

TURKEY, AUF WIEDERSEHEN (?)

Tassos Symeonides
(RIEAS Academic Adviser)

Copyright: Research Institute for European and American Studies (www.rieas.gr)
Publication date: 10 September 2017

Note: The article reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the views of the Research Institute for European and American Studies (RIEAS).

“The fact is clear that Turkey should not become a member of the EU... Apart from this, I’ll speak to my colleagues to see if we can reach a joint position on this so that we can end these accession talks.”

Angela Merkel

And so it came to pass. Mrs. Merkel, once a fervent supporter of bringing Turkey into the EU, abruptly announced it is high time the European bloc drops Turkey from its list of potential candidates.

Against the backdrop of escalating verbal tensions between Berlin and Ankara, and the impending German general election, Merkel’s declaration was not entirely a surprise. Weighed down by accusations over her throwing German borders open to a flood of Moslem undocumented arrivals in 2015; and stung by spreading discontent over her “humanitarian” stance, which strong German majorities see as inimical to the social stability of their country, Mrs. Merkel decided to go all out, something unusual for Germany’s prudent and restrained chancellor, who apparently felt it was time to show some political backbone toward an increasingly frenetic Turkey.

Unsurprisingly, Merkel’s declaration rekindled the traditional wavering inside the EU over key strategic issues. Estonia and Finland, long-time Ankara’s bosom

buddies, sped to [criticize](#) any attempt to push Turkey back where she belongs – to the Asiatic Moslem East. Other EU “partners” remained quiet although it is certain that any further German pressure to deal with Turkey once and for all will trigger the usual wrangling so revealing of the traditional EU inability to reach conclusive decisions on key strategic matters.

One thing is for certain: European leaders, whether sympathetic to Turkey or not, are losing their patience with sultan-for-life Erdogan’s increasingly tyrannical rule. And the Turkish autocrat, under pressure from all sides, reacts predictably. He lashes out at European “Nazis” and “fascists;” he castigates the West (and the US in particular) for supporting Kurdish fighters dealing defeat upon defeat on Islamist fanatics in Syria; he sends his warplanes to violate Greek airspace to demonstrate his military “prowess” against a weak adversary with little capability to retaliate; and he breaths fire and brimstone against Cyprus for beginning to drill for hydrocarbons inside her exclusive economic zone while ignoring his bombastic threats.

How to deal with a proven self-absorbed megalomaniac has been the eternal problem in international relations and Erdogan’s case is no different. But the sultan’s primary advantage is largely of Western making. Ever since 1947, when President Truman elevated Turkey to a “Western bulwark” on the frontier with some of the most unstable and dangerous areas in the world, Ankara has developed a game of demanding, threatening, and refusing in pursuit of its nationalist and imperialistic goals. NATO has been Turkey’s favorite playground where she can roam roughshod trampling upon her supposed allies as she pursues her expansionist aims in the Aegean among others.

To make matters worse, the “Western bulwark” theory spawned a powerful pro-Turkish political-diplomatic culture in Western capitals, pushing constantly for “understanding” Turkey’s “unique predicament,” which remains vibrant even today. The operative term “understanding” translates into *actively supporting Turkish demands*, however outlandish, for fear of “losing” such a key ally in the global struggle against the enemies of the West.

The period beginning roughly in 2012, with Erdogan quickly dropping his supposed progressive garb and donning the neo-sultanic Islamic robes as he drives

Turkey ever more harshly toward a fundamentalist Islamic state, has dented the “Western bulwark” theory little (see [this](#), for example.)

Strong advocates of “understanding” Turkey continue their activities both in Washington and Western capitals, although they are quickly running out of excuses for their favorite man in Ankara. Erdogan’s flirting with Moscow raises some concern but the image of Turkey as a potential surrogate of Moscow has yet to sink in Western government councils.

Mrs. Merkel, and those who agree with her, will meet opposition in their attempt to finally drop the unrealistic prospect of Turkey as an EU member. Arguments in favor of holding Ankara close to Europe’s bosom are familiar and often repeated:

1. Europe and NATO simply cannot afford to divorce Turkey given her size and geographical location.
2. Forget human rights for the moment and wait the Turkish crisis out; let the domestic political process take its course.
3. Europe must not lose this most precious bridge to the Islamic world; Turkey can be the perfect Western good will ambassador conferring with Arab and other Moslem autocrats.
4. Europe will suffer economically due to the volume of European-Turkish trade.

Given the experience of recent years, not to mention Turkish intransigence and camouflaged permanent hostility to “Western values,” shooting down such arguments is relatively easy.

Undoubtedly Turkey’s spot on the map is strategic, yet this fact alone is too weak to impose upon the West an openly hostile Moslem fundamentalist autocrat as a key ally ready to supposedly side with the West’s “good and proper.” The West can barely exert any influence on what Turkish governments choose to do in pursuit of their goals – e.g. from nurturing Islamic terrorists to seeking territorial expansion into neighboring countries and to *deliberately* sabotaging Western initiatives in the region.

The Turkish domestic political process is unstable and dangerous. Despite Erdoganist efforts at intimidation and election fraud leading up to the April 2017 referendum, the aspiring sultan barely scored above 50 pc of the vote. Turkey is sharply divided and the opposition continues to stage protests despite police violence, arrests, and “disappeared” opposition advocates and politicians. Letting this situation “play

out” entails serious risks of civil war. Open and determined embrace of Turkey’s secularist progressives should be pursued with vigor equal to that demonstrated by Erdogan in persecuting and silencing his opponents.

The “bridge” theory is so brittle as to merit no further discussion. It takes one brief look at Turkey’s history of the last forty years to disprove *resoundingly* any attempt to present Ankara as advocating for the West in Moslem countries. If anything, what becomes obvious immediately is Turkey’s preference for Islamic fundamentalists, sharia regimes, mingling with Arab supporters and financiers of Islamist terrorists, and Ankara not hesitating to buttress Sunni fundamentalist terrorists in Syria and Iraq. And Erdogan’s recent involvement with Qatar, known for its close ties with Islamic terrorists, is only the latest episode in a long succession of Turkish similar actions.

Turkey is a net import country and most of her key imports come from Europe. While any economic sanctions will affect individual European companies the net loser will be Ankara, which may not find substitutes for European imports. Erdogan will undoubtedly choose to play bold but his domestic market will suffer adding to the already spreading discontent with his tyrannical antics.

But, while Merkel’s sudden volte-face dominates the political news, it is Turkey’s NATO membership that looms large in the background. An increasingly vicious anti-West Erdoganist Turkey is the perfect Trojan horse for Moscow. President Putin has deftly manipulated Erdogan’s personal instabilities and fears, particularly over Syria, to strike a detente of sorts with Ankara. Erdogan has meekly apologized for shooting down a Russian warplane in November 2015 and is obediently building ties with the Iranian ayatollahs, now “friends” of Russia in the Syrian disaster. Erdogan has also agreed to buy the advanced Russian S-400 antimissile missile system to augment Turkish air defenses disregarding the S-400’s incompatibility with Turkey’s NATO armaments.

This new found “harmony” between Turkey and Russia should be a warning to NATO. Turkey maintains representatives in all Alliance committees and planning organs, with access to *classified materials and other such sensitive sources*. Erdogan’s Stalinist purge of Turkey’s armed forces after the alleged July 2016 coup has removed well-trained, pro-West officers from NATO organs and replaced them with Erdoganists, something that, almost certainly, triggers satisfied smiles in Moscow. What better way

for Mr. Putin to subvert NATO than to have controlled Turkish sympathizers inside the Alliance's secret councils?

At the end of the day, Merkel's surprising shot across the bows is pushing Europe to face the fundamental question it did not ask when it offered EU candidate status to Turkey: how could an Asian country so essentially different from European mores, traditions, social values, and liberal politics be considered for full membership to "the greatest democratic experiment" of our times?

This question was never answered for reasons too complex to analyze here. Suffice it to say though Turkey's candidate status was decided not only due to present-day "geostrategic stability concerns" but also because of a long history of "a game of thrones" with the extinct Ottoman Empire affecting the long term views of major European powers regarding the "Western bulwark." But what European leaders chose to ignore, viz. this exact history of "a game thrones," was the best reason for choosing *not to invite present-day Turkey to join as a full partner but, rather, as a neighbor on the basis of preferential economic relations.* And as [Markus Becker](#) recently put it:

[Europe] should be more honest..... by communicating to Turkey that it is interested in deeper economic ties rather than EU membership for the country. That would likely create greater opportunities for the EU to assert political influence over Turkey, because Erdogan is in fact dependent on having good economic relations with Europe.

EU membership for Turkey is also inconceivable in the longer term. The European states need to speak openly about this once and for all -- if for no other reason than to prevent the EU's further disintegration. [Emphasis added]

