

The ongoing Russian-Turkish rapprochement is surprising in more ways than one, considering that the two countries have fought each other for over five centuries. But the evolution of this new “axis” will depend to some extent on the initiatives that both the American administration and the European Union are willing and able to undertake

Major manoeuvres underway between Moscow and Ankara

RUSSIA 2

by Fernando Orlandi

Russia and Turkey have a history of five centuries of competition dating from the rivalry between the Ottoman and Tsarist empires. These differences subsequently exploded into a number of military conflicts from the 18th century onwards. The empires that had long influenced the history of Europe disappeared at the end of World War I and a secular State replaced the Ottoman empire. Although it remained neutral in World War II, Kemalist Turkey allowed Italian and German ships to enter the Black Sea, and Stalin did not forget this. At the Potsdam conference, he put forward territorial claims that actually took the border between the two countries back to where it was in August 1914 and also demanded that the Bosphorus strait and the Dardanelles become international waterways. The two countries were on the brink of war in 1946. The Soviet Union had amassed 30 divisions on the border while postponing the retreat of its troops still stationed in northern Iran. American President Harry Truman took the Turks’ side, demonstrating his support by having the body of Turkish ambassador Mehmet Ertegun, who had died in the United States on November 11th 1944, taken back to Turkey aboard the *USS Missouri*. Enthusiastic crowds greeted the ship’s arrival in Istanbul. The Cold War had begun and Turkey had made its choice. The arrival of the *Missouri* on April 5th 1946 symbolised Turkey’s entry into



...Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan have met on several occasions since 2003. The two men reached an agreement on Chechnya and the Kurds at their July 2005 meeting

a new era, where it took up its position within the Western bloc. When the Korean War broke out, Ankara sent troops to Asia and in 1952 it was the only one of the USSR’s neighbours to join NATO, becoming one of the organisation’s pillars. Following the disappearance of the Soviet empire, Turkey and Russia continued to be rivals in the 1990s. Moscow did not appreciate its neighbour’s activism in the Turkish-speaking post-Soviet areas of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Strange publication on the Web

Some truly surprising changes have taken place in Eurasia's geopolitical landscape over the past decade. Russia and Turkey have retreated from the hostility that marked their relations for decades. Although Ankara remains an important member of NATO, it appears to have started out on a path that seems to be leading it towards closer co-operation with Moscow. It is worth recalling a recent incident that did not receive as much press coverage as it should have. The Munich Conference on Security in February was held in an atmosphere of open criticism towards the Kremlin's domestic and foreign policy. Russian President Vladimir Putin did not let himself be backed into a corner; he reacted with a tough speech in which he attacked U.S. "unilateralism" and the strategy of NATO expansion, calling it "serious provocation". The next day, the text of the speech could be found not only on Russian websites but also on the official website of the Turkish armed forces. Historically, the Turkish armed forces have stood at the helm to resolutely steer the country westward, so it was immediately obvious that something important had happened. In any case, this was not the only signal: for some time, in fact, increasingly frequent speeches by representatives of the Westernized upper spheres of the Turkish military have supported a theory according to which Ankara should redraw its geopolitical positioning, i.e. follow its own agenda, detach itself from the USA and freely choose its allies.

Towards the EU

The country had approached the new millennium with the slogan "The 21st century will be Turkey's century". The 1990s had been a very difficult decade with no fewer than ten coalitions, all of them inefficient and corrupt, succeeding each other in government. In 1997 the army had stepped yet again into the country's political life, this time for fear of the religious danger that could undermine the Kemalist State, to counter a government led by the Islamic Welfare Party (*Refah partisi*), which was subsequently banned by the Constitutional Court. Meanwhile, the dizzy spiral of economic crises had led the country to the brink of the abyss by February 2001. The Welfare Party had re-emerged in 1999 as the Virtue Party (*Fuzilet partisi*). After it was dissolved in 2001, it was reborn as the Justice

and Development Party (*Adalet ve kalkinma partisi*), which won the general election on November 3rd 2002 with 34.3% of the vote. Thanks to the 10% voting threshold, it won most of the seats in Parliament (365, or 66%). The party was rewarded once again at the 2007 elections, increasing its consensus significantly with 46.7% of the vote (and 340 MPs). The army's fears had come true. All in all, however, the government has kept its actions separate from religion and in its first years of activity it committed itself more strongly than any of its predecessors to the reforms required for membership of European institutions. Thus, on 6 October 2004, the European Commission recommended that negotiations for Turkey's membership be opened; they were formally started on October 3rd the following year. It was a victory for the Justice and Development Party, which had demonstrated markedly new skills compared to the weakness, instability and ineffectiveness of the governments that had succeeded each other in the preceding decade.

It was well known that the path towards European institutions would not be an easy one. The obstacles along the path, the misunderstandings and the change in Turkey's political agenda in view of the 2007 elections, as well as the difficulties the EU itself has experienced with the wave of enlargement, are all factors that have contributed to creating a new situation. The Kurdish issue entered a new phase with the negotiations. The membership procedures per se were a good opportunity for Turkey to find itself in a stable and balanced situation. In fact, the so-called Copenhagen criteria of 1993 are non-negotiable and require candidate countries to have a market economy that works well, stable democratic institutions, rule of law, the safeguarding of human rights and the protection of minorities.

The minority issue

As regards the minority issue, Ankara's starting point is the one ratified by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, according to which only non-Muslims (Armenians, Jews and Greeks) are guaranteed minority status. Turkey's current refusal to concede this recognition to the Kurds is based on the Ottoman principle that, among Muslims (the Kurds are Muslims), Islam prevails over nationality and only non-Muslims can be given minority



_Turkey has encountered a number of obstacles on its journey towards European institutions. The obstacles, combined with misunderstandings and changes in the political agenda in view of the elections, have contributed to creating a different atmosphere

status. Only a year ago, as the “Turkish Daily News” of November 4th 2006 reported with a wealth of detail, there was a long-distance clash between Hansjörg Kretschmer, the head of the EU delegation to Ankara, who was about to leave his post, and the Chief of Staff of the Turkish armed forces, General Yasar Buyukanit, who violently criticised Europe’s request that Turkey recognise various ethnic groups, saying: “Approaches based on race are shameful in this century”.

But the Kurdish issue is not just a problem of the rights and protection of a minority (one tends to forget that the Kurds have played a key role in the country’s institutions, army included, and that the late Turgut Ozal got as far as being President of the Republic). It is also a problem of ferocious terrorism by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya karkeren Kurdistan*), the PKK, headed by the Maoist-inspired Abdullah Ocalan, who demands the creation of the sovereign state of Kurdistan and has notched up a horrifying number of victims. The PKK features on the US and well as the EU’s list of terrorist organisations. But America and Europe’s attitude can hardly be deemed satisfactory: the PKK is active in northern Iraq because of US indifference and operates in Europe under various alibis (and even has its own satellite television channel, Roj TV, on Hotbird). All of this obviously sticks in Turkey’s throat and has led to various considerations on the two different criteria

used as well as hostile feelings among the Turkish public (“Why are they working actively against Al-Qaeda and doing nothing against the PKK?”).

The US reluctance to intervene against the PKK in northern Iraq has led to the rapid propagation of anti-American sentiment among the people. To mend the situation, in April 2006 Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice agreed to organise a co-ordinated fight against Kurdish separatist groups operating in northern Iraq. However, the co-ordination has not produced any results because of Washington’s negligence.

The Cyprus issue

Another obstacle is the Cyprus issue, which led the EU Foreign Ministers to freeze eight of the 35 chapters in entry negotiations on 11th December 2006. When it came to power, the Justice and Development Party tried to pull the country out of the sandbanks where it had run aground. To break the deadlock in the dispute, Ankara had accepted UN Secretary General Kofi Annan’s plan for peaceful reunification. Put to a referendum on 24th April 2004, the plan was approved by Turkish Cypriots and rejected (76% against) by the Greek Cypriots. One week later, the Greek Cypriot administration joined the EU as the Republic of Cyprus. As Philip Robins observed, the EU chose to violate one of its cardinal rules in a way that was hardly judicious. By doing so, it imported the instability of the Cyprus issue into the EU instead of exporting the stability of a “community of security” to Cyprus. However, following the acceptance of the Annan Plan by Turkish Cypriots and to “reward” them in some way, that same April the EU Foreign Ministers decided to end their isolation and encourage economic growth in their part of the island. However, a report by the authoritative International Crisis Group pointed out in March 2006 that nearly two years had gone by, but “this resolution does not seem to be worth the paper it was written on”.

The dispute that arose on the right of the Republic of Cyprus (a new EU member) to use ports and airports in the part of the island controlled by the Turkish Cypriots has not been resolved. Ankara refuses to accede to the requests until such time as the EU has honoured its commitment to reduce the isolation of the Turkish community in the

northern part of the island. It should not be forgotten that with the entry of the Republic of Cyprus into the EU, Ankara faces a second potential veto after Greece's.

Saying "No" to Washington

On 6th November the EU published its second Progress Report on Turkey. The twelve months that have gone by since eight of the 35 negotiating chapters were frozen have shown no particular signs of progress. In the meantime, Turkish public opinion has become radicalized, as films and books show. In 2001 the film *Deliyurek* (Mad Heart), in which American spies are involved in terrorist activity, was a big hit. The final scene, in which their chief is spectacularly killed by a bazooka shot, had audiences applauding the Turkish hero who had liquidated him. The film was followed by a television series, *Kurtlar vadisi* (The Valley of Wolves), a tale of clandestine activity directed by Mafia bosses and businessmen on orders from the Americans (and the Israelis). In the years that followed, *Metal fırtına* (Metal Storm) by Orkun Ucar and Burak Turna, the story of a Turkish-American war in Kirkuk in northern Iraq, and *Ucuncu dünya savasi* (The Third World War) by Barak Turna, topped the bestseller lists. The plot of the latter book has a vengeful Turkey joining forces with Russia in 2010 to attack the EU after the murder in Europe of Turks and Muslims at the hands of Austrian, French and German fascists.

The accumulation of discontent in public opinion was vindicated by the Turkish turnaround in the spring of 2003. After six months of intense financial, political and military negotiations with Washington, on March 1st the Turkish Parliament denied American troops authorisation to enter Iraq from Turkish territory. Ankara's decision would not only have repercussions on the course of the war (forcing the American army to change its plans and strategy), but would contribute to complicating the situation to the point that in March 2005 the then Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld openly complained about Ankara during appearances on television talk shows on the occasion of the second anniversary of the attack on Iraq.

Turkey's relationship with Washington was one of the many victims of the war in Iraq. The Turkish Parliament's vote and the de facto alliance between the US and the Iraqi Kurds

have signalled the end of the strategic relationship between Ankara and Washington. It was against this background that, on October 10th, the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations passed a resolution defining the massacre of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during World War I a "genocide", despite opposition from President George W. Bush. One week later, following a fresh outbreak of terrorist attacks, the Turkish Parliament voted 507 to 19 to authorise the Turkish army to intervene in northern Iraq to wipe out PKK bases. Washington is rushing to mend matters so as to stop the already difficult situation in Iraq from getting any more complicated. In Turkey, anti-Americanism and anti-Western sentiment have reached unprecedented levels. The former strategic ally is now seen as the main threat to the country's unity and security. A number of slogans against Washington were held up in the big protest marches against terrorism. The press stokes popular sentiment. Columnist Burak Bekdil, for example, published a scathing article titled "A Turkish-Kurdish-American opera buffa" in the "Turkish Daily News". He brutally reminded Defence Secretary Robert Gates, who was worried about civilian casualties in the event of a Turkish incursion into northern Iraq, that there have already been about 80,000 victims in Iraq and that Turkey was not responsible for those. For newspapers such as "Yeni Safak", on the other hand, an Israeli-American conspiracy is afoot (with the support of the EU), its objective being the creation of a "Great Kurdistan" at Turkey's expense.

In favour of the status quo

These hostile feelings have developed not only at the grassroots level but also among intellectuals, politicians and the traditionally Westernized armed forces. This has also contributed to closer ties with Moscow. While relations had improved towards the end of the 1990s, the real turnaround took place starting from the spring of 2003, in parallel with Turkey's refusal of Washington's request. After Parliament's vote on 1st March, the Turkish foreign minister decided to try and establish closer ties with Moscow. Ankara and Moscow's positions have begun to converge, albeit for different reasons, e.g. as regards Iran and Syria or the attempt to exclude Washington, which wanted observer status,

from the Organisation for Black Sea Economic Cooperation, with headquarters in Istanbul. Moscow was against and Ankara abstained: a slap in the face for the US. The US was subsequently accepted in October 2005, but only thanks to third party states and to counterbalance Bielorrussia's entry. Similarly, Moscow is trying to use its new relations with Ankara to hamper Washington's projects in the Caucasus region in general and Georgia in particular. Russia and Turkey have found common ground in their aversion to changes

The presence of an Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey is yet another factor of complication. As a result of the exodus from northern Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire in the last decades of the 19th century, there are now more Abkhaz in Turkey than in Abkhazia. While trade between Abkhazia and Turkey has prospered in the past decade, in recent years Turkish boats approaching Sukhumi have been intercepted by the Coast Guard patrol boats the Americans have supplied to Georgia and the crews and captains arrested. This has caused irritation in Ankara; in Tbilisi, it raises suspicions about Russo-Turkish collusion in Abkhazia.

A turning point

It was a 180-degree turnaround compared to the past. For most of the 1990s, Moscow viewed Ankara as Washington's long hand. As far as the Kremlin was concerned, Turkey was trying to usurp Russia's position in the Caucasus and Central Asia by using its historical association with the Muslim populations in the region as a lever. Because of the Balkan and Caucasian diasporas in Turkey, the two countries had diametrically opposed positions on issues such as Bosnia, Chechnya and Kosovo. The U.S. project to use Turkey as a transit corridor for hydrocarbons from the Caspian Sea towards Europe (especially for Azerbaijan gas and oil) was seen, on the other hand, as a direct threat to Russia's strategic interests.

Moscow's support of the PKK and Ankara's sympathetic attitude towards the Muslims of Chechnya did the rest.

Everything changed after 2003. There were quite a few meetings between Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President Vladimir Putin. Their summer meeting at Putin's Sochi residence on the Black Sea coast in July 2005 was perhaps the decisive one. On that occasion, Erdogan and Putin also reached an agreement on Chechnya and the Kurds: each adopted the other's position. This marked the turning of the page of the 1990s, when Ankara turned a blind eye to the active support that its northern Caucasus diaspora provided to the Chechen cause, while the PKK and organisations linked to it were allowed to operate in Moscow and elsewhere in the country: in October 1998 the "Komsomol'skaya Pravda" revealed the existence of a PKK camp in Russia. Erdogan and Putin also had seven-hour private talks in



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_Maoist-inspired Abdullah Ocalan's PKK, which legitimately claims the creation of a sovereign State of Kurdistan, has however been responsible for causing several victims and features on the US and the EU list of terrorist organisations

on their immediate borders. Following Georgia's "Rose Revolution" in November 2005, relations have deteriorated not only between Georgia and Russia but between Tbilisi and Ankara as well. Turkey, which tried to play a positive role in the 1990s (for example by brokering a ceasefire in southern Ossetia in 1992), now observes events in the neighbouring country with suspicion. The situation in Abkhazia, one of the separatist regions, has further complicated matters. The so-called peacekeeping Russian troops have supplied Russian passports to the inhabitants and the ruble, not the lari, is the currency used in the area. Moscow has repeatedly threatened to recognise Abkhazia's independence if Kosovo provides a precedent.

Sochi, at the end of which the Turkish Prime Minister declared: "Our points of view on the situation in the region as well as issues relating to maintaining stability in the world fully coincide".

What brand of terrorism?

Turkey is emerging as a regional power unhappy with both the EU and the US and ready to pursue its own national interests whether on Iraq, the Kurdish issue or stability in neighbouring countries including Iran and Syria. For Washington, the Russo-Turkish rapprochement is disturbing. In the first place, the two countries do not agree with the American "war on terror". In Ankara the "empire of evil" has not been replaced by the "axis of evil". The Russians and Turks are not particularly worried about Al-Qaeda. Turkey has its hands full with PKK terrorism and Kurdish separatism and the Russians are busy with Chechen (and now North Caucasian) terrorism and separatism. In any case, the jihadist threat is not a cause for great alarm in Russia and Turkey. It is true that there were two waves of kamikaze attacks in Istanbul in November 2003. On November 15th the Beth Isarel and Neve Shalom synagogues were attacked (30 dead and 300 wounded); on November 20th the HSBC bank building and the British consulate were attacked (33 dead, including the consul general Robert Short, and 450 wounded). It was the biggest terrorist attack in the country's history and in the immediate aftermath the local press called it a "Turkish 9/11". With the passage of time providing a more detached view, one realises that, although the overwhelming majority of victims were Muslims, these attacks were not perceived as a threat to the Turkish government but rather as being directed towards Jewish and Western targets. Similarly, in Russia the danger from international Islamic terrorism is far less worrying than the internal danger.

Both Ankara and Moscow associate the Iraq war not with the fight against international terrorism but rather with the chaos that has damaged their national interests. Both countries basically do not view the politics of the U.S. administration as a bastion against extremism; rather, in the fight against the "axis of evil" and the prospective future scenarios in Iran, Iraq and Syria, they see an expansionist policy that will further damage their interests



and produce greater chaos on their borders. Ankara fears that political upsets will generate greater, not fewer, regional conflicts; Moscow fears the creation of anti-Russian alliances.

An economic base

The current reconciliation between Ankara and Moscow rests on solid and growing economic bases. Bilateral trade started in 1984 with gas supplies, but the boom has happened over the last decade. It all started with cross-border trade by Russian tourists in the early 1990s. Tourism is now a significant element of the economy, while Russia has become Turkey's second largest trade partner after its traditional partner, Germany, and Turkey is Russia's first export destination (in July 2007, Russia earned \$12.5 billion from energy supplies of over 20 billion cubic metres of gas, about 70% of Turkish demand). Then there are Russian investments in Turkey for about \$2.5 billion and another \$4 billion of Turkish investment in Russia. The trend towards exchange in recent years has grown markedly and is expected to continue in the future.

Major industrial and media groups have supported the political reconciliation. As Suat Kiniklioglu, director of the Ankara branch of the German Marshall Fund, revealed in a recent work, the press is now encouraged by its owners to play an active role in creating a positive image of Russia to counter the negative image of the Communist past and the years of the first wars in Chechnya. News items are carefully filtered, "friendly" correspondents are sent to Moscow and comment is censored within editorial offices, not only as regards Russia but also other neighbouring countries such as Azerbaijan.



_There are also unresolved problems in Turkish-Russian relations, such as the Cyprus issue (left: protest march for reunification) and the energy issue (above: Gazprom chief Aleksei Miller)

The problems

Obviously there are also problems with Russia. When the gas war between Russia and Ukraine broke out in January 2006, Aleksei Miller, the head of Gazprom, revealed the price the Turks paid for gas, which had been guarded like a State secret until then.

The Turkish people were extremely disconcerted on learning that their country was buying the most expensive gas in Europe. A discussion on energy security was inevitable.

What some have called a “honeymoon” is darkened by occasional blocks caused by the health reasons used as a pretext to ban imports of Turkish poultry, fruit and vegetables and political misunderstandings such as the inexplicable (in terms of the current atmosphere between the two sides) position Moscow adopted at the UN Security Council on Cyprus. Another event Turkey frowned upon, which is however understandable in the light of the close relations between Yerevan and Moscow, was the Duma’s adoption of a resolution on the “Armenian genocide” in April 2005. The burning issue is energy: Moscow is looking for a southern ally with which to build the equivalent of the Baltic Sea gas pipeline. If this project is accomplished, the EU can abandon many of its plans to diversify supplies.

The prospects

Many analysts and politicians from both countries have repeatedly emphasised the points of convergence that should in some way explain the ongoing rapprochement. Actually, although the changes that have taken place in the past few years are extremely significant, the situation still remains quite fluid. A lot will depend on what the US and the EU do. The frustration and possible resentment towards Brussels and Washington that have apparently brought Ankara closer to Moscow are not sufficient to build a common platform of action, if only because of the substantial fact that Turkey and Russia’s reasons for resentment are too different. The respective interests of these regional powers are bound to conflict, because the Turkish-speaking countries that are naturally destined to be of interest to Turkey are genuine energy treasures and form part of the area that the current leadership of Moscow holds to be a zone reserved for Russian influence. The unresolved problems with the Bush administration have more to do with the internal insecurity that has been generated and the issue of Kurdish terrorism and separatism. By paying greater attention to Turkey, Washington could intervene in this delicate equation. As regards the EU, the stable structure that emerged from the last round of Turkish elections should supply the push to restart the process of membership. The EU should pay attention to being more consistent and not forget that the distrust generated could well create a wound. The reduction of Ankara’s contribution to the policy of security could already be a problem and certainly does not improve the energy security of the continent as a whole. The mistakes made by both sides on the Cyprus issue should be tackled serenely and the EU must take the issue of Kurdish terrorism into due consideration. As a recent report by the International Crisis Group observed, it should not be forgotten that the start of EU-Turkey negotiations “supplied a stimulus for a golden era of reforms,” producing, among other things, stability, five years of unprecedented economic growth, the flowering of civil society and the laying down of foundations for a possible solution to problems and conflicts. The Justice and Development Party appears to be strongly determined in its European choice. The EU must not let this opportunity slip away.