

# IS TURKEY HEADING FOR STRATEGIC REORIENTATION?

The consolidation of power achieved by the religious-conservative AKP party, the tensions in relations with the US, and the difficult negotiations with the EU raise questions about the future strategic orientation of Turkey. A fundamental reconsideration of the country's Western alignment is unlikely. It is quite possible that a larger role for Ankara in the regional politics of the Near and Middle East could be in line with the interests of the West. One precondition, however, would be for Europe and the US to offer Turkey the prospect of comprehensive foreign and security policy cooperation.



Visitors at the mausoleum of the founder of modern Turkey, Kemal Ataturk, 9 September 2007 Reuters/Umit Bektas

Turkey is an important security policy partner for the EU and the US. Geopolitically, the country constitutes a bridge between the West and the Near East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. In the context of energy policy, it is an important transit country for oil and gas. Its armed forces are the largest in NATO after those of the US. Finally, Turkey also represents a successful model for the combination of Islam and democracy, as European and US observers frequently point out in their demands for political reforms in other Muslim countries.

During the Cold War, Turkey generally acted as a reliable partner of the West after its NATO accession in 1952. However, three developments in recent years have raised questions about the country's future strategic orientation. First of all, there have been fundamental shifts of power

in Turkish domestic politics. Whereas the state had traditionally been ruled by the secular elites sworn to defend the Kemalist ideology of the state's founder Ataturk, the religious-conservative AKP (Justice and Development) party has been in government since 2002. Secondly, Turkey's relations with the US have markedly deteriorated since the invasion in Iraq.

Third, there is increasing skepticism both among the Turkish population and in Europe towards the notion of Turkey joining the EU. According to an annual survey conducted by the German Marshall Fund, support for EU accession in Turkey dropped from 73 per cent in 2004 to 40 per cent in 2007. During the same period, the corresponding average rate in 11 European countries fell from 36 per cent to 22 per cent. Today, only 26 per cent of Turkish citizens

believe that a successful conclusion of accession negotiations with the EU is likely. How significant is the current transformation of Turkey's domestic and foreign policy? What effects can be expected for Ankara's future regional and strategic course?

## From Kemalism to political Islam?

Within Turkey, tensions have been increasing as the AKP has been able to consolidate its power base in recent months, despite – or possibly because of – the threats uttered by the military, which regards itself as the guardian of Ataturk's heritage. The party of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan won the parliamentary elections in July 2007 by a broad margin. Accordingly, AKP candidate and former foreign minister Abdullah Gul managed to win the election for the state presidency in August 2007. This means that the AKP today controls all of the central state institutions, with the exception of the armed forces.

While the AKP has won an initial victory in the power struggle with the Kemalists, the underlying confrontation between the traditional and the new, religious elites in Turkey is still far from being decided. The military has already carried out several coups in the past in support of preserving Kemalist principles such as the separation of religion and politics or the country's pro-Western orientation. In April 2007, the general staff published a memorandum warning against a de-secularization of Turkey. Subsequently, Kemalist opponents of the AKP, including the pro-army CHP

(Republican People's Party), organized mass demonstrations. In view of the current popularity of the AKP, a military putsch is not a viable option for the generals at this point. However, networks consisting of the security apparatus and the traditional elites will try to limit the influence of the new religious elites by all means.

It is important to note, however, that the AKP's current political agenda is far less committed to political Islam than the Kemalists suggest. For example, the party is not so much opposed to secularism per se, but rejects the Kemalist version of the secular state. It has also pursued a liberal economic policy in recent years and implemented a series of political reforms that are aimed at preparing Turkey for EU accession. Paradoxically, the AKP today regards the country's alignment towards the EU and NATO as less of a problem than do some of the traditional elites, whose nationalist and anti-Western sentiments have been increasing in recent years.

The rise of the AKP can be attributed primarily to the party's economic success. It does not imply either an Islamization of the Turkish state or a shift away from Turkey's pro-West alignment. The broadening of Turkey's strategic scope beyond the one-dimensional fixation on close security ties with the US, as well as its growing assertion of a regional leadership role, can only partially be attributed to the AKP, as the roots of these developments are to be found in the 1990s.

### Tense relations with the US

The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union considerably broadened Turkey's strategic options. Nevertheless, the country initially continued to prioritize close relations with the US. Concurrently, however, it developed a strategic partnership with Israel, with the power triangle between Ankara, Tel Aviv, and Washington manifesting the increasing ambitions of Turkey as a regional power. In recent years, though, the relations with both partners have deteriorated. The increasing distance from Israel is directly attributable to the AKP, which is more critical than the Kemalist predecessor governments of Israel's policies towards the Palestinians, and which also maintains relations with Hamas. The redefinition of the relationship between Turkey and the US, on the other hand, was not brought about by the AKP alone, but is due to a widespread rejection of the Bush admi-



nistration's Iraq policies that has broad support within the Turkish population.

Turkey was opposed to the US intervention in Iraq and turned down the US military's request to use Turkish territory as a staging ground for the invasion of the neighboring country. The US Air Force is still forbidden from using its military base at Incirlik in southern Turkey for air strikes against targets in Iraq. This refusal by Turkey is mainly linked to the Kurdish question. While relations between Turkey and Saddam Hussein's Iraq had been tense, the regime in Baghdad constituted a centralized state that prevented a Kurdish bid for autonomy. Ankara's fears that a reorganization of Iraq would strengthen and mobilize the Kurds in northern Iraq and the neighboring states have come true.

Attacks by Kurdish rebels against Turkish security forces and civilians have increased again since the intervention in Iraq. In particular, Peshmerga guerillas operating from the Kandil mountain range have been carrying out attacks that have claimed the lives of several hundred Turkish soldiers and police officers. The Turkish military has stationed troops along the border with northern Iraq and has repeatedly crossed over to its neighbor's territory in clashes with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). According to the military, the PKK, which has several thousand fighters in northern Iraq, is supported by the two main Kurdish groups in Iraq.

The US has remained fairly complacent towards the PKK, although it lists the group as a terrorist organization. The Kurds in northern Iraq are an important ally for Washington, while Ankara considers them a source of regional destabilization.

Turkish-US tensions over policy in Iraq will continue to increase if the Kurds should, in the course of Iraq's decentralization, gain a de-facto independent state, possibly including the region surrounding the city of Kirkuk with its enormous oil resources. Ankara would consider such a Kurdish entity as a threat to the ethnic Turkish population in northern Iraq and as a catalyst for separatist tendencies among the Kurds of southeastern Turkey.

The Kurdish issue in Iraq has brought Turkey closer to Syria and Iran, where Kurdish minorities are also present. Generally speaking, the crisis of the US as the dominant power in the Middle East coincides with more active Turkish policies in the region. Thus, Turkey today is pursuing an independent policy vis-à-vis Iran, which is putting an additional strain on the Turkish-US relationship. For example, Ankara and Tehran are cooperating in the area of energy supplies. Washington is opposed to the integration of Iran in the context of energy policy. Iran's nuclear program might put a quick end to the thaw in Turkish-Iranian relations, however. If Tehran were to build nuclear weapons, Turkey could be expected to realign itself more closely with the US and Israel, and to reinforce its own conventional capacities. In such a case, Ankara would also strive for nuclear arms of its own; however, that currently seems to be an unlikely prospect.

Overall, there are many indications that the tense relationship between Turkey and the US, as well as the widespread critical stance towards the US among the Turkish population, are to be attributed to the Bush administration's policies more than to structural factors. The future course of bilateral relations is therefore dependent

to a considerable extent on the outcome of the US presidential elections in 2008. There is a far-reaching convergence of strategic interests between the two parties beyond the Kurdish issue, which is why a rapprochement certainly seems feasible in the medium term.

### EU accession – The key issue

The factor that may have a greater impact on Ankara's future strategic orientation than the domestic change within Turkey and the possibly temporary cooling of Turkish-US relations is the question of EU membership. Turkey has been aiming for convergence with the European integration process since the 1960s. The start of accession negotiations in 2005 has added urgency to the question of whether the future of the country can and should lie with the EU.

At the technical level of dossier negotiations, both progress and notable setbacks have been witnessed. In December 2006, the EU imposed a freeze on eight of the 35 negotiation chapters. The question of Cyprus was, and remains, the main bone of contention. Turkey does not want to open its ports for goods from the Greek part of Cyprus, since the EU has imposed a boycott of the Turkish northern part of the island due to a veto by the Greek Cypriots in the EU Council. Ankara stresses that in a referendum of 2005, the Turkish Cypriots agreed to the Annan plan, not least due to the recommendation issued by Turkey to accept it, but that it was rejected by the Greek Cypriots.

Despite such problems, it is certainly conceivable that Turkey will implement a continuous modernization course to meet the EU's political and economic accession criteria and that the technical level of negotiations could be concluded in the next decade. However, in some EU countries, skepticism towards Turkey's EU accession has increased in recent years. The opponents of Turkish membership cite a wide range of arguments. With a population of more than 70 million, Turkey would have great influence in the EU institutions. At the same time, the country is so poor and its economy so strongly geared towards agriculture that it would absorb huge amounts of financial EU resources. As to the strategic argument that the EU would be better positioned to pursue its interests in the Near East with borders adjoining Iran, Iraq, and Syria, critics respond that the EU Common Foreign and

### Turkey's Military: Facts & Figures

- █ Turkey spent 3.2 percent of its GDP on defense in 2005, or around 11.7 billion US-Dollars.
- █ Military manpower in 2007: 515,000 troops, 379,000 reservists and 102,000 paramilitary troops.
- █ Contribution to UN peace support operations, 2006-2007
  - █ Sudan (UNMIS): 4 troops
  - █ Georgia (UNOMIG): 5 military observers
  - █ South Lebanon (UNIFIL II): 983 troops
- █ Contribution to non-UN peace support operations, 2006-2007
  - █ Afghanistan (NATO-ISAF): 650 troops
  - █ Bosnia-Herzegovina: (EU-EUFOR): 368 troops
  - █ Democratic Republic of the Congo (EU-EUFOR-RD Congo): 17 troops
  - █ Palestinian Autonomous Areas of Gaza and Jericho (TIPH): 3 troops
  - █ Serbia (NATO-Kosovo Force): 467 troops

Source: ISS Military Balance 2007

Security Policy is not yet capable of dealing with the complex problems of this region. The most frequent argument against EU accession, however, is that of cultural differences. Although the final scope and identity of the EU remain controversial, many Europeans are determined not to admit Turkey, a Muslim nation, to the club.

Such arguments advanced in the domestic European debate have not failed to have an impact on Turkey and have contributed considerably to the dramatic decrease of support for EU accession among the Turkish public. The looming possibility that Turkey's EU membership might be rejected by the veto of individual states, even in the case that the country's suitability for accession should be officially certified, undermines the negotiation process and weakens the EU's credibility in Turkey. This, in turn, threatens to slow down the AKP's reform process and to strengthen nationalists in Turkey. The lack of a clear prospect of EU accession has already contributed to a situation where Turkey is increasingly pursuing an independent and assertive role as a regional power.

### Independent regional power with pro-Western orientation

Unlike the crisis in Turkish-US relations, the difficulties in Turkey's convergence with the EU are primarily of a structural nature. Since hopes for a reliable commitment of all EU states to a Turkish EU accession seems unrealistic at this point, the country can be expected to look increasingly towards the east and south in the longer term. Such a move should not, however, be interpreted as a fundamental turn away from the West, but as an attempt to diversify Turkey's foreign and security policy options. Today, Turkey's attention is shifting again towards a region with which the Ottoman Empire maintained close ties. The Cold War, as well as Kemalism with its

turn away from the Near East, had only temporarily disrupted these relations.

A growing role of Turkey as a regional power could well be in the interest of the West – as long as Turkey remains solidly anchored within the transatlantic and European framework. The US should therefore resume its efforts to integrate the Turkish government more closely into its Near and Middle Eastern policies and to involve it in the efforts to resolve the Kurdish question, which remains a central issue for Ankara. The Europeans, for their part, should already today develop alternatives to full-fledged Turkish EU membership that could offer Ankara attractive options even in the case that negotiations fail. Even if Turkey currently rejects concepts such as "privileged partnership", both Ankara and Brussels should be interested in systematically involving the country into the European Security and Defense Policy, for example.

Turkey is today a reliable partner for the West. It participates, for example, in peace-keeping missions in Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Kosovo. In combating organized crime, Ankara also cooperates closely with Western countries. The greatest future challenge to the policies of the EU and the US towards Turkey will be to consolidate this state of affairs even if the EU accession option should lose its attraction.

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