

TURKEY: A NEW BRIDGE IN A NETWORK WORLD?

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The genesis of this pamphlet and hence this talk today arose from a view that over the last three years the world has changed dramatically from one of hard power and blocs to one in which it was no longer necessary to be strong to talk to the strong, or threatening to have authority but in which soft power, dialogue and technological skills are increasingly becoming the prime tools of international diplomacy and influence. This was the Network World of which recently Lord Howell spoke to us.

It has surprisingly quickly seen the end of hegemonic strategies and the diminution of polarisation. It has witnessed the increasing salience of not only the obvious re-emerging forces of China, Russia and India but also of the growing economic and technological entities of South Korea, Japan and even Malaysia. It is a world in which reaching out is taking over from going in, where engagement is replacing ostracisation and which is based on cooperation rather than conscription, on encouragement rather than direction

It has become increasingly clear that one of the potentially key players in this network world is Turkey. Yet the extent of that potential is still to be determined and it is to that question which my pamphlet is however inadequately addressed. I might simply have called it the Re-emergence of Turkey and avoided the sensitivities which I know exist in the often used 'bridge' metaphor. I chose not to because in this network world I believe the bridge analogy is more appropriate than ever.

I am not speaking of a bridge in the passive sense of something over which things move or are transported, but a dynamic concept which not only facilitates but energises relationships and movements across and around it. It is more than a hub from which initiatives radiate outwards although that is part of it. It has the potential to connect those which are unconnected, to reconcile those which are currently not reconciled and to give support where the lack of it causes instability. It is that concept of a bridge which seems to be central in exploring the question of where the Turkey of today is headed. And in this its geopolitical location is crucial.

Turkey's importance lies not only in its linking of Europe and Asia on a north/south axis but also on an east/west axis as the essential water passage between central Asia and Russia and by way of the Dardanelles to the Aegean and the Mediterranean beyond. It historically was and currently is and will remain 'a bridge', but one that both motivates and adds value.

While Turkey's military strength is unquestioned, this 'bridge' would not be based on hard power but on commerce and diplomacy and facilitation between conflicted nations, a working example of soft power or even what has sometimes been called 'smart' power. Turkey is well suited to the emerging network world.

The question remains however as to whether Turkey really wants to be a driving force, a key player, a bridge in this networked world. Does it see its future either in the EU and the West or through what is

loosely called neo-Ottomanism in the Middle East region? Or is it still undecided and just testing the various waters around it? And in any event is the country domestically stable enough to sustain such a foreign policy? These are the questions which I will try to explore.

‘Neo-Ottomanism’ is a term some analysts have used to describe Turkey’s recent self-confidence in regional affairs and its new activism in the Middle East. As a broad philosophy it appears to have been actively pursued by the ruling Justice and Development Party (the AKP). Omar Taspinar, an expert commentator on Turkey and the surrounding region, quotes Ahmet Davutoglu, formerly the Prime Minister’s top foreign policy advisor and now the Foreign Minister, as saying that “strategic depth” was a necessary remedy after years of unbalance, that is to say looking too much to Europe.

It logically followed that the untapped potential, both economic and political, gained from turning to the east was too great to be ignored. And so it is proving.

A renewed emphasis on the Middle East has been attributed a number of factors among them security, economic necessity and opportunity and perceived rebuffs from the EU. In terms of trade and goods, Turkey’s imprint can be found all over the Middle East and an increasing amount of Gulf capital flows into the Turkish economy. Turkey also now functions as what is sometimes known as an ‘example’ state. According to former Foreign Minister Ali Babacan, countries in the region ask Turkey detailed questions about how democracy, Islam and security function together.

Turkey’s chief role in the Middle East was until recently as a member of Nato and an early ally of Israel. It is now increasingly becoming that of proactive intermediary.

For example, Turkey has been central in refereeing discussions within Iraq. Indeed the European Commission has welcomed Turkey’s continued support for efforts to achieve stability, security and national reconciliation in that country.

Israel and Syria have also made positive use of Turkey as intermediary. In April 2008 Prime Minister Recep Erdogan announced that both nations had sought Turkey’s help, saying “The trust Turkey has makes it almost obligatory to take on a mediating role.”

Turkey has long been Israel’s closest friend in the Muslim world, and in 1948 was one of the first countries to recognise Israel. The armies of the two countries have been close. Yet Turkey is also the only NATO country to have welcomed Hamas leader Khalid Meshaal, and it has been un-ambivalent about the need to bring Hamas to the negotiating table. This insistence that the current status quo is unsustainable is a firm message for Israel. Indeed Turkey’s straight talking may eventually point the best way forward to an Israeli- Palestinian solution.

Turkey was active in attempting to bring about an end to the attack on Gaza in December 2008 and January 2009. Prime Minister Erdogan met with President Mubarak after talks with Jordan, Syrian and Palestinian leaders including Hamas in a bid to end the offensive. It may have been frustration at their failure to end the Gaza siege, or that it was damaging the prospect of Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, that riled Mr Erdogan enough to snub President Shimon Peres by storming off the stage in Davos earlier this year and why military relations with Israel including over-flying agreements have recently changed. It remains to be seen in the longer term to what extent relations have been soured, and how much they are affected by the relatively more hard line stance of the Netanyahu Government in Jerusalem.

Arising from all this there emerges a wider and vitally important question, namely whether there is likely to be a Turkish agreement with Iran on control and influence over the region, or whether between them there will be constant friction and struggle for influence. In essence, will Iran be a

friend or a threat to Turkey in the region? The jury on this pivotal point are still out.

In February of this year, Mr Erdogan told the Guardian newspaper that Iran had asked Turkey to resolve its thirty-year dispute with the US as a possible prelude to re-establishing ties. As Iran and Turkey currently appear to be strengthening relations - Abdullah Gul met Ayatollah Khamenei in March 2009 and Mr Erdogan met him in October - this would be a major string to Turkey's mediating bow. At the same time there is noticeable anxiety in the US Administration at the potential for improving Turkish relations with Iran to undermine the Western strategy towards that country not least in the matter of sanctions.

Turkey's dealings have not been restricted to the Middle East, and indeed her neighbours to the north could prove just as much in need of mediation as those to its east. Turkey played a conciliatory role following the conflict between Russia and Georgia. Apparently Georgian police even wear Turkish style uniforms. Turkey has proposed a regional initiative, the "Caucasus Cooperation and Stability Platform", which is intended to include Turkey, Russia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and possibly Iran.

Turkey has also made headway in bringing Pakistan and Afghanistan together. In April 2007 the Presidents of all three countries met in Ankara for a summit, producing the "Ankara Declaration". This contained pledges to try and achieve cooperation in areas including territorial integrity, sustainable development and the fight against terrorism.

Yesterday, Mr Erdogan met President Obama in Washington to discuss a number of issues, including sending troops to Afghanistan, relations with Armenia and the Middle Eastern region. There is no doubt that even since the President's early visit to Turkey the areas for discussion between the two countries are widening considerably as Turkey's regional influence grows.

Turkey is also developing strong and dynamic links with countries such as India and China as well as countries in South America and Africa.

There are also now hopes for a genuine restoration of relations between Turkey and Armenia. On October 10th Turkey and Armenia signed an historic accord normalising relations after nearly a century of hostility. Although there were last-minute problems, the two foreign ministers eventually signed the protocols in the presence of the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and the EU's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana.

Hostility on the ground is still very much to the fore in relations between the two countries and this will be a long and rocky process at best. On top of that Turkey is troubled by the long-lasting and ongoing dispute between Armenia and Turkey's ally Azerbaijan, over the disputed region of Nagorno Karabakh.

Nevertheless, relations are much better than could have been hoped in a very long time. This is very much in conformity with the foreign policy that the AKP have been trying to follow, that of 'Zero Problems with Neighbours'.

Whether it weakens Turkey's position and standing simultaneously to look both east and west will now depend on how deftly it manages its dealings. It appears that its leaders have realised that Turkey can benefit by befriending all sides, engaging rather than isolating. What is more Turkey's growing influence in the Middle East is the chief reason why America is embracing, and the EU should embrace, the country. Yet regarding trade, as the Economist pointed out last February, Arab investors look to the country precisely because they consider her European, not Middle Eastern. So

how European is Turkey and how European is it likely to become?

If Turkey achieved accession it would become the EU's second biggest member state in terms of population, smaller only than Germany. It would bring a new energy dimension to the European Union. It is situated close to over 70 per cent of the world's gas and oil reserves and sits on major routes between supplier countries and markets. The major oil pipeline, running from Azerbaijan through Ceyhan, a Turkish port, is growing in importance. A new route for gas is imperative, and to this end Turkey again could be vital. The planned Nabucco pipeline project is a case in point.

All of this underlines the potential importance of Turkey to Europe and the value of achieving an even closer relationship. That is why Turkey's application for EU membership is as highly relevant to Europe as it is to Turkey. At the same time the special and significant characteristics of Turkey do not readily lend themselves to an increasingly and eventually wholly integrated Europe. This is not a disparagement but a statement of fact, one which I happily make equally in relation to the UK.

Turkey is a good example of why the current EU 'in-or-out' system is too rigid and a Europe of variable geometry would be preferable. A specially designed sort of 'Associate Membership' for Turkey could solve many of the problems regarding Turkey's current full membership bid, one which looks unlikely to ever fulfil fundamental EU expectations. A generally more flexible EU, with other countries also able to move to varying forms of associate or less than full membership themselves, could well be a better answer. Indeed meeting Turkey's interests in this regard might well be the catalyst for creating a more sensible EU, based on variable geometry. I personally believe that there is, particularly after the ratification and imminent implementation of the Lisbon treaty, a strong case for looking at a Europe where the central core can move ever further into integration but where the countries on the edges, Turkey, Ukraine, Poland and the United Kingdom for a start could all enjoy a less integrated and more associate form of membership where each could act as a dynamic bridge to what in each case lies beyond, whether into Asia or into Russia or across the Atlantic.

The military is a particularly important part of Turkey's power and influence because it is the largest army in Europe, and the second largest in NATO. Turkey is one of only a few NATO countries that is capable of independently and rapidly deploying an operational headquarters; its forces are predominantly ground based, technologically advanced and well-equipped - although its relationship with NATO, and especially the US, has at times been less than smooth.

Turkey's inability to participate in the European Defence Agency (EDA) has been criticised by those who promulgate a European Army and is another indicator of why Turkey might be better suited to the sort of 'Associate Member' status I have just suggested. Once again I would argue that the same could apply to the UK.

There is also the issue of how Europe perceives Turkey. Different nations within the EU have alternative perspectives on Turkey's proposed membership. There are two primary concerns: how Europe's identity will be affected, and how the economics and other practical considerations will be resolved.¹

It doesn't help that the European Union's own future identity remains uncertain. After the Lisbon Treaty, the dynamic for internal reform and a unified sense of direction makes the prospect of new members harder to contemplate. Moreover, as one commentator points out, "much of the general public [in Europe] simply see Turkey as too big, too poor, too far away and too Islamic."

¹ Public opinion in Europe in favour of Turkish accession runs at about 30 per cent across the whole Union. Turkey's membership is actively opposed by France, Austria and Germany. Their opposition is partly to do with Turkey itself and partly enlargement in general, and in varying degrees.

The UK is one of its strongest supporters, and in October 2007 the British Government released information about a new Strategic Partnership with Turkey, which includes assisting Turkey with their membership attempt, dependent on the continuation of reforms in Turkey. I hope that such support continues but by mutual agreement towards a slightly different form of membership.

Then there is the issue as to how Turkey sees Europe. Currently public opinion in Turkey is still in favour of membership, although this has declined sharply since 2004. Because of domestic political matters, frustration at the constant demands made by the EU and the belief that Turkey is ultimately not welcome in Europe there are growing doubts that she will ever become a member of the EU. These perceptions are damaging even to the form of associated membership which I have suggested and to the reform movement within Turkey itself.

In fact Turkey began its domestic reforms before the EU existed. Turkey should continue to do so, at a pace that works best for the country, with or without the carrot of EU membership. It should be the role of western EU countries to encourage and help Turkey through this process, remembering as Huseyin Gun points out that it is hard for the government to introduce the more unpopular changes or look beholden to the EU when the stated position is that talks are 'open-ended' and have no certainty of membership. The 'Davos affair', as a foreign diplomat pointed out to *The Economist*, was further evidence of "Mr Erdogan's conviction that the West needs Turkey more than Turkey needs it."

One developing scenario is the relationship between Turkey and the US once again in evidence in Washington yesterday. It can be argued that President Obama's outreach to Turkey is amongst other things a sign that Europe has dropped the ball on this. Brussels can be accused of taking Turkey for granted, whereas Washington can be said to be positively courting Ankara. In short, as an editorial in the *Guardian* put it, Europe has "yet to see what Mr Obama has already understood. Turkey's biggest asset is its geopolitical role, and it is using it intelligently." The meeting yesterday in Washington underlines this as well as reemphasising that Europe is in danger of getting left behind.

Another major question is whether Turkey can sustain an ambitious and controversial foreign policy. For a start is it domestically stable enough?

In many regards Turkey is an example to fledgling democracies in the Middle East; it has a constitution, a 550-seat unicameral Parliament, elections every four years and a directly elected President.

Generally the AKP have been a reforming party; politically, socially, economically and culturally and Turkey has changed a great deal since their election.²

Yet there are major problems that prevent Turkey from having genuine and solid democratic credentials. The Economist Intelligence Unit's Political Instability Index in March ranked Turkey 53rd out of 165 countries (the lower the rank, the higher the risk of instability).

Successive political crises have damaged Turkey's reputation and derailed EU prospects, as well as creating an unwanted atmosphere of political instability.

The military's role in political life is complex. For many Turks, the army is the most constant institution in the country, commanding varying degrees of respect, and seen as above politics by its

² The three constitutional amendment packages introduced in 2001, 2002 and 2004 included, among other things: abolition of the death penalty, abolition of State Security Courts from the Turkish Judicial system, the enshrinement of the principle of gender equality in the Constitution, and the supremacy of international human rights treaties over domestic law.

supporters. But that does not make for essential stability. The tension between the military and the political system has been cited by the EU as problematic, as is the impression that both the army and the government believe they should have top billing in dictating Turkey's affairs.

One example of this inherent instability was the decision in March 2008 of Turkey's Chief Public Prosecutor to petition the Constitutional Court for the closure of the AK Party, accusing it of being a focal point for anti-secular activities. While in the outcome the Party was not closed down, it was found guilty of anti-secular activity and fined 50 per cent of its state funding. This was a knock to the political stability of the country as a whole.

The economy, which had been growing and developing under the AKP's leadership, has also taken a major knock with the global financial crisis. In November 2008 the OECD cited Turkey, as one of the countries most likely to be severely affected; its unemployment rate is at an all-time high of nearly 15 per cent. There are still ongoing talks between Turkey and the IMF about a loan deal.

Yet prior to this Turkey's economy had grown rapidly after the 2001 crisis, and developed into the 17th largest economy in the world and the 7th largest economy in Europe, with a GDP valued at \$659 billion. A PricewaterhouseCoopers long-term projection, made before the current crisis, suggested that Turkey could have an average annual per capita GDP growth of 3.4 per cent, lower than China or India, but higher than Brazil and Russia and significantly higher than that of the G8 countries.

This robust position could well re-emerge once the worldwide recession has abated, but strong and confident leadership is now more vital than ever.

No study of the current situation in and international potential of Turkey can ignore the problem of the Kurds who make up around 15 per cent of Turkey's population and are mainly based in the poor south-east of the country, also the base of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The PKK has been boosted by the lack of stability in neighbouring Iraq, and it has established bases around and across the border. A profile produced by Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre in September 2008 revealed a marked increase in support for the PKK among Turkey's Kurds since the summer of 2004.

Yet the Turkish government has been working hard on creating the right initiatives to persuade the PKK to surrender their arms. The AKP have taken on the old slogan of 'peace at home and peace abroad'. To this end, Ankara recently lifted a ban on the Kurdish language and put money into new aid programmes for underdeveloped Kurdish regions. There have also been discussions with PKK leaders currently based in northern Iraq. The 'Democratic Opening' towards Turkey's 15 million Kurds is certainly a bold and politically risky initiative by Prime Minister Erdogan. Hopefully it could prove a real turning point in Turkish Kurdish relations.

Clearly, whatever Turkey's future direction may be, there still remains internally a lot to be done. At the same time both because of Turkey's relative success as a secular democracy in a Muslim country, and because of the destabilisation effect that could occur were it to falter, it remains vitally important to Europe and the wider western world that Turkey continues to be a relatively stable and exemplary force in the region.

In conclusion we need to ask the overall question of where Turkey is heading. I have no doubt that Turkey is ideally placed to play a leading role in a networked world. Moreover, it appears the governing AK Party has the inclination for it to do so.

Turkey's relationship with Europe is paramount and the direction that is taken will determine the

futures of both Turkey and the EU. If Europe is to benefit from Turkey's regional importance, political clout, military abilities and energy security as well as to get a foot on this bridge to the Islamic world it will I believe require a system of variable geometry in order to achieve that goal.

The AKP's tenure, although it has not been plain sailing, has seen great inroads made in terms of political reforms. At the same time the most significant advances have been on the diplomatic front where Turkey in very short order has established itself as a key – if not the key – regional player. The initiatives undertaken by Mr Erdogan and Mr Davutoglu are certainly courageous and they are beginning to show early signs of bearing fruit in their changing relations with their middle eastern neighbours. They are also making headway on the Kurdish issue and talks with the Armenians. Domestic instability is never far away, but serious crises have for the time being been kept at bay. The economic situation is bad in Turkey, as elsewhere, but it retains the potential to become an economic powerhouse of the future. The potential is there.

Only Turkey can decide what its next steps must be. Europe should stand by ready to encourage and to welcome. The West should support the progress of a stable Islamic secular democracy nestled in a neighbourhood of contentious and difficult countries and the world should welcome a renewed Turkey as a force for good.

No-one can foretell the future but one thing is clear. Turkey can if it so chooses become a real and vibrant bridge in a world that needs bridging more than ever. I hope that it will.

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