

From the Desk of the Editor

In this issue of TPQ we explore energy, security, conflict management, democratization, and state-building in the context of Central Eurasia. Drawing upon the framework and spirit of the ARI Movement's 9th International Security Conference, a particular effort has been made to provide a platform for voices from the region. As always, this contributes to a deeper understanding of the divergences of perception that shape the politics and cultural paradigms central to the region.

Donald Jensen, Stephen Blank and Suat Akgün, in covering energy security, offer insights into 'the Russia question' and the prospective role Turkey could play in diversifying European energy sources. The authors observe that Russia has been flexing its muscles with increased ambition; some of them find this new stance more justifiable than others. Energy is a critical component of Russia's new approaches, but it is not the only one. In their joint article, Prajakti Kalra and Siddhart Saxena examine the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which includes Russia, China and the Central Asian countries. The authors explain how the current 'preaching' tone of U.S. and EU foreign policy alienates some Central Asian nations and point out that the West should seek to engage the SCO and give it the opportunity to play a constructive role in the region. Katja Gersak looks at the issue from another perspective, adding that the West should try to enhance its deteriorating position in Central Asia by forging closer ties between NATO and the SCO. Such ties may enable the region's countries to become stakeholders in NATO's security agenda.

Voices from the region offer still other perspectives which contribute to the idea that the West has misunderstood and mishandled the region. Marian Abisheva and Timur Shaimerzhanov, in their joint contribution, explain that elections in Kazakhstan last August demonstrated that the population genuinely favors a slow and stable progress towards democracy and economic development over the confrontational and weak agenda opposition parties seem to be promoting. Though Western actors are eager to see an opposition with more power and complete freedoms rapidly provided, the authors showcase cultural and pragmatic reasons for a contrary preference among Kazakhs. Mjusa Sever and Fazil Khasanov take us to Uzbekistan to explain how Western attitudes have led Central Asian nations conveniently into Russia's lap.

There is no magic formula when it comes to striking a balance between a 'strong state' and a legitimate, democratic government. A politician who is able to garner public support is not necessarily one that guarantee the rule of law, nor even one who can set up an effective state providing the services and security its people need. Politics and an effective state can indeed be at odds, as can democracy and security. The competing political tensions, sectarian violence and high drama in Afghanistan and Iraq both offer food for thought in this regard.

In Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, the constituency is, perhaps willingly, trading plurality for stability. In this regard, people cling to the amount of well-being and development that the single dominant party has proven able to provide. The less experienced, more reactionary opposition has not provided confidence to a people who have undergone massive upheavals in recent decades. Yet these dynamics may offer an excuse for power to be held illegitimately, with no incentive to progress towards participatory democracy.

Turkey is also in the process of fine tuning the limits of the power the state should have over popular politics. As countries mature, these balances need to adapt.

How the current political, ideological and military situation in Afghanistan unravels is crucial to Western influence in the region. Hikmet Çetin, drawing on his vast experience as Former NATO Senior Civilian Representative for Afghanistan, outlines perceptions versus reality of the situation on the ground. He emphasizes that many NATO accomplishments in areas such as reconstruction go unnoticed while problems unrelated to NATO are attributed to the organization. Çetin's emphasis on the importance of public diplomacy, suggests that heightened cultural sensitivities and misinformation may be contributing significantly to deteriorating relations between the West and the region in general.

Three articles on Iran in this issue of TPQ starkly demonstrate differences in perception. Amin Tarzi, Joel Sprayregen and Kayhan Barzegar see Iran and interpret the way the rest of the world should relate to Iran, from very different angles. Sprayregen recalls the wide spectrum of views expressed at the panel on Iran of the ARI Security Conference in June and articulates a hardline response to them. In explaining the parameters of Iran's policies towards Iraq and Syria, Barzegar argues that the West is misreading Iran's intentions when viewing it as expansionist. Amin Tarzi, on the other hand, explains the fears about Iran are justified, expressing no doubt that Iran has a dangerous vision that extends well beyond its borders.

The language emanating from the new French administration suggests that a transatlantic convergence regarding Iran might be on the horizon. Contrary to assumptions that the two issues are mutually exclusive, deeper European integration does not seem to be sacrificed for the sake of closer transatlantic relations in the rhetoric among European leaders nowadays. Contingent on next year's elections in the US,, we may be witnessing the beginning of a less anti-American phase, at least in Europe.

Amjad Atallah's article is a sober reminder that in the midst of politicking in different corners of the earth, hundreds of thousands of people are dying in a places like Darfur on our watch. This is a topic, he argues, where a strong, united stance from the Muslim world could make all the difference.

How Turkey fits into these puzzles is a question in many minds. Where will Turkey stand if a more proactive confrontation with Iran – i.e. military strikes- take place? Is the current government capable of swaying Turkish public opinion to come in line with what it perceives to be Turkey's strategic interests? How does the AKP government – holding a strongly reaffirmed mandate to run the country after elections this year – see Turkey's role in these shifting dynamics?

Oubai Shahbandar raises questions regarding Turkey's policies towards Iraq, noting that the zero-sum mentality and one-dimensional outlook of some in Ankara is not necessarily conducive to Turkey's own national interests. He adds that this is demonstrated by the fact that this hard line stance has not mitigated Kurdish separatism nor Al Qaeda affiliated terrorism. He further questions whether, Turkey might be able to “maximize (its) strategic dividends” more effectively to become a regional powerhouse.

The Turkish government needs to articulate its worldview and priorities on how it intends to deal

with weak states and illiberal democracies in its region. Especially given its claim to be a regional power with its own vision (i.e. not reliant on the U.S.), it needs to project a clear, integrated approach that will generate predictability and confidence.

Central Asia can hardly be analyzed in a satisfactory way without also including the Caucasus. As recent trips to the region have brought to my attention, a deepening SCO has implications for Armenia – perhaps leaving them ever more isolated. In Azerbaijan one can hear strong claims that it is the success of their country that will serve as a bridge, and an inspiration to Central Asia for transformation from the post-Soviet model. Eyes are also fixed on Georgia. If Georgia's clear vision of European integration fails, other countries in the region will need to re-calculate their strategies of power balancing. The next issue of TPQ will take on the Caucasus – the domestic transformation of the three countries, their inter-relations with each other, and the potential for Europe's presence in the region's future.

We are delighted to welcome Fred Kempe to our advisory board with this issue. We look forward to launching the issue with an event at which both he and two other prominent advisory board members, Mark Parris and Hikmet Çetin, will speak in November. For our last TPQ roundtable we were honored by the participation of Secretary Madeleine Albright, who shared her insights on women's participation in politics. We look forward to continuing to confront our differences while we seek common ground; not only with the printed word but also with interactive and lively roundtable discussions.

We would like to extend our gratitude to Finansbank, the institutional sponsor of this issue. We also thank Ford, Fintur, Prime Class, Yapı Kredi Koray İnşaat, Borusan, Unit International and Türk Ekonomi Bankası for their continuing support. As always, a special thanks goes out to our institutional partners that make us stronger: European Stability Initiative (ESI), Turkish Daily News, and Bilgi University.

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