

December 21, 2004

TURKEY AND THE EU: STARTING THE LONG LAST CHAPTER

The European Union (EU) summit on December 16-17 gave Turkey what it had been seeking for over four decades. The EU decision to announce a starting date of October 3, 2005 for accession negotiations with Turkey ushers in a new era for Turkey and brings to an end what was in essence a virtually endless process of ‘negotiations about negotiations.’ At the same time, the EU decision constitutes an undeniable personal success for Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Justice and Development Party (JDP) leader who had proclaimed the goal of EU accession as the first aim of his government on the day the JDP won the elections in November 2002.

In order to fully comprehend the importance of the EU decision for Turkey and the JDP government, one need only imagine the political and economic consequences that would surely have ensued from a different outcome. Although Erdogan had said that the collapse of the EU effort was “not the end of the world” and that Turkey could continue with its reform process by “redesignating” the EU’s Copenhagen criteria as “the Ankara criteria,” it is not clear if there really was a satisfactory fallback position relating to Turkish foreign policy priorities or the JDP’s domestic political calculations. Moreover, as the precipitous fall in the stock market in the early hours of trading on December 17 on news of a possible breakdown of the talks in Brussels prior to a spectacular recovery to a new record high indicated, there would have been a negative effect on the current Turkish economic recovery despite the announcement of a new standby agreement with the IMF on December 14.

The next nine months will inevitably be filled with endless discussion and speculation in Turkey as well as the European countries of all aspects and implications of the new phase in the relationship. Every major development during this period in Turkey, the EU and even beyond Europe will be analyzed for any conceivable impact on the forthcoming negotiations. Even if no unforeseen occurrence affects the process prior to October 3, the talks themselves are certain to be difficult and prolonged. French President Jacques Chirac, for example, has predicted a process that could be “as long as 20 years” while Dutch Foreign Minister Bernard Bot suggested after the summit that it was “possible that Turkey would never achieve accession.” Consequently, as the talks usher in the beginning of the last chapter of Turkey’s long European journey, the JDP government will find itself obliged to steer carefully for many years between endless EU demands for adjustment of every aspect of Turkish life to the European laws, regulations and norms which constitute the EU *acquis* and the sensitivities and expectations of the Turkish voters, notwithstanding their overwhelming support for EU membership.

LAST MINUTE BARGAINING

On October 6, 2004, the EU Commission had given what the outgoing Commission President Romano Prodi characterized as “a qualified yes” to Turkey in its recommendation to the EU summit for the start of accession negotiations. After cautiously welcoming the report, Erdogan and Abdullah Gul, the Turkish Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, embarked on an intensive ten-week campaign to persuade the European leaders to accept and implement the recommendation. Their strategy combined quiet diplomacy – conducted primarily through Prime Minister Peter Balkenende, Foreign Minister Bernard Bot and EU Minister Atzo Nikolai representing the EU during Holland’s current presidency, in Ankara, Brussels and the Hague, as well as through a parallel track involving the three EU leaders most supportive of Turkey, Gerhard Schroeder, Tony Blair and Silvio Berlusconi – with open warnings on what was not acceptable to Turkey. In fact, most of the real action on the EU – Turkish front appears to have taken place in the public arena as details of the conversations and negotiating positions quickly surfaced in the Turkish media.

The essence of the message Erdogan and Gul conveyed via virtually daily statements was that Turkey had fulfilled the Copenhagen criteria, had therefore “passed the test,” and, as there could be “no changing of the rules during a game,” it was now up to the EU “to live up to its word” and thus “to also pass the test.” This meant no additional conditions beyond the Copenhagen criteria, the granting of an exact date for accession negotiations and the exclusion of any kind of ‘special status’ short of full membership – promoted by the declared European opponents of Turkish membership including the German opposition leader Angela Merkel and the French presidential aspirant Nicholas Sarkozy – and a special referendum in the EU countries on Turkish membership.

Turkey conveyed to the EU a list of what were described in the Turkish press as ‘the Turkish conditions’ after Bot gave the first draft for the EU summit to Gul on November 24. Although some changes were made, the Turkish leaders were clearly not satisfied by the language in the three subsequent drafts produced before the EU summit. Accordingly, on December 14, Erdogan raised the rhetorical level at a meeting with his parliamentary group: “We have said on several occasions that we will not accept a decision that is not based on a perspective of full membership and which offers special status... We have done what we had to do to start the membership talks. The rest is the responsibility of the EU. If the EU is not a Christian club, then I call on the EU leaders to declare that with Turkey's accession.”

The next day Erdogan asked the EU ambassadors in Ankara to convey to their governments the following message: “If conditions that we can not accept are put forth on December 17, Turkey will not hesitate to say no... Wanting to give Turkey a special status means not recognizing Turkey and the Turkish people. If there is such a thing, if talks are not being started or it is going to end in a certain way, then Turkey will decide by itself what it is going to do... Before this and after this, Turkey is a country that can stand on its own feet.” In case the message was missed, Erdogan bluntly warned just before leaving for Brussels on the same day: “We do not expect any unacceptable conditions to be put before us, but if such conditions are imposed... We will definitely put the matter in the refrigerator and continue on our way.”

Although Bot responded by reminding Turkey that it was up to the EU to make its choice and for Turkey to either accept or reject the offer and also that it was Turkey, which was applying to join the EU and not the other way around, Erdogan was not inclined to change his tone. As the EU leaders were preparing to meet on the first day of their summit, Erdogan told a large group of Turkish journalists in Brussels: “If we see that progress we want can not be made and if we think they are playing with time, we will stand on our feet and do what Norway did; that is, we can quit.”

BRUSSELS AND AFTER

Announcing the decision reached at the working dinner of the EU summit on December 16, EU Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso declared that the EU had “opened its doors to Turkey” and said the offer for the beginning of talks on October 3, 2005 was one “that Turkey should be glad to accept.” However, Turkey was not eager to take up Barroso’s suggestion. After confirming that the fourth draft had been approved without changes by the EU leaders, including the stipulation for Turkish recognition of the Greek Cypriot government that had entered the EU as the Republic of Cyprus, Erdogan balked. In an apparently tense meeting with Balkenende and Bot, Erdogan said that he would not accept the offer because of the Cyprus condition. This was not a surprise as Erdogan had effectively ruled out “direct or indirect recognition” at his first meeting with Turkish Cypriot President Rauf Denktas in over a year in Ankara on December 3, and subsequently dismissed all pleas from EU leaders. Erdogan went so far as to threaten to leave Brussels immediately, because the EU was “sacrificing Turkey with its 70 million people for 700,000 Greek Cypriots.”

The Turkish leader’s brinkmanship served to galvanize Blair, Schroeder and Berlusconi into action. After separate meetings with Erdogan to counsel patience, the three European leaders took the lead in lobbying the Dutch presidency as well as their other colleagues to accept a compromise offered by Erdogan to issue a statement of intent to extend the 1963 Ankara protocol – the legal foundation of the relationship between Turkey and the Europeans – to cover the ten new members of the EU prior to October 3. As a consensus began to emerge in the EU on this alternative, Greek Cypriot President Tassos Papadopoulos was left isolated – without the support of even the Greek Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis – and unable to use his threatened veto if Turkey failed to extend recognition.

With Balkenende’s confirmation that the Turkish pledge did not constitute a commitment to extend “formal legal recognition,” Erdogan was able to declare in his post-summit press conference that Turkey was proceeding to accession talks “without any additional conditions.” Erdogan said that while Turkey “did not obtain all that we wanted 100 percent,” the result was “a success” as the goal of full membership at the end of talks was underlined “unambiguously.” However, Erdogan complained that “conditions that have nothing to do with the Copenhagen criteria, including some that are even in breach with the EU acquis were put forward” and Turkey had tried “to find formulae that would at least bring these in line with EU law.” Referring specifically to the provisions restricting the free movement of people through ‘permanent safeguard’ clauses in any future accession accord, Erdogan said, “They were put into the desired shape as a result of the efforts we made. They will be now used if necessary, and if there is agreement between the parties.” However, he noted, the period ahead would be “much more difficult and full of more obstacles.”

Erdogan also reiterated his main argument in favor of Turkish membership of the EU by saying that “a reconciliation of civilizations between Christianity and Islam” now rested on a “concrete base.” The same theme was echoed by Tony Blair who commented that the EU decision showed that “those who believe that there is some fundamental clash of civilizations between Christians and Moslems are actually wrong.” In fact, Turkey was able to get most of what it wanted at the summit because Blair, together with Schroeder and Berlusconi, were apparently successful in getting their colleagues to accept their arguments on the broader geostrategic advantages of beginning accession negotiations instead of focusing on the counterarguments against Turkish membership such as its size, population and possible costs to the EU budget. However, as we proceed towards actual negotiations, all of these issues seem certain to be addressed again, along with the thorny considerations raised for many European citizens as well as some

EU leaders by the fact that the overwhelming majority of Turkey's population is Moslem while most of its territory is geographically outside Europe.

In his special TV interview before the summit, for example, Chirac, had stated that his response to Turkish membership was "yes but." Consequently, the French leader seems certain to emphasize the uniquely "open-ended" nature of the talks ahead – confirmed by the EU summit – to mollify the anger of the French opponents of his willingness to give a date to Turkey. Chirac, who has also speculated about the advantages of a special status instead of EU membership, also seems likely to follow the lead of Austrian Chancellor Walther Schuessel in arranging a special referendum as the ultimate safeguard against possible Turkish membership.

The opponents of Turkish accession will seek justification for their actions in the language which found its way into every draft as well as the final communiqué relating to the "EU's capacity to absorb new members while maintaining the momentum of European integration." At the same time, they will probably find an appropriate occasion to try to take advantage of the provision in the summit decision for a suspension of the negotiations. In addition, there is always the possibility that two seemingly perennial items in Turkey's relations with the outside world, namely the Kurdish and Armenian issues, which were raised just before the summit in a newspaper advertisement by leading Turkish Kurds and two declarations by French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier, could be utilized to bedevil the negotiations. Finally, there is the very real danger that political changes in Europe during the crucial next few years will see the replacement of some of the leaders who have shown a personal commitment to supporting Turkey's European aspirations.

As an astute politician, Erdogan is surely more aware of the possible pitfalls on the way to membership than anyone else. His first priority will be the appointment of a chief EU negotiator and a team of experts to handle the talks and the implementation of a cabinet reshuffle delayed by EU summit preoccupations. However, soon afterwards Erdogan is likely to tackle the intractable Cyprus problem once again. Having demonstrated his commitment in Brussels to avoid retreating beyond certain limits on this long-running 'national issue' – even at the risk of jeopardizing his cherished EU goal – Erdogan also recognizes that he has to find a way to satisfy his EU counterparts without upsetting his domestic constituency prior to October 3. After all, the Greek Cypriots are currently in sole possession of the seat reserved for Cyprus at the EU and will sit on the other side of the table from Turkey during the negotiations. As Erdogan noted himself in his post-summit comments in Brussels, "the lack of a solution is a problem both for us and for our brothers in Cyprus." The ideal way out of the current impasse is a solution along the lines of a revived Annan plan – accepted by the Turkish Cypriots but rejected by the Greek Cypriots in April 2004 – leading to the creation of a United Republic of Cyprus that would replace the Republic of Cyprus before the start of the Turkish negotiations. Post-summit reports suggest that Erdogan has already suggested to Annan a revival of his aborted initiative.

While it is not clear whether he intends to do so, Erdogan might also mount an effort to reach out more effectively to the citizens of the EU as Blair suggested after the summit. Having apparently persuaded the majority of the EU leaders with his argument that "Turkish entry would help prevent a clash of civilizations" while "helping the EU to become a global power," Erdogan also needs to directly address the ongoing debate throughout the EU on European Moslems and relations with the Islamic world. Although this is a risky strategy because of the Islamist background of Erdogan and many of his colleagues in the JDP, the failure to do so could prove even more costly. Moreover, such a 'hearts and minds' campaign could also help counteract the apparently negative reaction of some Europeans to Erdogan's assertive negotiating style in Brussels, including Jean-Claude Juncker, the Prime Minister of Luxembourg, which assumes the EU presidency in January 2005.

Finally, Erdogan will surely find time and energy to devote to balancing Turkey's deepening commitment to the EU with its important strategic relationship with the United States. The tensions, which have recently arisen in the US-Turkish relationship while the JDP government was focusing on the EU summit, have not undermined the fundamental basis of the bilateral relationship. However, it remains to

be seen whether Ankara will be able to utilize the declarations of continued US support for Turkish accession to the EU to build a new and stable triangular relationship involving Brussels and Washington at the core of its future foreign policy and security framework. This task is likely to prove particularly difficult in view of the current strains in the Transatlantic relationship.

Bulent Aliriza
Director, Turkey Project

Seda Ciftci
Research Associate, Turkey Project