CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN REFORM
policy brief

Can Turkey combine EU accession and regional leadership?

By Katinka Barysch

★ The looming deadlock in Turkey's EU accession bid stands in contrast with its increasingly active role in the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Over the last few years, Turkey has built stronger links with its neighbours and sought to become a regional peace-maker and mediator.

★ Turkish leaders insist that their country's growing regional clout makes it a more valuable addition to the EU. But some observers worry that Ankara is turning away from the West and is instead pursuing a 'neo-Ottoman' or 'Islamist' foreign policy.

★ Turkey's EU aspirations and its re-emergence as a regional power are not necessarily incompatible. But Turkey needs to maintain its strong westward orientation and continue its internal modernisation in order to become a strong and respected regional player.

★ The EU, meanwhile, needs to keep Turkey's membership talks moving forward. It should find a way of co-operating with Ankara in foreign policy that goes beyond the narrow confines of the accession process. The EU's new High Representative should establish a regular foreign policy dialogue with the Turkish foreign minister.

A decade ago, Turkey was largely isolated in its region and its relations with neighbours such as Armenia, Greece and Syria were fraught. Today, Turkey is one of the region's most successful and influential countries. It is building stronger ties with the countries around its borders – Iraq, Iran, Syria, Russia, even Armenia – under what the country's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, describes as a 'zero problems with the neighbours' policy. Ankara has also taken the diplomatic initiative to manage or mediate long-standing conflicts in the region. Trade and business links between Turkey and its neighbours have been flourishing. Turkey says it wants, and is able, to spread stability and prosperity across its borders.

While Turkey's relations with the countries of the Middle East, Caucasus and Central Asia are improving, its relationship with the European Union is heading for deadlock. Although the EU and Turkey avoided a crisis over Cyprus in December 2009, the accession negotiations have slowed to a snail's pace. The EU has suspended some parts of the talks, while several EU governments are blocking other bits. Although Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel are no longer openly calling for a 'privileged partnership', two-thirds of French and Germans are against any further enlargement of the EU.[1] Most Turks still want to join the EU. But a big majority thinks their country will never be let in, even if it fulfils the accession criteria. The government in Ankara claims it remains committed to accession, but its enthusiasm for reforms has waned.

Turkey's traditionally strong ties to the West seem to be slackening. Ankara's relations with the US have improved since Barack Obama replaced George W Bush in the White House – but not as much as many people had expected. Turkish soldiers are serving alongside NATO allies in Afghanistan but Turkey's role in the alliance remains awkward. Turkey's previously solid bond with Israel came under strain in 2009. Recent statements from Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's usually pragmatic prime minister, have puzzled western allies: Erdogan called Mahmoud Ahmedinejad "a friend", dismissed worries about

1 *European Commission, 'Standard eurobarometer 71', September 2009.*

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Iran's nuclear programme as "gossip", and seemed to exonerate Sudan's leader Omar al-Bashir by saying that "Muslims don't commit genocide". Erdogan's last-minute attempt to foil the appointment of Anders Fogh Rasmussen as NATO secretary-general made many Europeans and Americans cross.

Some commentators conclude that Turkey is turning away from the West and towards the East.[2] Ankara's priority, they say, is no longer EU accession and working alongside NATO allies, but pursuing a 'neo-Ottoman' foreign policy designed to restore Turkey's regional predominance, give it 'soft power' among Muslim nations and turn it into an independent player in a multipolar world. While European governments are obstructing Turkey's EU bid and the Obama administration tries to figure out how to handle a Turkey that is no longer content to be a junior partner, Ankara is looking for friends elsewhere.

2 See for example Soner Cagaptay, 'Turkey's turn from the West', The Washington Post, February 2nd 2009; Alistair Crooke, 'Turkey's shifting diplomacy', New York Times, November 28th 2009.

The perceived shift in Turkish foreign policy worries many Europeans and Americans, for two reasons. First, Turkey's growing ties with regimes shunned by the West – those of Syria, Iran, Sudan, as well as Hamas – could undermine western foreign policy objectives. Turkey may help such regimes to overcome their sense of international isolation and shield them from western pressure. Turkey, in other words, may no longer be a reliable ally of the West.

Second, some observers suspect that Turkey's stronger ties with the Middle East and the former Soviet Union are the outward manifestation of worrisome trends within Turkey. The Kemalist opposition in Ankara accuses the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) of pursuing a creeping Islamisation of Turkish politics and society, while more liberal types detect a roll-back of democratic freedoms and civil rights. Critics say that the AKP no longer aspires to modernise the country and therefore prefers stronger ties with autocratic and Islamist regimes. They predict that if the EU anchor is left to drag, Turkey will be more open to non-western, perhaps radical, tendencies coming from its south and east.

Such views are simplistic. Turkey does not face a clear-cut choice between West and East. Suat Kiniklioglu, an AKP foreign policy spokesman, compares Turkey to Janus, the Roman god of gates, doorways, beginnings and endings: "Turkey today is a Janus-like geography that offers gates and doorways to the East and West."[3] He is right: Turkey should be able to combine its growing regional role with its EU aspirations and its allegiance to NATO – provided that it continues its internal modernisation and dares to stand up for values such as democracy and tolerance when dealing with less liberal neighbours.

3 Suat Kiniklioglu, 'Neo-Ottoman Turkey?', Project Syndicate, December 3rd 2009.

The EU, meanwhile, should stop seeing Turkey exclusively as an applicant expected to follow EU positions unilaterally. Paradoxically, the accession framework does not offer enough scope for Turkey and the EU to develop their foreign policy co-operation in a way that would make Turkey feel more valued and allow the EU to take advantage of Turkey's growing international clout. The EU faces similar dilemmas in energy and security policy, other areas where more constructive co-operation between Turkey and the EU would have a positive impact on the overall relationship and could thus help to revive the accession process. For the EU, treating Turkey more as an equal partner in some questions while keeping the accession talks on track will be tricky. But an EU that wants to be a big foreign policy player must at least try.

The state of the accession talks

AKP politicians and Turkish foreign ministry officials insist that they remain fully committed to getting their country ready for EU membership as soon as possible. At the beginning of 2009, the government finally appointed an EU chief negotiator (a job previously handled by Turkey's overstretched foreign minister), and parliament passed the long-overdue 'national programme for the adoption of the *acquis*', a blueprint for the reforms needed to get into the Union.

The government has continued to make progress towards fulfilling some long-standing EU demands. For example, it has amended article 301 of the penal code (under which scores of writers had been prosecuted for insulting "Turkishness"); cut back the powers of military courts; set up a parliamentary committee for women's rights; made life a little easier for non-Muslim religious communities; and adopted plans for improving the judiciary and clamping down on the black economy. The European Commission acknowledges such steps in its latest update on Turkish EU accession preparations.[4] It also welcomed various policy changes that are not directly related to the EU accession process, such as the rapprochement with Armenia, continued macro-economic stability, the smooth conduct of the March 2009 regional elections, and plans to address the Kurdish issue in a more comprehensive way.

4 European Commission, 'Turkey 2009 progress report', October 2009.

However, the unresolved status of the divided island of Cyprus could be a time bomb under Turkey's accession path. The 2005 'Ankara protocol' requires Turkey to extend the customs union it has had with the EU since 1996 to all the countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. The EU takes that to mean that Turkey should open its ports and airports to ships and planes from Cyprus. Turkey has so far refused to do so, arguing that such transport-related issues do not automatically fall under customs union rules. More fundamentally, Ankara insists that it will not move on

port opening until the EU allows the northern (Turkish) part of Cyprus to trade directly with EU countries. EU leaders promised to do so in 2004 but the necessary regulation has since been blocked by the (Greek) Cypriot government. Turkish politicians say that until and unless the EU implements its promise, it does not feel bound by its commitments under the Ankara protocol.

In 2006 EU leaders decided on a set of sanctions to push Ankara on the port opening issue. They said Turkey would not be allowed to open negotiations in eight of the 35 policy areas, or chapters, that it needs to plough through before it can join (the eight chapters suspended cover areas broadly related to the custom union). The country could open other chapters, but it would not be able to close them. They added that they would "review the situation in 2007, 2008 and 2009".

Some EU politicians took 2009 to be a deadline and called for the negotiations to be suspended entirely unless Ankara opened its ports. At their December 2009 Council meeting, EU leaders decided to keep the existing sanctions in place but to let the accession process continue. They knew that had they called off the accession talks, Ankara would have withdrawn its support for the ongoing negotiations aimed at reaching a permanent settlement in Cyprus. So they promised to review the situation once again in 2010, hoping that the two sides in Cyprus may have found a solution by then.

The prospects for this are decidedly mixed. Dimitris Christofias and Mehmet Ali Talat, the presidents of the Greek and Turkish parts of Cyprus respectively, have met 60 times since talks resumed in November 2008. As both leaders are said to be genuinely committed to finding a settlement, many observers believe that the ongoing round of talks is the best, and perhaps last, chance for a deal.[5] Progress in the talks has been slow: long-standing issues of political representation, security guarantees and property restitution remain unresolved, as does the question of when the 30,000-40,000 Turkish soldiers will withdraw from the north. The April 2010 presidential election in northern Cyprus could set a natural deadline for the talks. If Talat has nothing to show for his peace efforts by then, Turkish Cypriot voters may well replace him with his more nationalist challenger, Dervis Eroglu. If the Turkish Cypriot leadership becomes less amenable to compromise, it will be even harder to find a deal with the Greek Cypriots, who can more happily live with the status quo.

If the Cypriots managed to reach a deal in 2010, Turkey would open its ports, the EU would unblock the eight chapters currently suspended while Cyprus would also lift its veto. This would allow the EU and Turkey to enter "a whole new territory of constructive engagement", as one EU official put it.

If the talks broke down altogether, the island might remain permanently divided. Turkey would not lift its ban on Cypriot ships sailing into its ports. The Greek Cypriot government would continue to use its seat at the Brussels table to obstruct Turkish membership, albeit with new spite and vigour. Those politicians in the EU who oppose Turkish membership may well call for a halt to the accession talks at the end of 2010 on the grounds that Ankara was still not living up to its obligations. They could succeed since Turkey's friends in the EU would find it harder to defend the country's accession bid.

The risk of slow death

A third scenario is that the Cypriot talks grind on after the election but lead nowhere. Turkey's accession talks would formally remain open. However, they would risk dying a slow death as the EU and Turkey simply run out of things to negotiate. The two sides have now been negotiating for over four years. They have managed to start talks on 12 chapters, but closed only one (science).

Of the remaining ones, the EU has suspended eight because of Turkey's non-compliance with the Ankara protocol. In addition, France is vetoing talks in five areas that, it claims, matter only for countries that are certain to become fully-fledged EU members. Since President Sarkozy repeatedly said that Turkey should be offered a privileged partnership rather than full membership, he argued that Ankara did not need to bother with these. Although Sarkozy stopped calling for a privileged partnership in 2009, he has not lifted his veto. Germany and Austria together are said to be blocking three chapters. Cyprus has been holding up two because of bilateral disputes with Ankara over energy and culture. It threatened to block another four after the December EU summit regardless of EU leaders' decision to let the negotiations continue (foreign and security policy, the free movement of workers, justice and home affairs, and judiciary and fundamental rights). Some of these national vetoes overlap but in total 18 chapters are currently off limits, according to Turkey's chief negotiator, Egemen Bagis.

Turkey and the EU still have five or six chapters on which they could work. But the talks are barely progressing. Until 2009, Turkey managed to open two chapters every six months. In 2009, that pace slowed to one chapter per semester – this despite two pro-Turkish governments, the Czech Republic and Sweden, running the EU presidency.

Turkey blames the slowdown squarely on EU obstruction. EU officials retort that Turkey is not reforming fast enough. They point out that there are various chapters that could be opened, if only Turkey

[5] *For a good overview of the Cyprus issue see David Hannay, 'Cyprus: The costs of failure', CER policy brief, September 2009; International Crisis Group, 'Cyprus: Reunification or partition', September 2009.*

implemented the changes specified as 'opening benchmarks'. Some of the required steps are politically controversial so they will take time. For example, the EU expects Turkey to lift a ban on strikes among public sector workers before the employment chapter can be opened – something the government is reluctant to do.

The Commission's 2009 progress report contains a still formidable to-do list for Turkey, which ranges from appointing an ombudsman for human rights to moving to a more transparent system of public tenders. "Political reform has basically stopped," declares one EU official. "There is some movement on economic issues such as labour laws but not on the catalogue of iconic political issues needed to show us that Turkey lives up to European values."

The EU and Turkey could be heading for an impasse. Turks are feeling increasingly bitter towards the EU. They point out that all 27 EU countries backed the decision in 2004 to open negotiations with the objective of full membership. The fact that leading politicians like Sarkozy and Merkel were openly advocating a privileged partnership proved to many Turks that the EU could not be trusted. Ankara is also convinced that the EU could do more to lean on Cyprus to unblock parts of the negotiations and work towards a settlement in the negotiations with the north of the island. Some Turks consider it an insult that Macedonians, Montenegrins and Serbs can now travel freely to the EU while Turks still have to apply for visas.[6] Turkish government officials have become more prone to making angry statements about the EU. The two big opposition parties, while notionally still in favour of accession, are accusing the government of 'selling out' Turkey's interests to the EU. The more charged political atmosphere has further reduced the enthusiasm for EU membership among the Turkish people.

6 Turkey and the EU resumed talks on a readmission agreement (to take back illegal immigrants who enter the EU via Turkish territory) in 2009. The EU regards such an agreement as a precondition for abolishing visa requirements for any country.

A neo-Ottoman alternative?

The gridlocked state of Turkey's accession bid contrasts starkly with the dynamism of its neighbourhood policy. Turkey's increasingly active diplomacy in the Middle East, the South Caucasus, Central Asia and beyond is both natural and inevitable. It was the country's previous isolation in its neighbourhood and its single-minded westward orientation of the Cold War years that were the anomaly.

A country with 70 million people, a rapidly changing economy and an almost unrivalled strategic location – connecting the Balkans, the Black Sea, the Caucasus and the Middle East – should of course be a big regional player. Previous governments have tried, and failed, to widen Turkey's role. The idea of a 'multi-vector' foreign policy that seeks to rebuild ties with all neighbours while highlighting cultural and historical bonds goes back to the government of Turgut Ozal in the late 1980s and early 1990s.[7] After Ozal's death in 1993, Turkish politicians were too preoccupied with fixing the country's economy, overcoming political crises and subduing the Kurdish uprising in the south-east of the country to pursue such ideas further. The government of Necmettin Erbakan in the mid-1990s attempted to launch an 'Islamist foreign policy' with a stronger focus on building ties with the Middle East and other Muslim countries in Asia and Africa. It was quickly forced out of office. Domestic turmoil strengthened the hands of Turkey's military and the more conservative parts of the political establishment which tended to see Turkey's neighbours as a threat to the country's secular order and its territorial integrity.

7 Abdullah Akyuz, Soli Ozel, and Suhnaz Yılmaz, 'Rebuilding a partnership: Turkish-American relations for a new era – A Turkish perspective', report for TUSIAD, April 2009; Nora Fisher Onar, 'Neo-Ottomanism, historical legacies and Turkish foreign policy', EDAM discussion paper, October 2009.

Nor were Turkey's Arab neighbours overly keen on building ties with a country that, in their eyes, was run by an unbelieving elite, was a friend of Israel and a stooge for US interests in the region. The election victory of the mildly Islamist AKP in 2002 and the Turkish parliament's decision to block access to US forces destined for Iraq in 2003 dramatically changed perceptions about Turkey in the Arab world. The AKP leadership's strong defence of the Palestinians and, more recently, its highlighting of religious and cultural ties with the Muslim world have further softened old suspicions.

Turkey is assuming a more pro-active and forceful regional role not only because it can, but also because it feels it must: the end of the Cold War, the break-up of the Soviet Union and Russia's resurgence, the Balkan wars, the invasion and subsequent implosion of Iraq, the expanding reach of Iran's Shia regime and the intensification of the Israel-Palestine conflict have all contributed to instability in Turkey's neighbourhood. International organisations and forums, from NATO to the OSCE's Minsk Group (which seeks a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict) and the Middle East Quartet, have had limited success in resolving the many disputes around Turkey's borders. Turkish politicians no longer trust the US – and much less the EU – to do so. Hence Turkey's new 'do it yourself' mentality.

Ahmet Davutoglu – a former professor of international relations turned prime ministerial advisor before he took over the foreign ministry – supplied the theoretical underpinnings for Turkey's regional ambitions. In his 2001 book 'Strategic depth', he argued that Turkey needed to start behaving in line with its geographical position and historical legacy, including the Ottoman empire but also its strong western alliance dating back to the Cold War years. He suggested that Turkey should

balance its western ties with stronger links to the Muslim world, Central Asia, Russia and other emerging powers. He envisaged a foreign policy that moves away from the previous hard-power focus and employs cultural, historical and commercial links to foster regional stability and prosperity.[8]

[8] *Joshua Walker, 'Learning strategic depth: Implications of Turkey's new foreign policy doctrine', Insight Turkey, July 2007.*

Turkey knows that regional instability not only stifles its economic prospects but also puts its own peace at risk. The repeated cross-border attacks of PKK fighters hiding in northern Iraq are perhaps the best example. Ankara feared not only the destruction caused by such attacks; but also that the growing autonomy of Iraq's Kurdish provinces could fuel separatism among Turkey's Kurds who may be hoping for an independent Kurdistan to span the Kurdish areas of Iraq, Syria and south-eastern Turkey.

While Turkey's traditional response to the cross-border threat from Iraq was one of military force, Ankara is now pushing for a political solution. In the course of 2009, the Erdogan government dropped its refusal to deal with the Kurdish regional government in northern Iraq and instead pushed the authorities in Arbil to help clamp down on PKK fighters sheltering on their territory. Turkish businesses do a thriving trade in northern Iraq, and Turkey hopes that gas from there will help fill the Nabucco pipeline. Relations with the Iraqi central government are also developing. In October 2009, Erdogan took a plane-load of ministers, officials, businessmen and journalists to Baghdad, where he signed 48 agreements on trade, security, water management, energy and much else.

The prime minister's Iraq trip was only one in a series of headline grabbing bilateral meetings in the second half of 2009. When Vladimir Putin visited Ankara in August, for example, he agreed with Erdogan that Russia and Turkey would collaborate on two pipeline projects, as well as on defence and nuclear energy. Erdogan's visit to Syria in December 2009 helped to resolve a long standing territorial dispute. The two countries – which came to the brink of armed conflict in 1998 – have started combined cabinet meetings, joint military exercises and extensive trade liberalisation. Turkey has abolished visa requirements for Syrians (as well as for the Lebanese, Libyans and Jordanians).

When Erdogan met Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad in Tehran in November, the two leaders promised to encourage bilateral trade, dust off a controversial investment deal in Iran's gas fields and establish a joint industrial zone, bank and airline. Even more spectacular has been Turkey's rapprochement with Armenia. After 16 years of deep-frozen relations, Ankara and Yerevan signed two protocols in August 2009 that foresee the resumption of diplomatic relations, the opening of the bilateral border and the establishment of an international historical commission to investigate the massacre of perhaps a million Armenians by the Ottoman government during the First World War.

Turkey has not only sought to strengthen bilateral ties, but also actively sought the role of a broker and peace-maker in its neighbourhood. Turkish politicians and diplomats have mediated between Israel and Syria, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Syria and Iraq. They tried (and failed) to get Israel and Hamas to talk to each other, and to bridge the gap between Hamas and Fatah. They were also involved in brokering internal agreements between different factions in Iraq and Lebanon. After the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, Turkey launched a 'Caucasus stability and co-operation platform' in an attempt to bring the countries of this conflict-ridden region together. In 2009, Ankara offered to mediate talks between Tehran and Washington on Iran's nuclear programme; and Turkey suggested that it could store Iran's nuclear fuel rods after Tehran had spurned a similar offer from France and Russia.

Turkey's soft power

Economic ties have grown in line with Turkey's political reach. Some analysts suspect that the objective of selling and investing more across borders is the true driving force behind Turkey's regional diplomacy.[9] In recent years, Turkey's trade with its neighbours has grown noticeably faster than that with the EU. As a result, the EU's share in total Turkish exports has fallen below 50 per cent while the proportion going to the Near and Middle East has doubled over the last ten years, to around 20 per cent. A number of temporary factors may have accounted for the geographical shift in Turkish exports: high oil prices until 2008 fuelled Middle East buying power while the onset of the financial and economic crisis depressed demand in the West.[10] But there is no doubt that Turkish manufacturers, energy companies and construction groups are expanding eastward, not only to the Middle East but also into Russia, Central Asia and around the Black Sea. Turkey sees itself as an economic and transport hub wedged between various regions with huge catch-up potential.

[9] *For example Kemal Kirisci, 'The transformation of Turkish foreign policy: The rise of the trading state', New Perspectives on Turkey no 40, Spring 2009.*

[10] *Hugh Pope, 'What Obama should say to Erdogan', Transatlantic Academy, December 2009.*

Turkey also aspires to become a major energy hub, connecting the resource-rich countries of the Caspian and the Middle East with the energy-hungry markets of Western and Southern Europe. A handful of important pipelines already cross Turkey while a significant share of Russian oil reaches world markets through the Bosphorus straits. If major pipeline projects such as Nabucco and South Stream materialised, Turkey would become indispensable for

EU aspirations to diversify energy supplies away from Russia and for Russian attempts to send its gas to western markets without transiting Ukraine. As an energy hub, Turkey needs to have good relations with both the countries that supply the oil and gas and those that consume it.

In addition to selling cars, refrigerators, foodstuffs and construction services to its neighbours, Turkey is also exporting culture, ideas and values. Turkish TV programmes have become regular viewing across the Middle East, with the final episode of 'Noor', the most popular soap opera, reportedly attracting an audience of 85 million in the Arab world. The professedly moderate Islamist movement of Fethullah Gulen has expanded its educational activities far beyond Turkey's borders, with Gulen schools and seminars now operating from Central Asia to Africa. Turkey has been an increasingly active member of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, and a Turk has been OIC secretary-general since 2005. A survey conducted among 2,000 people in seven Arab countries in July 2009 found that over 75 per cent had a positive view of Turkey and an even higher share approved of the way Turkey dealt with Arab countries.[11]

[11] Survey by TESEV, cited by Ayla Jean Yackley, 'Mediating role wins kudos for Turkey among Arabs', Reuters, November 20th 2009.

The generally positive response that Turkey elicits in the Middle East, as well as in much of the Caucasus and Central Asia, contrasts with the more negative view that West Europeans tend to have of the country. "In the Middle East, my Turkish passport makes me a hero", says one young Turkish think-tanker who does not enjoy similar treatment when he travels to Western Europe. Ministers and officials report similar experiences: whereas they sometimes feel snubbed in EU capitals, they usually enjoy a warm welcome when they travel east, north or south.

The 'Davutoglu bluff'

Nevertheless, it is far from clear that Turkey's ties with its eastern and southern neighbours represent a real alternative to its traditional westward orientation. Turkish politicians and diplomats are travelling incessantly. But the outcome has so far consisted mainly of non-binding memoranda on trade, energy, political co-operation, as well as a plethora of new councils, working groups and other semi-institutionalised get-togethers. "Accumulating air miles is not a policy," sniffs one German policy-maker who has observed Turkey's regional activism closely.

The risk of overstretch in Turkey's hyper-active foreign policy is palpable. Turkey is not only expanding its role in the neighbourhood, it has also been harbouring more global aspirations. During 2009, Turkey held a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council, opened ten new embassies and consulates in Africa (with five more planned for 2010), sought to improve relations with China, and the list goes on. The foreign ministry is starved of cash and Turkey's diplomatic corps is only 1,000 strong, which means that many initiatives remain by necessity superficial.[12]

[12] Germany, for example, employs 6,000 diplomats. Bettina Luise Rürup, 'Länderanalyse Türkei: Der lange Weg in die Europäische Union', Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, September 2009.

Neither have Turkey's efforts as a mediator so far achieved a lot of concrete results. That is perhaps not surprising: any country would find it exceedingly hard to pursue a 'zero-problem policy' in a region that is so full of problems. When it comes to the Middle East peace process, US involvement and the political will of Israel, the Palestinians and Syria – rather than Turkish diplomatic skills – will determine whether there is progress.[13]

[13] Nathalie Tocci and Joshua Walker, 'The sea change in Turkey Middle East policies: What does it mean?', unpublished draft, Transatlantic Academy, January 2010.

But even in a more propitious political environment, Turkey would struggle as a mediator: since many of its neighbours have deep differences between themselves, it is hard to see how Turkey can be friends with all of them.

Already, Turkey's improved relations with Iran and Syria, and its willingness to talk to Hamas, have come at the expense of its traditionally strong ties with Israel. In January 2009, after the Israeli bombardment of Gaza, Erdogan stormed out of a Davos debate with Israel's president, Shimon Peres, accusing him of knowing "well how to kill". In the autumn of 2009, Ankara withdrew an invitation to Israel to join an air manoeuvre, while Israelis got upset about a Turkish TV drama that depicted Israeli soldiers as ruthless killers. Ankara and Tel Aviv have been at pains to maintain diplomatic relations and started patching things up towards the end of 2009. However, the sour state of the relationship means that Turkey would find it harder to mediate between Israel and its adversaries even if a new round of talks got under way.

Turkey's idea of a Caucasus stability platform has not resulted in any region-wide talks or initiatives – although it has facilitated Turkey's rapprochement with Armenia and made it easier for Ankara to play a role in seeking a resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. Turkey's promise to open the border with Armenia, however, has severely damaged its traditionally close relationship with Azerbaijan. Until recently, the two countries liked to describe themselves as 'one nation, two countries'. But in 2009 Azerbaijan turned away from Turkey in anger and threatened to limit future gas sales, which would undermine Turkey's ambition to become an energy hub.

Baku feels betrayed because the Ankara government appears willing to normalise relations with Yerevan

without waiting for a resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. Turkish politicians are ambiguous about this: while the foreign minister has talked about parallel processes, the prime minister has reassured Azerbaijan that the border with Armenia would not be opened unless Armenia started withdrawing troops from some of the areas surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh. If this was indeed Erdogan's stance, the protocols on the normalisation of relations would not be ratified any time soon, and Turkey's most courageous diplomatic initiative would remain stuck. Since Turkey's regional initiatives have so far produced few concrete results, one high-level European official dismisses them as the "Davutoglu bluff".

Regional rivalry

Turkey's new ascendancy may itself further complicate its aspirations as a mediator and peace-maker. A regional power has – or is presumed to have – strong national interests so it will struggle to assume the role of a disinterested interlocutor. There will inevitably be more rivalry with other countries that aspire to regional predominance, most notably with Russia and Iran.

Turkish companies are doing well in the Russian market, but the main reason why Russia is now Turkey's largest trading partner is because higher Russian gas prices have inflated Turkey's import bill. Turkey, which already buys over 60 per cent of its gas from Russia, is keen to diversify its energy supplies. Ankara and Moscow may agree that they do not want to see American or NATO ships on the Black Sea. But Turks watch growing Russia-NATO tensions with concern. They are wary of Russia's attempts to dominate the former Soviet countries around its borders. And they are acutely aware that Russia's attempt to keep a monopoly over gas transport on the Eurasian landmass stands in the way of their own plans to become a regional energy hub.

Similarly, Ankara's professed 'friendship' with Tehran hides some deeper suspicions. Some observers claim that much of Turkey's regional diplomacy – from helping to end Syria's isolation to contributing to stability in Iraq – is designed to prevent Iran from gaining the upper hand in its neighbourhood. Although Turkish politicians insist that Iran has a right to acquire civilian nuclear power, they are genuinely concerned that an Iranian nuclear bomb could trigger an arms race in this volatile region. Turkey itself is talking to the US about buying a missile defence system that could be used to shoot down Iranian missiles.[14]

In its regional diplomacy, Ankara will encounter setbacks and it will not be able to avoid hard choices. That does not mean that Turkey should not continue with its regional efforts. Unlike the other big powers in that region, Turkey has a foreign policy concept that has some allure for its neighbours. Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia or Egypt do not have a similarly appealing vision. Turkey does not stoke instability in neighbouring countries to further its own interests. It is not opposed in principle to 'outside' powers (in particular the US) playing a role in the Middle East and the Caucasus.

The architects of Turkey's foreign policy hope that growing commercial ties and pragmatic co-operation can prepare the ground for finding solutions to the region's long-standing and deeply engrained conflicts; that international organisations can help to manage ties between countries that find it difficult to get on; and that a rapprochement between countries that used to fight each other will also make it easier to deal with internal minority issues. Turkey's regional activism may not have produced many tangible political benefits. But Turkish foreign policy-makers have a point when they argue that they first needs to build functioning ties with neighbours before they can hope to achieve diplomatic results.

Not incompatible but intrinsically linked

The EU should therefore be careful not to dismiss Turkey's regional initiatives as evidence that the country has abandoned its westward orientation. Turkey's EU aspirations and its growing regional reach are in fact linked in various, complex ways.

The reforms that Turkey implemented to get closer to EU membership have had a bit of influence on its foreign policy-making. For example, the army's traditionally strong role in politics had previously skewed foreign policy heavily towards hard power and security. Turkey's stance towards its Muslim neighbours was defensive and suspicious. In the name of EU accession, the Erdogan government pushed the generals out of politics, which opened up entirely new foreign policy options. Another example is the economic liberalisation that Turkey has implemented partly as a result of its customs union with the EU. The rise of strong Turkish businesses looking for markets and investment opportunities has added an economic dimension to Turkey's regional policy, which (as pointed out above) is now one of the driving forces of its neighbourhood diplomacy.

Turkey's EU accession process has also greatly contributed to the soft power that is so important for the success of its neighbourhood policy. Almost two-thirds of Arabs think that Turkey's bid to join the EU would have a positive influence on the Arab world.[15] But it is Turkey's internal transformation and its economic success – both fuelled by the EU accession process – that have brought Turkey the

[14] *Katinka Barysch, 'Is Turkey Iran's friend?', CER Insight, November 2009.*

[15] *Survey by TESEV, cited by Ayla Jean Yackley, 'Mediating role wins kudos for Turkey among Arabs', Reuters, November 20th 2009.*

attention and respect of its neighbours. As one Turkish scholar puts it: "What Turkey has become in fact constitutes its main asset."[16]

[16] *Meliha Benli Altunisik, 'The possibilities and limits of Turkey's soft power in the Middle East', Insight Turkey, April 2008.*

Turkey's significance for the region is not only, or even primarily, as a manager or mediator of cross-border conflicts. The problems of this region are not disputes between otherwise well-functioning states. Most countries grapple with a myriad of unresolved issues: national identity, minorities, the role of women, and the relationship between political power and religious authority. Most have dysfunctional political regimes, and economic models that offer few opportunities for their young populations. Turkey may not yet be fit for EU accession but it stands out as an economic and political success in its neighbourhood: a predominantly Muslim country with a secular order, functioning democracy, fast-growing, open and diversified economy, increasingly well-educated people (and that includes most girls) and rising living standards.

Turkey's Kemalist elite does not like that their country is being taken as a model by the more religious and autocratic societies to their east and south. And some AKP leaders sniff at the notion that Turkey could be a bridge between the West and the Muslim world ("a bridge is something you walk over without noticing it"). But Turks are acutely aware that millions in the Middle East and beyond are watching Turkey's development with great interest. Turkey is an inspiration, especially to those who are hoping for reform in the Middle East and the former Soviet Union. However, for Turkey to keep and exercise its soft power, it needs to address its internal problems. It needs to show that a predominantly Muslim country can have a stable and pluralistic democracy, that religious and ethnic minorities can be well integrated, that long-standing neighbourly disputes can be unfrozen, and that economic reforms benefit all parts of society. To do all these things, Turkey needs to maintain its strong bonds with the West.

Does Turkey need an anchor?

Many Turks no longer believe that their country needs an external anchor to implement reforms and maintain internal stability. In 2008-09, Turkey managed to get through its worst economic crisis in a decade without the help of the International Monetary Fund. For a country that had to rely on no fewer than 19 different loans from the IMF in recent decades, this is a major boost to its self-confidence.

Similarly, successive governments used to refer to the need to converge with EU norms when they pushed through difficult reforms. No longer. The leadership now insists that it seeks change because it is good for Turkey, not because it is required for EU accession. In the summer of 2009, for example, Erdogan announced a courageous initiative to give the country's 14 million Kurds more cultural rights and seek a new political dialogue with them to end the 25-year old insurgency of the PKK – without mentioning the EU.

Despite such laudable initiatives, there is little doubt that the political and economic reform process in Turkey has slowed down considerably in the last five years. Critics find plenty of evidence that the AKP government is less committed to modernising the country and upholding western values. Press freedom is being eroded in a country that has always loved a heated political debate. Erdogan has sued several journalists and even cartoonists for critical or non-deferential coverage. A restrictive Internet law has allowed the courts to ban access to various websites. Although fewer writers are being imprisoned under the notorious 301 article of the penal code, prosecutors have been launching more cases on the basis of other laws. In 2008, the country's second-biggest daily, Sabah, ended up under the control of a company headed by Erdogan's son-in-law. Its coverage has since become kinder to the government. Following a dispute with the AKP leadership in 2009, the Dogan group, which controls many of Turkey's biggest newspaper, magazines and TV stations, was presented with a massive $3.2 billion fine for tax evasion. In other media outlets, there are signs of self-censorship as journalists fear personal prosecution and media owners (most of which have multiple business interests) seek to stay in the government's good books.

Worries about press freedom are mounting at a time when the general atmosphere in the country is veering towards distrust and suspicion. Western observers first welcomed the 'Ergenekon' case against alleged coup-plotters among the military and ultra-nationalist groups. They saw it as a sign that Turkey was finally rooting out the 'deep state' (a circle of arch-Kemalist officials, generals, judges and politicians who had for decades escaped punishment for illegal activities designed to entrench their power). But a large number of arrests without due process, on unclear charges and followed by long pre-trial detentions have since shed a bad light on the quality of Turkey's judiciary. Media reports allege that up to 100,000 Turks may have had their phones tapped by the government in recent years, largely as a result of the Ergenekon investigation.

In the current, antagonistic political environment, the Erdogan government will find it harder to resume the political and economic reforms that allowed the country to start accession talks in 2005. Erdogan's Kurdish initiative (Turks refer to it as the 'democratic opening') has so far amounted to little more than vague promises. The result has been a further deepening of the polarisation between the AKP and the Kemalist and nationalist opposition while the Kurds have yet to acquire new rights. The constitutional court's decision in December 2009 to

ban the Democratic Society Party (DTP), the only pro-Kurdish force in the Turkish parliament, has further reduced the chances of a lasting political settlement. Meanwhile, plans for a new constitution – the current one from 1982 was effectively written by the military, after the last coup – have been put on ice.

In the past, the objective of EU accession allowed Turkish leaders to overcome deep-seated political divisions. Although traditional Kemalists and urban professionals have always distrusted the AKP because of its roots in political Islam, the fact that Erdogan appeared committed to EU accession and liberal reforms allowed them to back his policies. Now his critics find it easier to accuse him of driving forward a creeping Islamisation of Turkish society and undermining its democracy while at the same time loosening Turkey's traditional bonds with the West.

Partner and applicant

Turkey, it seems, still needs the EU anchor for its internal transformation. The accession process, however, can only regain momentum if EU leaders and officials acknowledge that Turkey's membership application poses different challenges from that of say, Iceland or Hungary; and that they are dealing with a very different Turkey today than they did when they gave it EU candidate status ten years ago.

Turkish foreign policy-makers like to stress that by becoming a regional power, Turkey will be more useful for an EU that aspires to become not only a regional but a global player. The EU's declared objectives are to contribute to peace in the Middle East, strengthen ties with Central Asia and bring stability and prosperity to Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus with the help of the 'European neighbourhood policy' and the 'Eastern partnership'. Turkey claims that its new regional policy will add to all these objectives. It wants the EU to acknowledge that it has a valuable contribution to make. "Turkey's regional role," said Prime Minister Erdogan at an Istanbul conference in October "is an opportunity the EU and Turkey should not miss." Chief Negotiator Bagis, in a BBC interview on December 7th, put it more starkly: "Turkish membership is as important for the EU as it is for Turkey."

Although Turkey still has to prove that its regional activism can produce concrete results, the EU should stand ready to take advantage of the opportunities that Turkey's regional rise may create. It struggles to do that.

The EU's own foreign policies are rather weak in the areas where Turkey's role is most ambitious: the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Unless the EU strengthens its presence in these regions, Turkey may have little incentive to co-ordinate its initiatives with the EU – other than to improve its accession prospects, which may itself be a powerful reason.

There is another obstacle to EU-Turkish foreign policy co-operation. The Union expects countries that have handed in a membership application to adjust unilaterally to EU laws and policies. That also applies to foreign policy. It is true that Turkey has formally signed up to the vast majority of positions that EU countries have agreed under the 'common foreign and security policy'. Most of these statements concern international issues – from the situation in Zimbabwe to elections in Albania – that are not core to Turkish foreign policy. On key issues such as Iran Turkey has decided not to join CFSP statements.

Such formalistic alignment is, in any case, not the same as constructive co-operation. The Turkish foreign minister meets a 'troika' of EU politicians and officials twice a year to discuss foreign policy issues. These meetings are too short, too infrequent and too stilted to allow for real dialogue. Like all other formal meetings between the EU and Turkey, they tend to be dominated by discussions about the Turkish EU accession process.

The Turks would like to have a bigger say, not simply sign up to positions that have already been agreed among the 27 EU governments. Despite the aversion that most Turkish politicians display against the notion of 'partnership' with the EU, in foreign policy Turkey wants the EU to treat it more like an equal partner.

In the autumn of 2009, Foreign Minister Davutoglu suggested to the European Commission to establish a close yet informal dialogue on issues of common interest. Turkey would keep the Europeans up to date on its initiatives in the Middle East, the Caucasus and elsewhere and the EU might allow Turkey an early glimpse of its own emerging positions. The Commission, however, had no way of responding to this request. Since Turkey is a country negotiating for membership, the official in charge of the relationship is the enlargement commissioner (then Olli Rehn) and not the external relations commissioner (then Benita Ferrero-Waldner). Ferrero-Waldner had no competence to deal with Turkey. Rehn had no authority to discuss foreign policy and security issues. After a few well-intentioned attempts by the Commission to push the boundaries of departmental competences, the Turks put their proposal on ice.

The coming into force of the Lisbon treaty allows the EU to revive the idea. Cathy Ashton, the EU's new High Representative for foreign policy, now combines the roles of the Council's High Representative (which means she can speak on behalf of the EU governments) and the commissioner for external affairs (which gives her a sizeable budget and diplomatic staff). As vice president of the Commission, she also formally stands above the enlargement commissioner so she should, in theory, be allowed to talk to applicant countries. The EU should take the initiative by

establishing a more regular and less formal foreign policy dialogue between the High Representative and the Turkish foreign minister. Policy planners from the EU institutions and the Turkish foreign minister should meet frequently to prepare for these meetings. This dialogue should be separate from meetings on the accession process, which would continue to be led by the enlargement commissioner and Turkey's chief negotiator.

Both sides need to show some flexibility. The EU will not abandon its maxim that non-members do not get 'a seat at the table' where EU decisions are made. But the EU should elicit Turkish views and suggestions on areas of joint interest, such as how to bring stability to the Caucasus, enhance European energy security, deal with Iran's nuclear programme, encourage regional integration in the Mediterranean or move the Middle East peace process forward.

Lessons from energy and security co-operation

Foreign policy is not the only area where there is huge scope for co-operation between the EU and Turkey: energy and crisis management are others. In both areas, however, the EU and Turkey have struggled to find a way of working together constructively. The fact that Turkey is a country negotiating for accession should facilitate co-operation in areas of obvious common interest. Paradoxically, the opposite seems to be the case. Co-operation is blocked as long as the accession negotiations are not going as well as they should.

★ European security and defence policy (ESDP)

Turkish soldiers and policemen have taken part in seven ESDP missions since 2003. The EU, however, has resisted Ankara's demands that it should be involved in planning and deciding on ESDP operations. Most EU governments have become progressively more open to the idea of giving Turkey a bigger say (albeit not a veto). But Cyprus – fearing that Turkey-ESDP co-operation may compromise its security – has continued to block Turkish participation in planning ESDP missions, as well as its affiliation with the European Defence Agency. In turn, Turkey has vetoed ESDP-NATO co-operation. This veto has led to huge obstacles to EU and NATO personnel working together in places such as Afghanistan and Kosovo. Turkey appears to have taken a noticeably softer stance on ESDP whenever its accession progressed well. When EU-Turkey relations were tense, security co-operation between Turkey and the EU stalled.[17]

[17] *Miguel Medina-Abellan, 'Turkey, the European security and defence policy, and accession negotiations', Sinan working paper no 1, April 2009.*

★ Energy

To facilitate EU-Turkey energy co-operation, the EU has for some time been pushing Turkey to join the 'energy community treaty' (under the ECT most Balkans countries are now aligning their energy policies with that of the EU and are planning better infrastructure links). Turkish politicians insisted that if the EU wanted Turkey to align its energy laws and policies with those of the EU, it would do so only once the energy chapter has been unblocked.[18]

[18] *Katinka Barysch, 'Turkey's role in European energy security', CER policy brief, December 2007.*

When Erdogan travelled to Brussels in January 2009, he tried to use Turkey's importance as a potential transit state for gas shipment to Europe as a lever to push the accession negotiations forward. He suggested that unless the EU managed to unblock the energy chapter (vetoed by Cyprus), Ankara would hold up progress on the Nabucco pipeline, one of the EU's flagship projects. The result was outrage among the Europeans, with some saying that such behaviour suggested that Turkey would be a troublesome member-state. A governmental agreement on the Nabucco pipeline was signed in July 2009 and Turkey started negotiations on joining the ECT in the autumn of that year. But the overall impression is that energy co-operation has become hostage to the problems that besiege the accession process.

The EU and Turkey should find a way of co-operating on important international issues outside the established accession paradigm which leaves Turkey invariably in the position of a *demandeur*. Turkey will only accept such a separation if the EU provides stronger assurances that reinforced foreign policy co-operation is a way towards – not a substitute for – eventual membership. In the past, Turkey has been reluctant to work with the EU outside the accession process. Ankara fears that if it accepts forms of co-operation that are open to non-EU members, it risks slipping towards some sort of privileged partnership. EU leaders therefore have to stop questioning the validity of Turkey's EU bid, remove the national vetoes holding up various parts of the accession talks and reassure Ankara that the Union is negotiating in good faith.

The EU, however, will only want to work more with Turkey if it senses that the leadership there is

broadly aligned with the objectives of EU foreign policy. Erdogan and his colleagues would have to be more careful about making statements that appear to set Turkish foreign policy apart from western objectives. Today's Turkey enjoys credibility in the Muslim world. Professions of friendship with Ahmedinejad or a seeming defence of al-Bashir appear unnecessary and counterproductive. Moreover, Turkey would have to supply some evidence that it uses its growing ties with neighbouring countries to pass on tough messages from time to time and stand up for western values. For example, instead of rushing to congratulate Ahmedinejad on his victory in the rigged election of June 2009, Turkey should have insisted that democratic rules be upheld.

Regaining momentum

Ankara and Brussels need to put some substance into the often-repeated mantra that the country is an 'asset' for the EU. If Turkey and the EU miss this opportunity, the consequences for both sides, and for the entire region, might be dire. Without the EU anchor, Turks may feel they have nowhere else to turn but towards their more autocratic neighbours. The reform process in Turkey may founder. Turkey's neighbours would be less interested in working with Turkey if it was 'just another Muslim autocracy'. Reformers in the region would lose hope. Hardliners would feel vindicated in their belief that the EU is a Christian club that turned down Turkey because of a clash of civilisations.

If the EU and Turkey succeeded in reinforcing their foreign policy co-operation, Turkey would feel more valued and the risk that Turkish foreign policy runs counter to western objectives would be reduced. The experience of Turkish-EU alignment on important international issues – if communicated well – could be used as an argument to win over some sceptics in Western Europe. And it would make some Turks feel less bitter about the EU. It could therefore help to propel the accession negotiations forward.

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