

TURKEY: A KEY COUNTRY IN EUROPE AND BEYOND

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to be here today at the Catholic University of Leuven. It is also a privilege to be able to deliver my remarks firstly at an institution with such a very distinguished place in the global academic community. In my country as elsewhere the KUL is noted for the excellence of its academic work and its commitment to education. As the first speaker in a series of conferences to be organized by your University, I hope the subject matter will attract your interest and inspire questions.

I appreciate this occasion for several reasons: Firstly, as a diplomat with almost 40 years of service, including four postings as an Ambassador, it provides me an opportunity to share some of my experiences. Moreover, it is always a pleasure to be among a young generation whom will continue our striving for universal peace harmony and prosperity.

I would also like to warmly thank your Rector Prof. Dr. Mark Waer and his able colleagues for preparing this event.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I move on to some specific foreign policy issues, let me begin by a quote from Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the modern Republic;

“Peace at home, peace in the world”.

This seemingly straightforward and powerful maxim constitutes the main pillar of the Turkish Foreign Policy, which has always been peaceful, realistic and consistent.

Why such an emphasis on peace? Well the Turkish Republic was born out of war, continuous warfare between 1911 and 1923, but also a series of wars by our opponents from 1808 throughout the 19th century which threatened our very existence as a nation. There were very few years when we were completely at peace. For Ataturk, when he established the Turkish Republic in 1923 it was of the utmost importance for survival to assure permanent peace within and outside of the country, beyond ideology or rhetoric.

If you want to understand the challenges Turkish foreign policy is designed to cope with, take a quick glance at the map. I wanted to emphasize this, because I believe that if you realize that peace and security are the leitmotifs of the Turkish foreign policy, this may give you a better insight into it.

For example, you will understand why Turkey is exploring all diplomatic avenues for a peaceful solution over Iran or the Middle-East. Do not allow yourself to be distracted by talk about shifting changing the axis of Turkish foreign policy. Current policies do not imply that Turkey will draw away from her alliance with the Western world.

A quick look at Turkish Foreign Policy will reveal three distinct periods, characterized by a constant effort for peace building.

During the first phase, from 1923 to the end of the second WW, Turkey aimed to stay out of any conflict, while trying to create a safer near neighborhood zone mainly by initiating regional alliances.

The second phase roughly covered the Cold War era during which Turkey assumed an important role for the Western security. (i.e. its Korean War effort). As such, we were founding members of the United Nations and the Council of Europe, and attained memberships of the OECD and NATO. In 1963, we signed an Association Agreement, which was the first step towards joining the European Communities. It was stated in the Agreement that it was aimed at full membership and this took place after the Turkish Foreign Minister of the day had persuaded President de Gaulle on this point. Its main strategy was ‘Zollverein’ or full customs union for industrial goods by 1996. At the time it seemed a wild dream, but in the fullness of time it was achieved. Turkey is among the top six trade partners of the Union today.

Today; the immediate policy landscape is dominated by security problems. We have to deal with an evolving security challenges which are increasingly more amorphous and asymmetric in nature, making them harder to tackle than the less complex problems of the Cold War era.

Yet we still do not hesitate to do what is required. We strive for peace and stability world-wide. Turkey is located in a volatile region and whether it is high profile or low profile, we play an important part in maintaining stability in the Black Sea, southern Caucasus, and the wider Middle East.

To that end, we are making active contributions to efforts to bring lasting peace, stability and prosperity to regions ranging from our contingent of soldiers with ISAF in Afghanistan to the Balkans, Caucasus and the Middle East.

Taking part in global peace efforts is definitely nothing new for Turkey. We were an indispensable member of the NATO Alliance during the darkest years of the Cold War. This continues to be the case today when NATO is entrusted with much broader tasks. Close cooperation between EU and NATO has also become a key issue in recent times as the need grows for a more robust transatlantic partnership. This is something which we are very much in favour of. In fact, the modalities for such cooperation have already been established.

Having said that, I must also emphasize that our efforts are not confined only to hard security issues.

As the 16th largest economy in the world, we strive for ushering in a better global economic structure through our participation in the G-20, while being equally punctilious on issues like curbing global warming, combating terrorism and other forms of cross border criminal activity, ensuring sustainable energy supplies, promoting harmony among different civilizations and eradicating poverty.

Furthermore, Turkey is energetically extending a helping hand to developing countries struggling to overcome chronic problems. This reflects our strong desire to make at least a modest contribution to the global efforts towards the betterment of mankind in all respects. As a newly industrialised nation, we know how hard it is to make the breakthrough from a traditional agrarian society to a modern industrial one and how heavy the human cost can often be.

As a starting point, we have adopted a bold stance aiming to free our relations with our neighbours from all problems. This may sound idealistic or utopian to those who think we live in a Hobbesian world of hard realities, rather than a Kantian one of “perpetual peace”. We are as aware of the realities as anybody else. However, we do not believe that either human beings or states are hopelessly incapable of settling their differences peacefully.

All it takes is a leap of faith, inducing the parties in dispute to embrace a simple fact: when there is enough trust, confidence and goodwill displayed by both sides, solving disagreements does not have to be a “win-lose” or “lose-lose” proposition.

On the contrary, simply by walking half of the way towards their counterpart with arms extended for a sincere handshake, they are removing maybe the most important obstacle to agreement, which is the psychological barrier. If this Rubicon can be crossed, there is a good chance that even a unilateral call for dialogue will be reciprocated, mutual trust will snowball and the parties will be propelled towards their elusive settlement, which is of course the final product of a give and take exercise. Let me now try to give you a sense of how this philosophy played itself out in our case.

The earliest successes were achieved with our Balkan neighbours. Just look at our deepening partnership with Greece. The process of dialogue between the two countries, now a decade old, continues. We have adopted a number of confidence building measures, set up many mechanisms of cooperation and presided over a boom in economic, financial and cultural relations. This has been a “win-win” situation for both sides. Likewise, Bulgaria and Romania, once our adversaries during the Cold War period are nowadays our NATO allies. Recently we have even brought together Bosnia and Serbia.

As for the current UN process which has been continuing for the last two years, the Turkish side has remained one step ahead sparing no effort for an early settlement to bring peace, stability and an environment of cooperation to the Eastern Mediterranean.

In our view, it is a fact that today we are all facing the complications of the unilateral EU accession of the Greek Cypriot Administration, before a solution. A comprehensive settlement will not only benefit the two sides in the Island but also the EU and Turkey. We expect the EU to fulfill the European Council decision of 26 April 2004 and put an end to the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots. This will also help the efforts for reaching a comprehensive settlement

Turkish-Russian relations constitute today an integral component of our multidimensional foreign policy. We have also initiated the “Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform” in order to serve as a unique, regionally owned forum which could help the settlement of regional problems through dialogue. We have taken bold steps in the normalization of our relations with Armenia though the process came to an abrupt stop last April with an announcement by President Sarkissian. We hope that it can be resumed.

We encourage our neighbour Iran to adopt a more cooperative and transparent stance regarding its nuclear program.

Iraq on the other hand, is in a state of transition standing on its own feet after the US withdrawal. Our aim is to ensure that Iraq succeeds in this. A united and democratic Iraq, assuming its rightful place within the community of nations, would constitute a true success for us in Turkey as well. To the west of Iraq, our relations with Syria have improved remarkably in recent years.

Permanent peace in the Middle East is one of the main keys to a peaceful and stable future in the world. Tension there, have always had serious and adverse strategic consequences for the rest of the world. Therefore, Turkey always supported all efforts to reach a comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

But there are so many upsets in the region. One of the most unnecessary came on May 31st with the attack by the Israeli armed forces on the international humanitarian aid convoy in high seas. I invite those who are in any doubt about what happened then to read the report of the Geneva-based UN Council on Human Rights. The attack and the nine deaths, including 23 serious injuries to which it gave rise was an unacceptable act in clear violation of international law. Turkey is seeking an honest and fair peace with Israel, mainly through the UN Panel established for this purpose. This has to involve an apology and the payment of compensation. We believe that this is neither excessive nor impossible. If it happens then Turkey has committed itself to restoring bilateral ties between the two countries and normalizing relations. I think there is more than a sporting chance that things will turn out this way.

In short, we deem ourselves a party to any effort, anywhere, that seeks peace, stability and prosperity. We believe that this is a responsibility for every civilized and modern country.

In fact it is this tenacity that perhaps contributed to our election with overwhelming support to the United Nations Security Council a year ago. As a member of this august body, Turkey has been vigorously seeking the peaceful resolution of international disputes and striving towards the reinvigoration of a sense of collectivism, while promoting due compliance with international law and confidence in international organizations.

The road to global peace, stability and prosperity goes via creating local and regional blocks.

Regional integration is also a key driver of changes at the global level. And integrative movements, by definition, must be fair, inclusive and participatory. In that regard, there is one issue that is not just very important for Turkey, but also constitutes our national strategic goal.

I refer to our European Union accession process and I believe that it is also closely watched also by the Belgian public, especially nowadays that Belgium is conducting the EU presidency.

Our Prime Minister Mr Recep Tayyip Erdoğan reaffirmed our commitment to this goal only a few days ago. In Ankara the Turkish EU Secretary General's Office, headed by Mr Egemen Bağış, one of our most capable ministers and a close associate of the Prime Minister, is engaged in the immense work of adopting the Acquis Communautaire: but we are far advanced in this. If we were only allowed to do we could complete the negotiations in the same space of time as other candidates and perhaps more effectively than some for we are a country with a deep administrative capacity and of course we have that fourteen year old Customs Union with the EU, something no other candidate has ever had during negotiations

In this context let me briefly touch upon our relations with Belgium: Turkey and Belgium continue to share close ties and common perspectives on a wide range of international issues and global challenges.

There are around 200.000 Turkish nationals calling Belgium their home. Our bilateral trade volume has reached 6 billion Euros in 2008. Although this level contracted to 5 billion in 2009 due to the global economic downturn, we are optimistic about the future prospects of our trade relations.

There are more than 200 Belgian companies operating in Turkey. About 600.000 Belgian citizens have traveled to Turkey last year.

Returning to EU matters; we have embarked on this journey a considerable time ago, and I have to admit, at times things did not go as smoothly as one would have wished for. There have been two recent turning points in our relations: the Helsinki Summit decision of December 1999, whereby Turkey was declared a candidate country, and the subsequent step to open negotiations with Turkey in October 2005. In recent years; Turkey has launched a national mobilization to do what needs to be done. “Ownership” has become our motto in the accession process. Every Ministry, every state institution, the academia, the civil society is engaged with a view to bringing all of our country into this modernization project.

We have adopted significant reforms, not only to fulfil the necessary criteria, but also to ensure a better and more modern lifestyle for our people. We will continue with these reforms without hesitation.

But I have to emphasize that there are two sides to this bargain. The performance of the Union in fulfilling its share unfortunately falls far short of our expectations. The general impression in Turkey is that discussions in Europe are often marked by an overall tendency to resort to unfriendly stereotypes that in no way reflect today’s realities.

Many observers list Turkey's gains from membership while overlooking how Europe would also benefit greatly from it. This is far from being fair. There are those who even suggest alternatives to our future membership.

Allow me to be crystal clear on this matter: there is no alternative option. The goal was full membership on equal terms with other members when the process started and it has always remained the same.

Once becoming a member of the European Union, Turkey's contribution to Europe will be much greater and definitely more positive than some segments of European public opinion currently believe.

With Turkey as a member, the EU will in fact be a stronger economic, military and political player at the global level. Turkish membership will enable the EU to be more effective in areas targeted by its neighbourhood policy, as well as in volatile but strategic regions like the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Our EU membership will also help the West in its ability to promote stability, security and prosperity around the world, not to mention Turkey's essential role in energy security.

I should also mention Turkey's role as a catalyst in bridging the gap between East and West, Islam and Christianity through intercultural dialogue. With Turkey on board, I firmly believe that the cultural diversity and human fabric of the European Union will be enhanced, in turn bolstering the vision of a Europe whole and free. For example to promote tolerance and harmony, Turkey, along with Spain has initiated the Alliance of Civilizations initiative. The process is gathering great support world-wide and has become a major United Nations initiative, with the participation of more than one hundred countries and international organizations.

I am aware that such arguments, however truthful, may appear abstract to ordinary men and women in European streets, who are understandably more concerned about their jobs and wages.

Let me tell them this: With its large domestic market, growing investment opportunities and educated human resources, Turkey's economy is far from having reached the zenith of its capabilities. Despite periodical global crises, we are steadily making progress towards our goal; which is to make Turkey one of the 10 biggest economies in the world by 2023, the centenary of our Republic. (This year our growth rate is now only comparable to China, exceeding %11).

Turkey has also evolved into an emerging donor country for aid. With the contribution of Turkey-based NGOs, our overall development assistance exceeds 1½ billion Dollars annually.

This means that Turkey will be a generator of investments, jobs and economic growth for many decades to come.

It also means that rather being a burden on the EU, Turkey will take some of the burden off EU's shoulders.

To the extent that European public opinion is able to forge a better and comprehensive understanding of the real meaning of Turkey's accession to the EU, our membership will be within our reach. I sincerely believe that we owe this to the coming generations. Official efforts cannot do this alone, no matter how willing they may be. A lot depends on the activities of non-governmental organizations, press and academia.

The existence of many famous European institutions like the KUL is indeed an assurance for a stronger and more prosperous European Union.

Their educational activities give students a sense of European identity and lead them through the gates of first-hand interaction and experience with each other's culture. I am confident that by working with our friends in Europe, we will be able to realize a better future which is from my point of view is a Union with Turkey in it.

The ancient philosopher Epictetus (who was a native of Hieropolis, Phrygia-today's Pamukkale) said that only the educated are free. I call on you to retain a free and open mind on Turkey.

Thank you
