

# The Royal College of Defence Studies



## RCDS 2008 – CONTEMPORARY STRATEGIC ISSUES

### The Future Of Turkey?

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### THE FUTURE OF TURKEY?

#### Key Judgements

- Turkey is likely to internally consolidate its democracy, resolve conflict between secularism and political Islam and sustain economic growth. Some tension between democratic forces and secular elite will remain.
- The Kurdish problem will slightly ease up due to mitigating internal political developments but essentially stay frozen due to external regional situation.
- While Turkey-EU dialogue will continue, Turkey is likely to face continuous hurdles in securing full membership of the EU, in the foreseeable future.
- Turkey's position as a hub of energy pipelines linking Caspian Sea with Europe will increase its importance to EU for its energy security.
- In view of the efforts at resolution of Cyprus issue the likelihood of its settlement has increased.
- The EU attitude towards Turkish membership, Russian reassertiveness in her "near abroad", the stability and orientation of the Persian Gulf region, Chinese influence in Central and West Asia and the orientation of the future Iraq will determine Turkey's role as regional power.

#### Discussion

- Having lost an empire Turkey has been trying to find its soul for a century. Internally, it decided to make a break with the imperial past by opting for a harsh form of western secularism. Economy remained on the rocks. Turkish nationalism was brittle and paranoid. Externally, problems with Greece persisted even as both had membership of NATO. The twenty first century has begun with changes in the internal and external scene for Turkey. How Turkey perceives threats and opportunities in the new environment will dictate the future of Turkey. This paper essentially follows and examines dominant factors to draw relevant conclusions and reach key judgments.
- **Secularism vs Political Islam**. In recent years the long drawn battle between secularism and political Islam has come to the fore. Although Justice and Development Party (AKP) is not yet clearly out of the woods the tide of political legitimacy seems to be turning in favor of democratic forces. The military and judiciary seem to have realized that, political space will have to be conceded to democratic forces particularly when it brings along economic prosperity, keeps Turkey on track for EU membership and safeguards the security interests. Slowly, and due to EU membership requirements, the democratic culture will mature in the mid-term.
- **Economy**. After the shock of 2001, Turkey embarked upon macro institutional reforms opening up the economy, within the framework of an IMF programme. As a result, Turkish economy has witnessed sustained

and robust growth. The current global financial crises will impact Turkey less than others. Having received the dividends it is unlikely that any government will reverse course.

- **Kurds**. No other security issue has engaged the Turkish mind and energies as the Kurdish problem. The broader issue is not the PKK but Kurdish independence. The US invasion of Iraq and resultant autonomy for the Kurds in the north has raised the spectre of an independent or autonomous Kurd region with Kirkuk oil wealth. This could further create a pull on the Turkish Kurds. In the past, Turkish response to the challenge has been brutal suppression of any Kurdish cultural or political expression. Recently, in addition to military operations the AKP government has slightly eased the political environment. While this may work, the external regional linkages are likely to strain the Turkish restraint in the foreseeable future. The issue will continue to dog Turkish governments for at least another generation.
- **EU**. The AKP government has undertaken several political, legal and economic reforms to prepare itself for EU membership. It has also maintained a steady political course for securing membership. Meanwhile, it has made reasonable economic progress, remains important to European energy security and made moves to reduce the baggage of its Cyprus issue. On the EU side however, still there are significant historical, religious and psychological barriers to Turkish entry in to the club. In the mid-term this could change. However, this is not, and will not be a settled issue till at least 2015. Eventually, Turkey may choose to be a beneficiary of EU “variable geometry” (ie not a full member but economically integrated while independently sovereign). Turkey will certainly continue to seek markets and allies to the east also.
- **US and NATO**. Increasingly, Turkey’s anchors to the west are drifting or are under strain. NATO, for decades the bedrock of Turkey’s western identity, particularly for its influential military, has lost lustre. Despite laudable garden-tending by senior officials on both sides, US-Turkish relations have not recovered the depth and breadth they had in the 1990’s. This is happening at a time when Middle East, West Asia, Central Asia and Caucasus are transforming and Turkey’s relevance to the US is increasingly going to come to the fore. Recently, in the wake of August war in Georgia, Turkey has opposed introduction of NATO forces in to the Black Sea. While a dramatic NATO split is not envisaged, in the future the alliance will come under strain.
- **Greece and Cyprus**. Turkey – Greece rivalry goes back several centuries. However, starting in 1999, the earthquake diplomacy has helped thaw the relations and Greece has supported Turkey’s candidacy for EU membership. Meanwhile, Greek Cyprus has joined the EU – granting Nicosia a veto over all things Turkish. There are efforts at hand to resolve the Cyprus issue. Should they succeed, they will free Turkey from a significant burden and improve her chances for the EU membership as well.

## Conclusions

- Turkey is the heir to the Ottoman Empire, which at various points dominated the eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, the Balkans, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Black Sea region until it met the expanding Russian empire. Its collapse after WW-I created an oddity – an inward looking state in Asia Minor. It sat out 20<sup>th</sup> century or allowed its strategic space to be used. The situation has changed dramatically.
- Turkey is at a critical stage in its quest for a democratic political dispensation and economic upswing. The road ahead remains rocky. However, the signs indicate that Turkey will most likely stay the course and internal stability will lead to its increased potential for playing a regional role.
- Turkey has quietly emerged as the prize in a new great game over who will develop and bring to the EU / world markets the vast oil and gas resources of the Central Asian states. Turkey will in the years ahead become one of the world's major energy hubs, supplied by the pipelines which will crisscross Anatolia. It will depend on US and EU as to where those lines run and whose products pass through those lines.
- Turkey's EU project faces a hopeful but uncertain future. The relevance of NATO has dimmed. The US nexus has fallen victim to the US invasion of Iraq and support for the Iraqi Kurds. Yet, all this happens at a time when Turkey is rising and in the future the West's need for Turkey will increase. The strategic spaces around Turkey are all in turmoil. They have also been traditional areas of Turkish influence. Turkey will inevitably attempt to influence these spaces. How and to whose advantage this happens will depend as much on US / EU, as on Turkey.

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