

Turkey's Foreign Policy in Turbulent Times (Chaillot Paper N° 92)

By Kemal Kirişçi. Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, 2006

It goes without saying that the core of contemporary European discussion about Turkey is whether Turkey with all its "troubles and otherness" can fit into "our almost trouble-free" Europe. There are however two problems with this discussion. First of all, considering Turkey and the EU as static entities is far from reality, for both organisms are really living and dynamic ones. The second problem is that most of the discussion focuses on domestic issues Turkey yet has to face. But there is not much talk about Turkish foreign policy, its interaction with its neighborhood (the European neighborhood!) and its perception of threats, challenges and interests. While Europe is currently thriving (or, at least declares to do so) to be more efficient in interaction in its surroundings, and even attempts to change it to stand up to European standards, it is of vital importance to take a closer look on what does Turkey, the future "EU-pean", has to say to this.

To understand Turkey's current foreign policy one needs to take a closer look at deep changes (and their causes) that happened with this foreign policy in the last few years. Kemal Kirişçi, the director of the European studies centre and professor of international

relations at Bogazici University in Turkey has previously authored and coauthored a number of publications on Turkish foreign policy. In the latest one he focuses exactly on this almost revolutionary shift that happened in Turkey's foreign policy at the break of the millennium.

Turkey started expanding its economic and commercial contacts with surrounding regions as well as supporting or creating several peace initiatives in its volatile neighborhood already in the 1980s under the leadership of Turgut Özal. Prime minister and later, president, Özal emphasized the importance of interdependence and economic relations, and "interests of the export oriented sector in TR". This was seen as one of ways to open up Turkey and anchor it more firmly in the EC/EU. Yet this positive path was halted due to a number of factors, and in the 1990s Turkey found itself in conflict with Greece, Iran, Syria and Cyprus. Turkey of the 90s, the "coercive power" open to confrontation was also forging a closer friendship with Israel – something not looked upon positively by its Persian and Arab neighbors. Galloping unrests in the Turkish southeast, to which the military responded with often

inadequate force also did not add up to progress and transformation. Neither did the 1997 Luxembourg summit, when the EU opted for not assigning Turkey the status of candidate, and instead kept asking for a “political solution to the Kurdish problem”. Thus, in Turkey, hardliners were on the top, EU optimists were often labeled traitors, supporting the supposed EU plan to strip Turkey of yet another piece of land.

But the breaking point came according to Kirişci after the EU Helsinki summit in 1999, when Turkey received candidacy status. According to the author this move (enabled to a large extent by Turkish consent on using NATO facilities for ESDP) helped the EU to increase its leverage on Turkey. In fact things started getting better even before the summit, as relations with Syria abandoned their previous confrontationalist line after Syria expelled Ocalan in 1998. Relations got on a positive track fast – whether we speak about the cooperation on state level or trade. But more importantly, relations with Greece, a NATO ally with which Turkey was on the verge of war just a short-time ago improved definitely thanks to the famous “earthquake diplomacy” after summer 1999. The year 2000 has witnessed the first reciprocal visit between Greece and Turkey on the level of foreign ministers after almost 40 years of freeze, followed by increased volume of trade and civil society exchanges. Part of the success was surely the new

Cyprus policy – after Turkey, for the first time since 1974, abandoned the status quo, or the “non solution is the solution” approach.

It is however since 2002 and the arrival of the AKP to the government that a reform “revolution” has started, and to a large part due to these efforts the negotiations with the Union were finally opened. And it was exactly this rapid transformation that makes Turkey an “example from which lessons can be drawn” (rather than a model, term, that Kirişci avoids) for countries in the neighborhood attempting democratization.

So what is this “new foreign policy” Kirişci is talking about? In short it can be summarized as a break-up with the old spectre of “Sevresphobia” and self-perception of Turkey as the “most lonely country in the world”. The break up did not happen all by itself but was enabled by creation or better to say expansion of the public sphere. As NGOs and international actors have become more involved in creating a more inclusive and pluralist society in Turkey, the old fears started to subside. In other words – a legacy of the Ozal era was extended. While Kirişci lists a lot of evidence of these processes, this part of the work could use more analytical insight and a couple of more paragraphs about the newfound role of Islamic movements in Turkish society. The opening of the public sphere is reflected also in its foreign policy – NGOs have started taking on a more active role in cooperation with the state on the

drafting of public and state agendas. (A good example of this are TESEV's activities in the Cyprus issue). The field of diplomacy, a sacred cow for so many years (though surely not only in the case of Turkey) has become more an issue of expert and wider public debate.

What has happened with Turkey in the most recent couple of years, Kirişci summarizes as a shift away from a win-lose approach to a win-win approach and a willingness to take risks. Kirisci calls new Turkish foreign policy "pro-active", as its goal is to arrive at "zero problems with its neighbors." But here is actually the point where Kirişci's pro-active and constructive Turkey is seen by many in the West (especially in Europe) as stubborn, un-cooperative and – coercive. Thus we have to ask a question – can this shift from old to new foreign policy really leave its positive trait without an EU-Turkey consensus being found on significance of the "new"?

A case in point is Cyprus. When Turkey supported the Annan Plan on Cyprus and later, despite its failure (the Greek Cypriot no-vote), came up with its "New Initiative", it went unheard and without any success. While Europe and Turkey declared many times that they have common interests, they do not yet possess a common perception of threats, risks etc. If they are to achieve any of their common goals, time is up to start learning. And it is perhaps Europe who should listen now.

Especially, since Turkey is gaining firmer ground in the Middle East.

Yet even this creates complicated situations – when in March 2003 the Turkish parliament decided as it did regarding the use of Turkish territory for US operations in Iraq, it was "received by the Arab world as well as in many European countries as a sign of democratic maturity." Certainly, Kirişci is right to point out that also due to other factors, the Turkish image in Arabic countries and the Moslem world has changed, and that happened without deterioration of relations with Israel, its long time strategic ally. While Turkey used to be despised by its Arab neighbors also because of this friendship with Israel, this aspect of the new foreign policy should be highlighted.

One other important ally however seems to be sending surprised signals. As Turkey has been improving relations with countries that the USA does not consider so friendly, a reformulation of Turkish-US partnership will probably have to happen. And not just because of the "new" Turkish relations with its Middle Eastern neighborhood but more importantly, because of the Iraq factor. As we are witnessing more talk about territorial disintegration of Iraq, Turkey is understandably anxious and would like to see its allies, especially the US, take a more decisive stance towards separatists from the PKK. Moreover, another important issue, according to the author, is that the way how the US is handling the Iranian issue is in fact increasing Iranian influence in the region, which might in

the end diminish the role of Turkey as a source of inspiration for neighboring countries.

Thus, what challenges remain for Turkey? Kirişci sees three – first is the continuation of the reform process: pro-reform elites in Turkey will have to continue their tough battle with the circles opposed to change. Second is the continuing relationship with the Union. He is right to point out that the “ball” is on the EU side of the ground now. As an honest academic Kirişci avoids for activist calls and apocalyptic scenarios (“what happens if the EU fails”) but very softly suggests that the Union that helped to change Turkey and its policies from Hobbesian (win-lose strategies) to Kantian (win-win strategies) will have to deal with its “Turkish question” more honestly. It tempts to follow on the author’s line of thinking and suggest more openly: the Union should start to be more efficient in perceiving its relations with Turkey in a more Kantian than Hobbesian way.

And what is the third challenge? It is the turbulent neighborhood, of course. How far will Turkey go with reformism in regions it borders? It is more than obvious and Kirişci stressed it, that the way the third challenge will be answered depends to a large extent on the first two plus the character of relations with the US. The reviewed publication is really unique in how it encapsulates the key issues facing Turkish foreign policy these days and outlines issues that will need to be addressed by both Turkish and EU policy makers. Together with its rich reference apparatus, Kirişci’s paper is a relevant guide of changes that happened in Turkish foreign policy in the last few years and of more changes than we can expect.

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