

# **“It’s the post-Cold War era, not a foreign policy shift”, Turkey says**

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**The Cold War is over and foreign policy is not a zero-sum game. This sentence is the summary of what the Turkish capital has been tirelessly telling everyone in response to arguments and debates suggesting that Turkey has been moving away from the Western world because of inappropriate foreign policy moves on the part of the government.**

Most recently, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates joined those debates on Wednesday, suggesting that the European Union’s refusal to offer Turkey a swift accession process has partly caused Ankara’s foreign policy to shift and its relations with Israel to deteriorate. “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,” Gates told reporters in London.

“We have to think long and hard about why these developments in Turkey [are occurring] and what we might be able to do to counter them and make the stronger linkages with the West more apparently of interest and value to Turkey’s leaders.”

## **A more cooperative approach**

According to Stephen Kinzer, who served as The New York Times’ bureau chief in Turkey for four years from 1996, behind the friction between the United States and Turkey is a larger question about how to approach crises in the Middle East. “Turks are telling the US, ‘The Cold War’s over. You have to take a more cooperative approach, and we can help.’ The US is not prepared to accept that offer,” Kinzer told The New York Times in remarks published earlier this week.

The current bureau chief of the newspaper chose to label Turkey a pliable ally-turned-thorn for the US in the article.

As a matter of fact, remarks by Gates came over more than one year after US President Barack Obama himself clearly described Turkey as part of Europe, in addition to confirming Turkey’s central role during a memorable speech at the Turkish Parliament.

“I know there are those who like to debate Turkey’s future. They see your country at the crossroads of continents, and touched by the currents of history. They know that this has been a place where civilizations meet, and different peoples come together. They wonder whether you will be pulled in one direction or another,” Obama said in his speech on April 6, 2009.

“But I believe here is what they don’t understand: Turkey’s greatness lies in your ability to be at the center of things. This is not where East and West divide — this is where they come together: in the beauty of your culture; in the richness of your history; in the strength of your democracy; in your hopes for tomorrow,” he said.

## **An already discredited campaign**

In days following the visit, a senior Turkish diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity, told Sunday's Zaman at the time: "At the meetings between US and Turkish officials during Obama's visit, it was mutually confirmed that claims by certain US-based think tanks suggesting that Turkey has been shifting away from the West are not true."

Yet, here are the same debates today.

Professional diplomats do not have the luxury to get tired of repetitive questions on one particular subject. Yet, although putting forth the same argument to those questions in line with their country's principle of consistency, they might have to find creative answers which differ from their earlier answers, hoping that this time, the party that asks the question can get the point.

Earlier this week, a French journalist, whose country is a founding member of the EU, posed a question to a senior Turkish diplomat as she followed the third foreign ministerial level meeting of the Turkish-Arab Cooperation Forum (TAC) and the fifth meeting of the TAC Economic Forum, held simultaneously in Istanbul. Referring to the fact that during the TAC Economic Forum, Turkey and the Arab countries of Syria, Jordan and Lebanon had decided to establish a cooperation council to create "a zone of free movement of goods and persons" among them, the journalist asked the diplomat whether this planned council might be interpreted as a sign or proof that Turkey has been moving towards becoming an "Eastern" country.

### **Building East with originally western concepts**

"If we had any intention to move towards becoming whatever you name it, let's say 'Eastern,' would we do it by using concepts which are originally Western?" the diplomat responded.

The diplomat reminded the journalist of the fact that Robert Schuman, a qualified lawyer, French foreign minister between 1948 and 1952 and a man who is regarded as one of the founding fathers of European unity, could be regarded as the brainchild of the cornerstones — the free movement of goods, capital, services and persons — which constitute the underlying philosophy of the now 27-nation bloc.

"Europe will not be built in a day nor as part of some overall design; it will be built through practical achievements that first create a sense of common purpose," Schuman declared on May 9, 1950.

May 9 is now being celebrated as "Europe Day," with Turkey, an EU membership candidate country, participating in these celebrations since 1999.

"Turkey is now realizing an ideal dating back to 1950 in its region, on its own and even without becoming a member of the EU. Does this spell 'Easternness'?" the diplomat asked the journalist.

"These territories are our neighborhood, factually and not with some epithets such as 'the European Neighborhood Policy.' Current EU members are neighbors through 'acronyms' or epithets but we are neighbors with our border gates. That's why we are able to speak and understand the language of Iran and Syria. Is this Easternness?"

### **Casual connections**

At the TAC Economic Forum, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said that they are inviting all interested countries to join "the zone of free movement of goods and persons," which he said should not be seen as an alternative to the EU.

Turkey is still eager to join the EU but that the bloc "cannot and should not restrict [Turkey's] relations with its neighbors," Davutoğlu said.

According to Foreign Ministry spokesman Burak Özügergin, arguments suggesting that the EU “in a way” pushed Turkey away are accurate because Turkey has not been treated fairly by the bloc — particularly due to certain “sui generis” figures using Turkey’s EU membership issue to score domestic points.

“This is a mathematical truth. But, making a causal connection between this fact and Turkey’s regional efforts is totally wrong,” Özügergin told Sunday’s Zaman. “Turkey is not exerting its efforts within the region as a counter response to the EU’s attitude. These efforts are part of Turkey’s regional vision and if the EU had also been visionary, it would try to make use of the synergy created within the region thanks to Turkey’s efforts,” Özügergin added.

Analyses and articles written a year or more ago may still be valid today. One such analysis is a Jan. 29, 2009 article focusing on the issue at hand. It was written by foreign policy analyst Soli Özel and titled “The Back and Forth of Turkey’s ‘Westernness’.”

“Whether or not Turkey is turning its back on the West is a frequently asked question and a common refrain, particularly after Turkey’s reaction to Israel’s assault against Hamas in Gaza. Turkey remains strategically Western-oriented and in fact the ongoing Ergenekon investigation reaffirms its Atlanticist credentials. What Turkey’s Western allies must do is have a self-critical look at their record and then ask themselves whether the strategic ‘Westernness’ of Turkey is enough. How Turkey’s Western partners deal with these issues and whether they will spend the necessary time and energy to manage their relationships with Turkey may have as much, if not more, of an impact on how Turkey ultimately develops,” Özel wrote at the time.

This seems like the right time — for Turkey’s allies in Washington and EU capitals as well as for those columnists, opinion leaders and politicians within Turkey who gave credit to the aforementioned arguments about a so-called shift in Turkey’s foreign policy axis — to take a fresh look at Özel’s arguments without forgetting the interaction between debates surrounding Turkey’s foreign policy and domestic policy.

Remarks by Davutoğlu delivered this week when responding to questions about whether or not Turkey is involved in a shift of orientation in its foreign policy actually point to the need for such a fresh look and for focusing on the interaction between debates surrounding Turkey’s foreign policy and domestic policy.

Stating that they never said they had “given up the European ideal,” Davutoğlu added that people who criticize Turkey in that regard should give an enthusiastic level of support to the constitutional reform package in Turkey.

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## Sources

Source : TdZ, 13 June 2010, Sunday