

WISHFUL THINKING: STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES AND THEIR LIMITS IN TURKEY'S EU ASPIRATIONS

In an effort to counter concerns that Turkey is too big, too poor, and too Muslim to join the European Union, Turkish officials routinely stress the strategic benefits Turkish membership would provide the EU. While this argument may resonate in Washington and certain corners of Brussels, it is having little impact on the wider European public. By analyzing Turkey's strategic rationale, the debate within the EU about its geographic and cultural limits, and the growing importance of European public opinion, this paper calls for a new public diplomacy that complements Turkey's strategic arguments by stressing the concrete economic and political benefits of Turkish accession.

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In light of the European Union's (EU) decision to open accession negotiations with Ankara in October 2005, Turkey is now closer than ever to fulfilling the requirements for EU membership. Yet, despite this progress, the prospect that it will ultimately achieve full membership is arguably dimmer today than during much of the Cold War, when the question seemed less if than when Turkey would join. The biggest reasons for this ironic turn of events have less to do with developments in Turkey and much more to do concerns in Europe that Turkey is too big, too poor and too Muslim to join the EU. Turkish officials have responded by stressing the strategic benefits provided by Turkish membership. After all, such reasoning helped Turkey take its first major step westward when it joined NATO more than 50 years ago. And with the "war on terrorism" (defined largely as a war against radical Islamist elements stemming from the greater Middle East) emerging as the defining struggle of the post-Cold War era, the strategic rationale for binding Turkey to the West is as pertinent as ever. Yet with European citizens and officials contemplating the EU's geographic, cultural, and bureaucratic limits, Turkey's strategic arguments have grown less persuasive. In an effort to boost its candidacy, Turkey must develop a new public diplomacy that balances its strategic appeal with arguments designed to persuade influential EU citizens and entities that the benefits of Turkish membership extend beyond the mere strategic.

EMPHASIZING STRATEGY

Following the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, Turkish officials were confident that the emergence of a new, common enemy would provide Turkey the strategic weight it lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union and thereby bolster its EU candidacy.

The Foreign Ministry's Deputy Undersecretary for EU Affairs Volkan Bozkır contended that Turkey could expect a warmer West given the evident boost in its strategic relevance.¹ An emboldened Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of Turkey's Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and a deputy prime minister in the former government, went so far as to argue that the EU should lower its standards for Turkey, insisting: "We strongly oppose the notions that we should fulfill every demand of the EU to become a member or that we have to enter the EU at any cost."²

Others spent time drawing parallels between the "war on terrorism" and the Cold War, seeking to apply lessons from Turkey's successful NATO application to the EU. During the summer 2006 debate about whether Ankara should send troops to southern Lebanon, for instance, one political observer confidently argued, "Just as sending troops to Korea provided NATO membership, sending troops to Lebanon will provide EU membership

¹ Volkan Bozkır, "Turkey Can Anticipate a Warmer West," *Turkish Daily News*, 3 October 2001.

² He is quoted in "Bahçeli Toughens on EU and Its Domestic Supporters," *Turkish Daily News*, 3 April 2002.

because it will demonstrate Turkey's indispensability to European security.”³ The same rationale was applied during the late 2001 debate about committing troops to a stabilization force in Afghanistan.

Parallels can also be seen in Turkey’s public diplomacy in the early 1950s and after 9/11, with an emphasis on Turkey’s geo-strategic value and the potentially costly fallout of leaving Turkey out in the cold. In an effort to secure Turkish membership in NATO, Turkish leaders argued that the Arab-Israeli conflict was distracting Arab states from the Soviet menace and that, as the first Muslim country to recognize the state of Israel, Turkey was uniquely qualified to mediate between the Jewish state and its Muslim neighbors. Then-President Celal Bayar warned that should Turkey be snubbed by NATO, a wave of nationalist sentiment would erupt and threaten his country’s ties with the West. These warnings came after the U.S. Joint Chiefs had recommended against offering Turkey full membership in NATO, suggesting that an “associate status” might suffice in securing Turkish cooperation. But by May 1951, growing concerns about the Soviet threat to the Middle East led the National Security Council to back full Turkish membership “in order to assure Turkey’s full cooperation in international security measures.”⁴

Given their predecessors’ success in the early 1950s, today’s Turkish officials have recycled and updated those arguments since 9/11. They consistently describe Turkey as a political, economic, and cultural bridge spanning Europe and the Middle East; an effective intermediary that has the ear of Israel and its Arab neighbors. On the other side, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül sounded a common refrain this summer when warning that Turkey is at risk of turning away from its traditional alliances and the West, as “moderate, liberal people [in Turkey] are becoming anti-American and anti-EU,” especially “young, dynamic, educated, and economically active people.”⁵

While Ankara’s emphasis on its strategic relevance was an important element in securing Turkish membership in NATO, there are serious problems with drawing parallels between Turkey’s NATO application and its EU application. The two bodies are fundamentally different in purpose, structure, and decision-making. EU member states are required to integrate much more deeply than NATO member states on social, political, and economic levels. The result is far more rigorous membership criteria that emphasize human rights, democracy, and the rule of law much more than NATO ever has.

³ Yusuf Kanlı, “Turkey's Participation in a Lebanon Force,” *Turkish Daily News*, 14 August 2006.

⁴ James Lay, “Note on the Position of the United States with Respect to Turkey,” United States National Security Archives (11 May 1951) p. 3-4. It is interesting to note that Article VI of the Washington Treaty originally limited membership in the alliance to “parties in Europe or North America.” After Turkey acceded, “the territory of Turkey” was added. See Mark Smith. *NATO Enlargement during the Cold War: Strategy and System in the Western Alliance*. (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p. 62-63.

⁵ Quentin Peel, “Anti-west Backlash is Gathering Pace, Warns Turkish Minister.” *Financial Times*, 20 July 2006.

SELECTIVE DEMOCRATIZATION

The ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) efforts to prepare Turkey for the start of negotiations have changed the country dramatically in the course of a few short years. With Turks focused on the political, economic, and legal revolution taking place at home, many have failed to appreciate the profound changes occurring within the EU, which over the long term will have an even greater impact on the prospects for Turkey's application.

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the 12 states of the European Community set out on an ambitious project of enlargement while simultaneously deepening the ties that bound member states. As legislation from Brussels grew more intrusive, EU citizens began to insist on having a greater say in EU-wide affairs. This has, over time, led to a process of selective democratization in which EU citizens in certain member states influence union-wide decisions via referenda.

The most apparent example of this came in the spring of 2005, when voters in the Netherlands and France rejected a draft constitution designed to consolidate and streamline the legislative processes of an EU that had ballooned from 15 to 25 members. After the votes, the notion that the EU was suffering from "enlargement fatigue" gained favor, despite the fact that the proposed charter was about how to manage the EU's drive toward "ever-closer union" and carried no reference to Turkish membership or that of any other potential candidate.⁶ Nevertheless, the matters were linked in the minds of some French voters when opponents to Turkish accession pressured President Jacques Chirac into requiring a referendum for any future EU enlargement after Romania and Bulgaria.⁷ Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel has suggested he too would require a referendum, while the country's president, Heinz Fischer, has proposed a pan-European poll.

Turkish officials are rightfully concerned about seeing their fate placed in the hands of European citizens rather than those of European Council members and national leaders. While two arguments at the center of Turkey's case for admission -namely a more robust defense capability and improved relations with the countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean- are certainly part of the EU's objectives, they are far from the most cherished in the eyes of EU citizens. Surveys of European opinion show that since the

⁶ The president of the constitutional commission himself, Valéry Giscard D'Estaing, has opposed Turkish accession, warning that it would spell the "end of Europe." See Arnaud Leparmentier and Laurent Zecchini "Pour ou Contre l'Adhésion de la Turquie à l'Union Européenne," [For or Against Turkey's Membership in the European Union] *Le Monde*, 9 November 2002.

⁷ Such a clause was added to a French constitutional amendment that is required for the proposed European Constitution to be ratified under French law. According to a Louis Harris poll published two days after the referendum, 22 percent of "no" voters listed opposition to Turkey's entry into the European Union as a reason for their vote. See Elaine Sciolino, "European Charter Architect Faults Chirac for Its Rejection," *New York Times*, 15 June 2005.

spring of 2004, when Turkey was making its most concrete progress toward accession, the general public has grown more opposed to enlargement.⁸

This “enlargement fatigue,” has been linked to the latest “10 + 2” round of expansion, which heightened a sense within older member states that expansion entails risks and costs.⁹ While 62 percent of those polled think enlargement will boost peace and democracy along its borders, 58 percent “feel that further enlargement will make it more difficult to develop a common European identity.” Europeans aspire to play a greater role in global affairs, but they remain divided about how this should be pursued. 46 percent think Europe should boost its military power; 51 percent disagree.¹⁰ 63 percent of Europeans think that further enlargement of the EU will help it play a bigger role in international affairs, but this figure is highest in the future member states of Romania (85 percent) and Bulgaria (82 percent) and lower in the arguably more influential EU member states of Germany (48 percent), France (54 percent), and the UK (63 percent).¹¹ Looking at these and similar assessments of European public opinion, one sees Turkey’s strategic arguments for inclusion have a limited impact on an electorate that perceives strategic risks as well as rewards to EU expansion. For many Europeans, these strategic risks are heightened in the particular case of Turkey, given its borders with Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

Over the long-term, referenda on Turkish membership raise the possibility that even if Ankara were to close negotiations on all the chapters of the EU legal corpus, the *acquis communautaire*, it might not be given the green light to join. This prospect can be read between the lines in the negotiating framework agreed on October 3 2005, in Luxembourg, which includes a reference to “the union’s capacity to absorb Turkey,” as an opt-out clause, of sorts. This is not a new clause. Such wording was originally approved in Copenhagen in 1993 and was, at least in theory, applied to the ten states that joined in May 2004. Yet every country that has completed negotiations has been accepted, with Romania and Bulgaria slated to join at the beginning of 2007. Moreover, these negotiations had an air of inevitability as they were part of a process whereby the EU held the candidate’s hand and led it through the legislative maze to membership. In Turkey’s case, such understanding and patience will be less forthcoming.

⁸ For the most part, a majority of citizens in new member states support further enlargement while in older member states a majority of citizens are against. In both new and old member states, however, the percentage of those against enlargement is on the rise.

⁹ This term refers to the ten new member states of Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean, along with Romania and Bulgaria, which are slated to join on 1 January 2007.

¹⁰ German Marshall Fund of the United States and Compagnia di San Paolo, Italy, “*Transatlantic Trends 2006 Survey*,” p. 4. For full details, please see www.transatlantictrends.org/doc/2006_TT_Key%20Findings%20FINAL.pdf

¹¹ Interestingly, many Turks don’t seem to buy this line of reasoning either, with just 55 percent agreeing that further enlargement of the EU will help it play a larger role in international affairs.

WEIGHING POLICY OPTIONS

Given these uniquely challenging circumstances, Turkish leaders might easily grow frustrated and stake out counter-effective positions in their negotiations with the EU. A brief outline of “do’s” and “don’ts” should help Turkish leaders not only avoid certain pitfalls, but assist them in making a more persuasive case for inclusion.

First, the “don’ts.” In an effort to counter anti-Turkish sentiment in Europe, some Turkish proponents of EU membership have advocated tapping into a growing anti-Americanism both at home and in Europe.¹² They see a close relationship with the United States as a liability for Turkey in the eyes of a European public increasingly distrustful of U.S. policies. For them, the current split in the transatlantic relationship presents an opportunity for Turkey to burnish its European credentials, as they argue it did in March 2003 when parliament voted against allowing U.S. troops to invade Iraq from Turkish soil.

Such a strategy would be a big mistake, for several reasons. First, it mistakenly presupposes a single European position on matters related to the Middle East. The decision by the Turkish parliament against allowing the U.S. to open up a northern front against Iraq did, in fact, improve popular opinion about Turkey in several European countries. Yet, on the eve of the war, there was far from universal agreement within Europe about whether to support or oppose the invasion. More than shoring up Turkey’s European credentials, the vote was welcomed as a sign of Turkish democracy. Second, such a strategy incorrectly paints Turkish relations with the U.S. and the EU as an either-or choice.¹³ While polls over the past few years show that an increasing number of Europeans are opposed to American foreign policy, those polls also indicate that Europeans hold their negative views of the Bush administration distinct from their general opinion of the U.S.¹⁴ There remains considerable agreement between Europeans and Americans about the importance of a wide range of international issues, including terrorism, migration, communicable disease, and the growing power of China. Moreover, citizens on both sides of the Atlantic often share common opinions on how to address these problems, including, for instance, whether military force should be used to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. Though Turkey’s current anti-Washington sentiment may strike a chord with certain circles in Europe, the present slump in transatlantic relations is by no means permanent. It is impossible to predict how European public opinion with respect to the U.S. will have developed 10 to 15 years from now when Turkey might be considered for full membership. Along the way, Turkey will need U.S. help when it comes time to crossing the highest hurdles, such as resolving the Cyprus dispute. Finally, though Turkey cannot rely on its strategic importance to secure EU membership, an Ankara that doesn’t have Washington’s ear is clearly a less valuable

¹² The 2006 Pew Global Attitudes Project found that just 12 percent of Turks hold a favorable view of the U.S., down from 52 percent in 2000. For complete survey results, see: pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=252

¹³ For an example of this type of thinking, see İhsan Dağı, “Kritik Karar: ABD ya da AB,” [Critical Decision: U.S.A. or EU] *Radikal*, 12 March 2002.

¹⁴ German Marshall Fund (2006), p. 6.

strategic asset to Europe. Maintaining a healthy relationship with the U.S. will serve Turkey well as it negotiates with the EU.

Another tactic that Turkish leaders should abandon is raising the specter of a popular backlash within Turkey or a slide toward Islamic extremism should Ankara be snubbed by Brussels. These arguments raise concern in Europe that Turkey is a risky proposition. While a Turkey that feels rejected may indeed grow more radical, few EU citizens consider it their responsibility to keep Turkey in line.

And now for the “do’s.” One of the biggest challenges for Turkish leaders will be maintaining popular support for accession in the face of European opposition. While some European leaders opposed to Turkish accession have argued that the EU should reject Turkey out of hand, they have been overruled by more moderate opponents of Turkish membership who are mindful of earlier promises that Turkey would eventually be allowed to join the EU. Rather than be seen as rejecting Turkey, this latter group would prefer that Turkey fail to meet the requirements for membership or grow tired of trying and withdraw from the process of its own accord.

How will Europe seek to dissuade Turkey from persisting in its application? For a hint, witness the September 2006 approval by the French National Assembly of a bill that would criminalize the description of the mass slaughter of Armenians by Ottoman Turks beginning in 1915 as anything but genocide. Chirac followed the decision by stating that Turkey should not be allowed to join the EU until it accepts these allegations. No such genocide criterion applies to Turkish membership, as EU Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn was quick to point out after Chirac’s comments, yet it could derail Turkish progress by undermining public support for EU accession and boosting the position of anti-EU nationalists in Turkey.

A second matter that can be expected to feed the fires of anti-EU nationalists in Turkey is the divided island of Cyprus. Like the Armenian issue, none of the 35 regulatory chapters that make up the *acquis* deal with Cyprus explicitly, but resolving the Cyprus dispute is a *sine qua non* of Turkish membership. In its November 2006 progress report on Turkey, the EU threatened unspecified consequences if Turkey doesn’t open its sea and air ports to shipping and flights from the Greek-controlled Republic of Cyprus by mid-December. If Turkey were to retain the restrictions, the European Commission will likely freeze or refuse to open negotiations on several chapters related to the free movement of goods.

The Armenian and Cyprus issues will likely remain in the spotlight so long as European politicians believe they benefit from leaving it there. In order to reverse this trend, whereby Turkey’s opponents within Europe steer the debate toward contentious issues, Turkish leaders must engage in a new public diplomacy, both at home and in Europe, geared toward highlighting issues that favor Turkish accession.

This would seem a tall order. According to a 2006 poll, the number of Turks who saw EU membership as a good thing has fallen to 54 percent in 2006 from 73 percent in 2004, while the number that described membership as a bad thing has jumped to 22 percent

from just nine percent in 2004.¹⁵ While this decline has been drastic, it is also very recent and is tied directly to a feeling that Europe is not giving Turkey a fair shake. The sense that Turkey belongs in Europe is more enduring. It has a sixty-year track record and has survived similar crises in the past. Should negotiations on Cyprus progress, popular support for accession within Turkey is likely to return.

When it comes to Europe, there is a sizeable European audience that has yet to make up its mind about Turkey. According to the German Marshall Fund, when asked whether Turkish membership in the EU would be a good thing, a bad thing, or neither good nor bad, a plurality of Europeans (40 percent) selected “neither good nor bad.”¹⁶ So how should Turkish leaders target those undecided Europeans? This is a matter of framing the debate. Concerning the fight against terrorism, Turkish diplomacy should emphasize the “soft-security” benefits that Turkish membership would provide the EU in line with an emerging European consensus that terrorism must be fought with a diverse range of tools. Rather than warn about the potential radicalization of Turkey if Europe should reject it, Turkey should float scenarios about the future of the Middle East and ask, “Where do you want Turkey - on the inside or the outside?” Instead of discussing the dangers of Turkey pulling the EU into a Middle East conflict, Turkey should ask whether Europeans want to have a greater say in the critical regions of the Eastern Mediterranean, the Black Sea basin, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.

While Turkey’s opponents will seek to focus the debate on Turkey’s size, its underdeveloped economy, and its Muslim identity, undecided Europeans could be won over by a more nuanced discussion shaped around the likely costs and benefits of Turkish membership for the EU. Its large population, for instance, also makes Turkey an important market for European exports. Its underdeveloped economy offers significant growth opportunities for European investors. And its Muslim identity can help boost European influence in the Middle East. In order to steer the debate in a more favorable direction, Turkish diplomats should begin by addressing European elites, such as businessmen, academics, and politicians. These groups are more likely to see the advantages that come with Turkish membership, such as secure access to Caspian energy reserves, a more coordinated approach to stemming illegal immigration and drug flows, and a young and eager workforce that can help keep European retirement schemes solvent. If successful, this strategy would help create a group of elite and influential individuals who see Turkish accession as being in their own interests and who would be more effective in convincing undecided Europeans that Turkish accession carries more benefits than costs.

It has been argued that Turkey lacks the “public-relations gene” as much smaller countries have been much more effective in lobbying European governments to support their agendas. Turkey can learn lessons from countries like Greece and Bulgaria whose candidacies were once opposed on grounds that they were too poor or too Orthodox. Yet, by opening cultural centers, forging party-to-party contacts, and sponsoring internships, academic exchanges, and business lobbies, Athens and Sofia were able to improve their

¹⁵ German Marshall Fund (2006), p 19.

¹⁶ Thirty-two percent saw Turkish membership as a bad thing, while 21 percent saw it as a good thing.

prospects dramatically. Turkey should also train its press counselors and modernize its state news and information services so that these better correspond with European counterparts. Within this context, Turkey must also design its lobbying efforts with an eye toward the specific political and national cultures of key member states.

CONCLUSIONS

It is natural that Turkish officials would seek to portray Turkey as a critical frontline state in the “war on terrorism.” It plays to the country’s strengths, highlighting its military muscle and its potential role as a secular, democratic model for other Muslim states. As the EU develops its European Security and Defense Policy, Turkey’s military assets and potential as a forward base will grow more attractive. Yet, until EU member states are able to coordinate their militaries more competently and confidently, arguments based on the strategic benefits of Turkish membership will do little to persuade most Europeans.

With national governments giving their citizens a greater say in EU affairs, Turkey must take its case directly to the people. This presents a fundamentally different and more difficult challenge than the one Turkey faced in the early 1950s while applying to NATO. Turkish leaders should not abandon the idea that Turkish membership provides the EU valuable strategic benefits. But to believe that these benefits will be enough to secure EU membership is nothing short of wishful thinking.

Turkish leaders need to reassess the value they attach to the notion of Turkey as a bridge to the Middle East. Arguments that stress Turkey’s role as a mediator or a model for the Muslim Middle East are not nearly enough. They fail to address central concerns held by Europeans about the costs of Turkish accession in terms of development assistance, competition for jobs, and having 75 million new neighbors who are “strange” or “different.” Unless Ankara can effectively articulate to Europeans that these costs will be outweighed by concrete benefits from which they can profit, the prospects for Turkish membership will continue to worsen, regardless of the strategic advantages that would come with it.