political corruption. It has become clear that the hardly coherent and sometimes nationalistic statements issued by

⁵ "The Central Asian States Now Look to Turkey as Regional Mentor", in: *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 January 1993.

certain politicians do not provide a suitable guideline for the solution of the problems which have built up over the years. A political "changing of the guard" and a generation shift in the party-political landscape, therefore, were absolutely essential. Even before the death of President Oezal, this inevitable process had been initiated through the election of Prime Minister Yilmaz. It continued through the replacement of government leader Demirel by Mrs Çiller. Turkish politicians, however, have yet to demonstrate their willingness and ability to set in motion and resolutely effect the long overdue process of change.

Turkey faces serious problems and challenges with a foreign policy background. Apart from the relations with the EC, which could be described as tense, these primarily include the permanent Cyprus crisis, the dispute with Syria and with Iraq over the water of the Euphrates regulated by a Turkish dam, the activities of the Kurd terrorist organisation PKK from bases located on Iranian and Syrian territory, the dispute with Armenia over the Karabach conflict, and the critical situation of the Muslim minorities in the Balkan region. The question articulated by former ambassador Gurun encapsulates the mood: "What have we done wrong, why was Ankara unable to achieve the ambitious goals set two years ago, and why have the high expectations regarding the power to be exercised in this region not been fulfilled?"

One of the main reasons for this is the fact that, like every other country, Turkey was caught unawares by the events of 1989/90. At the time, it was in the middle of a heated election campaign; the parties were preoccupied with domestic policy issues. As always, foreign policy issues assumed a secondary role and, furthermore, they were often discussed in a highly emotional manner.

Another major factor was that the institutions responsible for foreign policy in Turkey talked and acted at cross-purposes. There was often more euphoria and rhetoric than pragmatism. During an official visit in spring 1993, for example, President Oezal declared: "What can the Armenians do if shots happen to be fired... March into Turkey?". His rival in Ankara, Prime Minister Demirel, took a different view: "We shall not attack Armenia. If we attack, others on the other side will also attack."⁶

The countries which had been freed from the yoke of the former USSR had numerous old scores to settle. The protagonists of Turkish foreign policy have so far failed to adjust to the resultant situations of conflict. They found themselves confronted with many problems with which they were unable to cope. Instead, they rated the number of signed treaties and summit meetings as criteria of foreign policy success. As shown, for example, by action on the occasion of Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO), and the Islamic Conference Organisation (ICO), interest focused on political considerations, to the detriment of economic interests. As opposed to the previous period, there was also a confusion of foreign policy priorities. The relational frame and the cost-benefit considerations are still vague.

⁶ Bassam Tibi, "Der Blick nach Osten", in: *Die Welt*, 19 May 1993.

The enthusiasm of the initial (re-)encounter with the Turk peoples of the former USSR was followed by a return to business as usual. Although the ancestors of today's Turks had come to Central Asia in the 9th century, Ankara hardly has any corresponding information. There was a language barrier. And mere rhetoric is insufficient; words must be followed by deeds. Especially the economic expectations of the partners were too high. At the same time, there was a reserved response to the "Turkish model". The inertia of the Soviet apparatus is, as demonstrated by the replacement of President Elçibey, who was elected by the Azerbaijani people, by Aliiev, a member of the former Soviet Politburo, still effective. It is becoming increasingly clear that Moscow — and not Ankara — is the determinant external power in Transcaucasia and Central Asia. The internal political power constellations in the new countries of the former USSR with a primarily Muslim influence also indicate that there will be no interest in the West which goes beyond the desire for Western financial aid and includes the basic values of democracy and human rights.

Ankara has also underrated the security policy and economic influence which the Russian Federation exerts on the other countries of the former USSR. What is more, the Turkish side has jeopardised its previously good relations to Russia through its express sympathy for the Turk peoples. Ankara initially tried in a precipitate solo run to put the relationship to the Muslim peoples of the former USSR on a political, economic and cultural basis. It probably wanted to establish a new and indispensable position for the West as a trustee of the newly emergent states. Following initial interest, however, the envisaged partners showed noticeable restraint.

Turkey was then unable to fulfil Azerbaijan's expectations in view of Armenian aggression. Azerbaijan turned to Moscow for help. And Moscow was willing to teach Ankara a lesson in order to make it clear who was still in charge in the CIS states⁷.

The Turkish side attached particular importance to Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan because of their oil reserves. Ankara is still interested in connecting the oil extracted in both countries with the outside world through a pipeline to Turkey. There are misgivings, on the other hand, about transportation through the straits in oil tankers due to the associated environmental pollution risk and the already excessive maritime traffic. The oil business, of course, has multinational dimensions. Accordingly, many firms operating worldwide want to access new markets and increase existing shares of the market. Experience shows that the power constellation of the parties involved and the corresponding balance of interests are extremely important here. Ankara would have been well-advised, therefore, to take the initiative from the outset in order to successfully influence the still unresolved negotiations on the oil pipeline route from Azerbaijan to Western Europe at an early stage.

⁷ Heinz Kramer, "Die Tuerkei: Anker fuer Mittelasien?", in: *Mittelasien zwischen neuen Fronten*, SWP Ebenhausen, May 1992, p. 31.

The powers-that-be in the now sovereign Muslim republics of the former USSR are confronted with two main problems. First, the ethnic conflicts and independence movements inside the respective states, which threaten territorial integrity. Second, the constantly growing economic problems. The absence of reforms is accompanied by a rapidly increasing need for foreign financial assistance and foreign direct investments.

In security policy terms, Turkey was above all challenged by the Armenian war of intervention against Azerbaijan and by the Serb massacres of Bosnian Muslims. Most Turks were incensed about both events. Nevertheless, Turkey could do nothing but rhetorically declare its solidarity with the peoples of the maltreated countries. Moscow, on the other hand, sympathised with their enemies and/or Serbia and Armenia. As Turkey's economic resources are limited, the country is unable without Western support to provide the financial backing the new partners need. Mutual expectations, therefore, are now being given a realistic and pragmatic basis. Under the current circumstances, the economic relations can only be extended and intensified step by step.

Future Prospects of Turkish Foreign Policy

The developments in the Balkan region and in Transcaucasia have cast doubt upon the role of regional leader to which Turkey laid claim. The country is running the risk of gambling away its political standing. Ankara has arrived at a crossroads. A retrospective analysis allows conclusions to be drawn about a number of future requirements.

In future, Turkey will remain an important member of NATO and also continue its cooperation with the WEU. The goal of Turkish Westward orientation has secular significance. Despite fluctuations caused by internal politics, therefore, it will also be passed on to the younger generation and thus be sustained until the finalisation of the country's bonding to Western civilisation. Economic interests primarily signpost a Westward path of cooperation, even though the negative response of the EC Commission to the Turkish accession application of 14 April 1987 has dampened former hopes of full membership.

Turkey already reaps substantial economic benefits thanks to the "Ankara Agreement", which lays down an association with the EC. This makes a major contribution towards the country's development. The EC states are still the most important trading partner of the Turkish economy, and the markets in the EC are extremely significant for Turkey.

In 1992, the EC accounted for a 52 per cent share of Turkey's total exports. A large part of imports — 44 per cent — is also transacted with EC states⁸. Almost 60 per cent of foreign investments come from EC countries. Furthermore, almost 2 million workers are employed in the EC. Their remittances amounting to almost US-\$ 3 billion (1992) are just as important for Turkey as its export

⁸ Undersecretariat of Treasury and Foreign Trade (ed.), *Main Indicators*, May 1993, pp. 56-63.

revenue. Tourism — trips to Turkey by EC citizens — makes a considerable contribution towards consolidating Turkey's balance on current account. The new markets in the Muslim countries of the former USSR cannot replace the markets in the industrialised countries in the foreseeable future; they can only be considered as supplementary. The BSEC and ECO, therefore, cannot provide serious alternatives to trade with the OECD and EC countries⁹.

According to the "Ankara Agreement" of 1963 and the Supplementary Protocol of 1973, Turkey can become a member of the European customs union after 1995. All tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade between Turkey and the EC will then be removed. At the same time, the Common External Tariffs regulation towards third countries will be adopted by Turkey. At first glance, this would appear to be a major challenge for the Turkish economy. Bearing in mind the long-term perspectives, however, the Turkish economy will, regardless of the pessimistic assessment by sections of industry oriented towards the domestic market and by trade unions worried about jobs, mainly benefit.

This, admittedly, is only true under one condition. Both the smooth economic integration of Turkey into the customs union and the perhaps subsequent full EC membership as well as the envisaged leading role in the region cannot be successfully achieved without considerable national economic effort. The current state of the Turkish economy — high inflation (70 per cent), growing budget deficits, an alarming level of internal and external debt, structural and hidden unemployment, a distribution of income deteriorating at the expense of the working population, and a reform deficit in public life — is a poor foundation in both respects. Turkey, therefore, should put its own house in order first by tackling far-reaching restructuring measures and by continuing an economic policy geared to the world market. If the 21st century is to become a Turkish century, as Oezal declared, the resolution of urgent political and economic problems must begin without delay. Political initiatives can only be successful if they are accompanied and supplemented by economic components.

⁹ Cf. for more details Bahri Yilmaz, *Die Wirtschaftsbeziehungen der Türkei zu den Nachfolgestaaten der Sowjetunion: Stand und Perspektiven*, SWP Ebenhausen, March 1993.