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TURKEY'S ENERGY INNOVATIONS AND REGIONALISM

Turkey's governing AKP party was returned to office with a 47% majority in recent elections. The country's secular and nationalist-inspired parties also garnered sufficient votes to have a parliamentary presence. So, too, did representatives of Turkey's major ethnic minority, the Kurds, many of whose representatives ran as independent candidates.

Turkey's election results signify a broad public approval for the AK's economic reforms and an annual economic growth rate of at least 7% over the past five years. They also indicate a desire for continuity and stability – even in the face of rising tensions over Islamic political infusions into the staunchly secularist program of the historic figure of Ataturk. Despite the AK's victory at the polls, however, the party does not retain enough votes to support a bid to appoint a president who, like Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, is seen as having an Islamist agenda opposed by the military and the secularists. Parliamentary stability, therefore, may be fragile for the short term. Turkey's foreign agenda is also undergoing a restructuring tied to its cross-border relations, and increasingly, to the country's energy program, which Prime Minister Erdogan maintains will be furthered according to Turkey's national interest.

Turkey's EU Aspirations

President of the European Commission Jose Barroso welcomed the AK's victory. Yet movement towards enlargement is expected to be slow, and accompanied by lingering doubts over Turkey's cultural and geographic connections to western areas. Though the UK supports membership, Germany has been reticent—at first calling for a privileged partnership, and then stating that it might accept full membership if the whole of the EU were behind such progress. France, one of the EU's most populous nations, has not side-stepped the issue in like manner, and remains opposed to an accession that might come, in the best of all possible worlds, in more than a decade.

Potential migration into western EU areas may lie at the heart of the opposition to enlargement. The EU recently saw a westward immigration from its newly admitted eastern members that now totals over 1 million. This westerly movement has raised questions of absorption capacity, just as it has underscored the benefits of additional populations to a declining labor force as well as to a growingly mature demographic profile.

Efforts to find both skilled and semi-skilled employees for positions incapable of being filled due to large-scale retirements from western labor forces are engendering a flexible approach to further in- migration from the east. Unlike Britain, Sweden, and Ireland, Germany was opposed to opening its borders to eastern labor migration, but has now expressed a potential

need to shift perspectives in the future. A complex policy that would match labor force characteristics of immigrants with internal EU economic requirements may need to be considered. A balance between in-migration to the west in the face of a decline of national work forces may have to be achieved before the prospect of Turkey's membership, and a prospective population movement, is realistically considered.

On the one hand, ethnic and religious distinctions provide a cultural barrier to an enlarged EU. On the other hand, emigration from eastern EU nations themselves is provoking a turn towards attracting a compensatory labor force from the EU Neighborhood nations, such as Ukraine. Hesitations over Turkey's EU accession have added to the difficulties of evolving appropriate migration policies. They have also brought about a severe decline in popular support within Turkey for EU membership despite the governing AK party's positive enlargement outlook.

Cross-Border Considerations

US positions on Turkey's EU accession have been depicted as observatory. However, given progress towards economic reform, the current administration thoroughly supports an EU door that remains open to a Turkey that retains its current secular, constitutional democracy. Nevertheless, Turkey's EU accession might bring a complication of cross-border ties, that would also encompass other NATO allies and attempts to further regional dialogues. Two of the major cross-border issues entail questions of the relation between scarce resources and Kurdish populations which straddle modern national boundaries.

Water is one of these issues. In this respect, Turkey's 386 mile shared border with Syria involves it in often tense relations over usage and quality of water emanating from the Euphrates River. Syria's rich farming areas were once stopped from receiving an adequate water supply in the 1990's when Turkey feared a growth in Syrian political support for an ethnic Kurdish movement. UK and US diplomatic intervention brought a cessation of a water cut-off that nevertheless lasted for two weeks.

A second, and by far the greatest cross-border issue, is energy availability. Decreasing world energy supplies, along with the EU's search for sources beyond its current dependence on Russian pipelines, frame any discussion of regional ties. So, too, does Iraq's oil-rich Kurdish province and its major urban center Kirkuk. US inability to secure Iraq is nevertheless accompanied by a favorable stance towards Iraqi federalism over the heightened provincialization of Kurdistan – a consequence of which might be the furtherance of a homeland movement, as well as an emigration of Turkish Kurds, who now number over 20 million. Turkey's military is known to desire an incursion into northern Iraq in order to suppress the PKK, a Kurdish separatist movement that it, the EU and the US, have classified a terrorist organization. Military involvement in Northern Iraq seems dependent both on the sustainability of US foreign policy, and on the immediate future of Turkey's domestic and parliamentary politics, which now includes members of an anti-Kurdistan, nationalist philosophy.

Tensions between the US and Turkey have arisen due to Turkish perceptions that the US has done little to contain the PKK. Nonetheless, there are suggestions that the US has voiced its continuing belief in a sovereign Iraq, and that it is heading towards a form of “concrete” results with respect to the PKK’s presence. The sustainability of Northern Iraqi policies is embedded in the answer to a variety of diverse questions which include Turkey’s potential military operations, the internal acceptance of a balanced distribution of Iraqi oil resources, and the extent to which Turkey’s newly reelected governing majority goes on to derive a foreign policy it has already indicated will be increasingly pursued in its national interest. Chief among these interests are Turkey’s activation of a critical geopolitical position that characterizes it as a hub or corridor that can serve as a transport center for oil from Central Asia destined for delivery to an energy- needy EU.

US Considerations

Both the US and the EU have underscored the importance of a trans-Caspian pipeline with origins in Central Asia. Turkey’s status as an energy transport center only heightens its strategic importance as an energy ‘bridge’ to the EU. However, Turkish officials maintain that their nation wishes to be more than a “conduit” since Central Asian energy connections inevitably bring it into growing relations with Russian efforts in the same oil and gas-rich area.

The months prior to the Turkish elections saw a souring of Russian ties due to the level of its “Cold War” rhetoric with respect to US plans for a missile shield in the eastern EU. Recent developments have dampened such verbal confrontations. The US Congress put a brake on spending for the missile shield. Further, the US’ long-standing emphasis on energy prices relative to Russian efforts rather than a highlighting of conflict situations is now converging with both the EU’s and Turkey’s practical approaches to their Russian ties, along with the concept of workable energy partnerships. Turkey’s political and economic significance to the EU’s future is embedded in its potential to provide Europe with a balance to Russian energy supplies in an environment that calls for multilateral dialogue. Its political role in the EU’s future, along with a growing energy-linked leverage towards either membership or the security of contractual ties, is becoming increasingly clarified.

The “Turkic World”

The emergence of Turkey’s energy politics is tied both to its potential status as strategic energy center, and its own concept of a broader “Turkic World,” which would include Central Asian nations with language affinities. Turkish cultural viewpoints include as well those Iranian populations of Turkic descent who, although Shiite, speak Azerbaijani, a language similar to that spoken in Turkey today. Though energy issues now predominate in Turkish-Iranian relations, cooperation in energy transfers is bolstered by cultural and linguistic affiliations. Turkey’s recent memo of understanding with Iran envisages Turkey as a distributor

of 30 billion cubic meters of gas from Iran and Turkmenistan to Europe. The memorandum and its agenda is opposed by the US, which is engaged in controlling Iranian nuclear prospects through international and business sanctions. Turkey's new role in providing Iran with energy export possibilities runs parallel to US and EU efforts to limit Iran's nuclear capabilities. The outcome of the memo hints strongly at an increase of Turkish-Iranian cooperation as well as a growing role for Iran in regional politics due to the potential inclusion of the management of its vast energy reserves into the contemporary fabric of Caspian and Central Asian agreements.

Implications

Turkey's internal restructuring is being accompanied by a realignment of its foreign policy. Often depicted as more responsive to external factors than to its own voice, this policy is increasingly taking on a regional quality based largely on the country's potential as an energy gateway. Turkey's centrality to cultural and linguistic ties that cross-cut national boundaries enhances a more active regional focus. That this focus both transcends alternative multilateral ties and is based on Turkey's national interest seems clear from its on-going energy links with Iran, which has been otherwise isolated by US and EU sanctions. Turkey's Caspian, as well as Black Sea pipeline potential, are subjects that have not been avoided either by Turkish foreign policy analysts or US officials interested in an emphasis on energy price differentials rather than persistent confrontations over seemingly scarce resources and difficulties of providing efficient supply networks.

Turkey's emergent transformation from a country with a reactive to a more prospective foreign policy still leaves lingering questions about the future contours of its US-Kurdish ties. Its energy arrangements with Iran, moreover, impinge on US activities in dampening Iran's nuclear agenda. In the short-term, however, Turkey's central role in including Iran in a regional energy framework may foster dialogues that stress technical partnerships rather than persistent or episodic confrontations. In the longer-term, Turkey's capacity to activate a geographically complex, energy-based foreign agenda also furthers attempts at reaching political solutions for strategic problems whose outcomes have depended, in the main, on military interventions in regional affairs.
