

## **ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE**

# **Who Lost Turkey? Not Europe**

By Doug Bandow on 6.14.10 @ 6:08AM

Defense Secretary Robert Gates is upset. And he is vocal with his complaints. Not with the North Koreans or Iranians. Not with the Chinese or Russians. Not with the Palestinians or Israelis. And not with the Turks.

He is upset with the Europeans. Because they have mistreated the Turks.

While visiting London he opined: "I personally think that if there is anything to the notion that Turkey is, if you will, moving eastward, it is, in my view, in no small part because it was pushed, and pushed by some in Europe refusing to give Turkey the kind of organic link to the West that Turkey sought." Meaning, presumably, European Union membership.

The solution? "We have to think long and hard about ... what we might be able to do to ... make the stronger linkages with the West." Meaning, presumably, European Union membership.

It was an astonishing performance. U.S. officials including presidents, like Barack Obama last year in Ankara, have routinely expressed their support for Turkey's membership in the EU. But rarely have American policymakers so explicitly criticized the Europeans for not incorporating Turkey, or suggested that it will be their fault if we "lose" Turkey.

The argument, while not quite absurd, is flawed at several levels.

Give the Turks their due. They are serious people; their country is a serious regional player. They have a lot of interests and face a lot of pressures completely unrelated to what transpires in Brussels.

First, the transformation of Turkish politics over the last decade has been dramatic. Secular nationalists of various ideological stripes have crashed and burned. Moderate Islamists have taken firm control.

Equally important, elected civilians are finally pulling the controls of government away from the hands of the military and other members of the unelected elite which saw itself as

the guardian of the Turkish republic and the vision of its founder, Kemal Ataturk. Whether this is good or bad is a matter of bitter dispute in the West -- outsiders generally choose between the "democracy" and "secular" teams, with the former doing most of the winning these days.

Second, the transformation of Turkish foreign policy is following a similar course. Ankara's vote against the Iran sanctions resolution is merely the latest evidence of Turkey's increasingly independent course.

But to talk about "losing" Turkey erroneously assumes that nation was America's, or the West's, to lose. That's never been the case. Only during the Cold War was Ankara tightly allied with America and Europe. The collapse of the Soviet Union dissolved that important glue bonding Turkey and the West.

For a complex mix of reasons including power politics, ideology, and religion, Turkey has become a less reliable U.S. and European ally. Explanations range from more benign (Ankara simply has different interests) to more malign (the ruling party plans on creating an Islamic state). But the status of EU accession talks is not a terribly important factor.

Third, EU membership is not Washington's business. It is not a geopolitical plum that U.S. policymakers get to give to America's allies. Imagine the German Foreign Minister showing up in Ottawa or the British Foreign Secretary visiting Mexico City and declaiming about Washington's irresponsible failure to form a North American Union.

European leaders have a responsibility to their peoples to decide whether Turkey fits within their continental community. That requires considering questions of poverty, culture, religion, and politics. The issue has badly divided EU members. It would have been irresponsible of European governments to have ignored the potential downsides of Turkish membership in hopes of keeping Ankara more firmly anchored to the West.

What if the EU said yes and Turkey continued moving eastward anyway? Imagine Iran sitting in European councils.

Without doubt, the possibility of EU membership has aided those seeking to democratize and liberalize Turkish politics. And as the prospect of joining has faded this impetus for reform also has weakened. Yet EU membership would in no way ensure Turkey's loyalty with Washington's and Europe's foreign policy objectives (which themselves are likely to increasingly diverge).

Ironically, the possibility of giving, in Gates' words, "Turkey the kind of organic link to the West that Turkey sought," mostly aided the Islamists in using democratic procedures to gain control over the so-called deep state, which put rigid secularism first. That process likely will continue in or out of the EU. As the likelihood of military interference in policies has receded, Ankara's willingness to take independent foreign policy positions has grown.

From Washington's standpoint, EU membership might seem a small price for the Europeans to pay to advance America's agenda. But if problems arose -- problems which

are easily imaginable and are not the product of a prejudiced imagination -- Europe, not the U.S., would be stuck paying the bill.

There's nothing wrong in American policymakers urging Europe to consider the geopolitical issues surrounding Turkey. If extending EU membership would generate a more liberal political order and pro-Western foreign policy in Turkey -- a major if -- then the Europeans should give the issue due weight. But given the foreign policy messes routinely created by U.S. governments, American policymakers should be appropriately humble before blaming other nations for today's problems.

One simple change would greatly improve U.S. foreign policy. American officials should learn to appreciate the virtue of simply shutting up when traveling abroad. No lecturing, no hectoring. Give advice in private and respect the decisions made. That certainly would be a better approach to the question of Turkish membership in the EU.

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