

Summary: The main focus of the January Trilateral Strategy Group meeting was to confront the expectations of participants that “Western” views could be defined on a number of issues, with what seems to be a more complex reality; despite a shared preference for a continued unity of the West in order to solve these problems and, more generally, to provide an anchor of stability to the international system, it is apparent that policymakers and governments tend to think and act less “Western” than ever before. Natural as the assumption of Western commonality of interests and unity of purpose was for a “transatlanticist” group like ours, it seems increasingly challenged by events, and that reality could not fail to influence our discussion.

Turkey, Europe, and the United States in a Multipolar World

by Gilles Andréani¹

A less Western world? A less Western West?

The background events to the meeting of the Trilateral Strategy Group spoke by themselves: in the weeks before, the U.S. president had failed to attend the celebration ceremonies of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall; whatever agreement could be reached at the UN Copenhagen summit on climate change had been the product of a rather succinct negotiation between the United States and China, not of any meaningful transatlantic deliberation; the new U.S. strategy on Afghanistan released in December after agonizing debates within the administration seemed a delicate balancing act between the requirements of U.S. commanders on the ground and Obama’s political constraints at home, in which the allies’ input played no visible part. The new assertiveness of China has been the most prominent international development of the last few months, and it is not clear that any attempt has been made to devise a common analysis—not to mention any common policy—among the main Western partners of China in response to what is likely to become the single most important foreign policy issue in the decades ahead.

This context, I believe, is going to inform the trilateral process in the future: on a

number of issues, its implicit purpose is to compare views that are assumed to emanate from three distinct quarters of the same geopolitical entity: the “West,” i.e. Europe, the United States, and Turkey. As the latter is unquestionably the main center of interest of the group, questions naturally arise as to “how Western is” Turkey, or “how congruent with the West” some of its policy choices are. These could have been relatively straightforward issues against the background of clearly defined Western attitudes and policies; they are much less so now that Western unity seems both less present, and perhaps less needed. To further add to the complexity of the situation, differences on this central, but unspoken, issue—the unity and purpose of the West—manifested themselves among participants from the European Union and the United States, as well as from Turkey.

Turkey’s options in a multipolar world

That complexity was apparent in the first session on risks and challenges. Seen from the United States and Europe, threats could emanate from accidents, miscalculations, or internal strife in key countries such as Pakistan, and could be seen, by and large, as surprises in an otherwise stable world. For the Turkish participant, they tended to be a function of deeper,

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tectonic forces: power was being redistributed to the benefit of rising countries (China, Russia, and Turkey among them). Such countries could become revisionist countries, and Turkey could be a “good candidate” in this respect, but there were commonalities of interests between rising and status quo countries, e.g. between China and the United States, or Russia, and the European Union that could prevent such an outcome.

That vision presented us squarely with the prospect of an emerging Turkey that could still develop commonalities of interest with the West, for instance through its aspiration to EU membership, but also had potential to challenge the existing Western-dominated order alongside other emerging powers. Some other Turkish participants spoke firmly of a Turkey anchored in the West, but a more prevalent view, it seems to me, was for most to present Turkey as a country with a plurality of options and perhaps of destinies. Being a Western power was one among them, and it was not an “either-or” option. Turkey could be both European and Middle Eastern in its orientation, enjoy privileged relations with the United States and with her neighbors in her region, etc. From that followed a “multi-dimensional” policy, a term that echoes the self-described “multi-vectored” policy of Russia. Russia has used the term since the 1990s to similarly describe its aspiration to a foreign policy that did not confine itself to one set of privileged relations, but had a wide span of options corresponding to Russia’s world stature. The point was made in a later discussion that Russia had become Turkey’s principal trade partner, and that trade with her neighbors now exceeded that with the European Union.

In that description, however, two further clarifications would need to be made: is this the wish on the part of Turkey to diversify its options and relations within the framework of essentially unchanged strategic priorities, i.e. NATO and the European Union, or is this a search for genuine alternatives to these priorities? How much of that stems from the understandable wish to demonstrate to Turkey’s traditional Western partners that it has choices of its own, in case Turkey does not get what it wants from them, especially from the European Union? (A lot, it would seem to me, but that issue was laid to rest in our discussions.)

Altogether, whatever the deeper motives of the new outlook of Turkish foreign policy might be, it is unlikely to find in the newly improved sets of relations with its neighbors in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Russia the substance of a serious alternative to its current Western partnerships. Ironically, the

player with the most serious ability to develop a “multi-vectored” policy today would be neither the European Union nor Turkey, but the United States. It can be said that the Obama administration has given quiet but unmistakable signs that it wishes to de-emphasize the traditional “Western” alignments of U.S. foreign policy, its protests to the contrary notwithstanding. By virtue of his own extraordinary destiny, and as a function of his foreign policy choices, President Obama can be seen as the first “global” U.S. president.

The Trilateral Strategy Group then went on to discuss three key foreign policy issues: Afghanistan, the Middle East peace process, and Iran. The latter seemed to be the issue with the most serious potential to single out Turkey from its Western partners.

Afghanistan: Less unity of purpose but not yet a lost cause

Afghanistan as a political issue seems to be much more salient in the United States than anywhere else. There, it is being used to hold the president’s policy to his electoral discourse (Afghanistan a “right” war of self-defense, unduly neglected to the benefit of a needless war of choice, Iraq) and to measure up his actions as a foreign policy and military leader. Against this backdrop, he has had to reconcile the need to answer to the pressing—and public—requests of his principal military commander in the field; the growing recognition that there are very strong limits to what military means can achieve in Afghanistan; and his party’s aspiration to develop an exit strategy. He came out with a strategy that reconciles as best as he could these three elements, namely a “surge, civilize (the mission), and exit” strategy.

It seemed that Turkey did not see this issue and the likely results of the new U.S. strategy any differently than any other European government did. They were there in the first instance to demonstrate solidarity with the United States and punish the accomplices of the 9/11 outrage; they are skeptical as to the eventual outcome of the mission and would rather lower its objectives than increase the size of their forces; some of them operate under political pressures to leave (e.g. the Netherlands) but most (and that includes Turkey) are prepared to keep their forces in the field for an extended period of time. They would insist that Afghanistan’s neighbors be given more of a stake in whatever success can be achieved there, and would support a strategy more inclusive of the Pashtuns. They doubt that the decision to encompass Afghanistan within a broader “Afpak” context can make a meaningful difference.

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What does that mean for NATO? It makes the Europeans vulnerable to the accusation that they did not respond to Obama's foreign policy changes by showing a commensurate display of solidarity in the field (an accusation that allows his opponents to illustrate the president's "naiveté" as much as the European's lack of courage). On the other hand, one may find it rather remarkable that the Europeans, under these circumstances and despite their deep skepticism, have continued to sustain and even increase their commitment to a mission that does not directly concern their security and on which they exert the smallest possible influence.

The implications of a Middle East without a peace process

Throughout the Middle East peace process, the Europeans have witnessed the spectacular rebalancing of U.S. policy, and welcomed it: the contest between the Obama administration and Israel's Netanyahu government on the settlement freeze, followed by the latter's victory and the lowering of expectations on the U.S. side, under the guise of a newfound "realism" of the administration on the issue. This has been a sorry development seen from the European Union and, I presume, Turkey, and probably the one that did the most to erode the Europeans' confidence in Obama's leadership. They know, however, that they cannot compensate for that situation, and that the best chance of progress on Israel-Palestine still lies with a continued U.S. involvement, albeit at a reduced level. They are looking for options that would draw in Arab countries and reaffirm the basic outlines of a two-state solution, with the immediate priority being to alleviate the economic and humanitarian situation in occupied territories and Gaza. The question of Obama's personal involvement in the process remains, short of which there is no conceivable prospect of progress. He has been bruised by his first experience (although probably more outside the United States than within). Will he try again?

In that context, the European Union and the United States are concerned by the evolution of the relationship between Israel and Turkey. While the outrage expressed by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the Israeli operation in Gaza was a genuine reflection of widespread popular feelings, it is fair to say that Turkey's alienation would contribute to the isolation of Israel in its own region, in itself not a positive context for progress in the peace process. The Israelis have themselves done much to bring about that result, but Turkey should not satisfy itself with the current situation.

Iran: The most immediate challenge

On Iran, there is currently a high level of convergence between the European Union and the United States, which both support UN-mandated, or by default Western-coordinated, sanctions, although there is a strong European preference for the former. There are some signs that the Russians could be mildly supportive of sanctions, while the Chinese position worryingly hardens. In this context, the Turkish position will be a key one both for the outcome in the UN and beyond, especially at the stage of implementation. The plea in the meeting that "regional problems should receive regional solutions as a matter of priority" would not seem to open a realistic solution to the Iranian problem. On the other hand, it might help if countries in the region, including Turkey made more known their dislike of the nuclear ambitions of Iran. That would take steam out of the Iranian argument that the nuclear issue is one between them and the West. For instance, they could reaffirm that they subscribe to the goal of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East (also endorsed by the United States and the European Union) and that the character of Iran nuclear activities compromise that goal. It would also serve as an implicit answer to the "Israeli argument" put forward by the Iranians, and not without echoes in the region, including in Turkey.

It would seem highly unlikely that Turkey would depart from the Western consensus in the UN Security Council, but bridging the gap between that outcome and the current Turkish policy pronouncements will require political deftness. More problematic would be a situation where sanctions would be agreed to outside the UN among like-minded countries. While there would seem to be more options open to Turkey in such a situation, the trade dimension of such sanctions would make it an EU affair, which in turn could impact the relations between the European Union and Turkey. At any rate, the current gap in perceptions and interests on the Iranian nuclear program between Turkey on one hand, and the European Union and the United States on the other, has the potential to affect their relations, especially in the case of sanctions.

Russia: Divergent analyses, shared impotence

On Russia, there is widespread concern about the political dynamics within (a rampant authoritarianism and a reduced prospect that Russian President Dmitry Medvedev could embody a more "modern" and "liberal" option within the Russian system) and beyond (the style of Russian diplomacy is increasingly defi-

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ant, cannot be changed from outside, and leaves only little space for genuine dialogue and cooperation).

There is, however, a deep divide on how to address that situation. Some, mainly within the United States and, to some extent, the European Union, advocate a policy that would combine the following features: ignore or isolate Russia; deal with its neighbors to consolidate them as much as possible; and deal with the Russians on the basis of strict reciprocity, for they essentially expect all concessions to come from others. An opposite school of thought combines the desire to engage Russia, devise structural frameworks to that effect, and explore the potential of economic interaction to further bind Russia to—especially—Europe, but also the United States. These two schools of thought were represented in the meeting by EU and U.S. participants; no Turkish voice was heard in favor of the former.

Do the principled arguments on which policy to adopt towards Russia, contrasted as they may be, bear any relation to the practical options which are really available? In the real world, is there an alternative to continued engagement and negotiation? The style of our interaction with Russia may change (the Obama “reset” policy bears witness to that), but the content will be dictated by facts—Iran, energy needs, Afghanistan—which do not allow us to ignore Russia, and which inevitably determine a combination of conflicting and diverging interests that diplomacy will seize and try to make the best of. In this context, the “engaged” school of thought may delude itself that Russia will let itself be transformed by the network of interactions and exchanges that it advocates establishing with that country. It should certainly lower the level of expectations that its vocabulary (especially on the EU side) conveys, and it could do without additional “common spaces”, “strategic partnerships” and the like. As for the “neo-containment” school of thought, it seems even more detached from reality. It is based on the premise of a fundamental estrangement of values and interests between Russia and the West, in itself a debatable proposition, and does not offer much beyond taking stock of that estrangement and leaving it at that.

Perhaps the best would be to leave both schools aside and do what the Russians themselves are ready to accept, i.e. give and take on the basis of reciprocity, recognizing Russia for what it is: a difficult but necessary partner. A practice of

diplomacy rather than a soul searching or transformative exercise, not unlike what Turkey seems to be currently doing with Russia.

Turkey and the EU: Still a way but less will

The final session of the meeting was devoted to the European Union and NATO. The EU’s ability to be more relevant to the solution of major international problems after Lisbon was questioned, especially on the US side, and justifiably so. On the other hand, the United States does not seem to have enough partners in the world who are ready to support it that it can dispense with the Europeans, and following Obama’s recent tour in Asia, one wonders where support is going to come from in region. By default it looks like Europe remains its closest partner for the United States. In international politics, like in domestic politics, one should never lose sight of their base.

A diminished priority for the United States, will the European Union—and specifically the accession process—remain Turkey’s foreign policy decisive priority? Turkish participants in the meeting seemed to convey two messages: on the one hand it read “it remains our priority and it is intolerable that we should be kept waiting” on the other hand “don’t delude yourselves, we have a choice, and we could well lose interest in EU membership.” To the first message, it was clearly answered that serious obstacles in the accession process stemmed from the slowing pace of reforms in Turkey. The second one deserves serious consideration for, beyond its obvious tactical or pride dimensions, it begs a broader question: have Turkey, and specifically the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, fully measured the transformative effect of EU accession, and have they decided to go all the way down that road? Observers have pointed out that so long as the EU accession process helped the AKP undo the Kemalist power structure, it supported it. It now has to evaluate the impact of completing that process on its own power base and on the functioning of state institutions which it now largely controls. The further liberalization of state and society, the social impact of further reform in Turkey, and the ultimate objectives of the AKP remain matters of considerable debate in Turkey. Just as the European Union is rightly hesitant about Turkey’s accession, it is not unfair to question Turkey’s own commitment to the process at this critical junction.

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The agenda of the meeting fully covered the ground that the subject called for. It was a well-conceived program where all major aspects of the issue found a place. The only issue which perhaps was not properly discussed was the role of Turkey in NATO, and its stance on the EU-NATO relations. In further meetings, the priority, it seems, should be deepening rather than widening the issues that were addressed in Stockholm. A first priority could be explore key regional challenges in the vicinity of Turkey: Iran, Iraq, Israel-Palestine stand out as obvious subjects in that context, as well as the broader strategic perspectives for the region, as seem from each of the three quarters represented in the group.

At a later stage, there would seem to be good reasons to address the internal evolutions of Turkey, which were hardly touched upon this time. On the relation between the current majority and the military, on the Kurdish issue, realities seem to move fast and tend to be easily mischaracterized in Europe and in the United States, while they remain the object of contradictory and at times passionate explanations from within Turkey. It would be worth trying to put these issues in perspective, with the help, if needed, of independent scholars and observers from Turkey.

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About the Trilateral Strategy Group

The Trilateral Strategy Group is a core convening activity of GMF's Mediterranean Policy Program, and is conducted in partnership with TUSIAD (the Turkish Businessmen's and Industrialists' Association), Koç Holding, and the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The group meets roughly twice each year, and brings together policymakers, experts, and opinion shapers from Turkey, Europe, and the United States to discuss a changing menu of strategic topics in "trilateral" perspective. Group was held in Stockholm, January 28-30, 2010.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) is a nonpartisan American public policy and grantmaking institution dedicated to promoting greater cooperation and understanding between North America and Europe. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working on transatlantic issues, by convening leaders to discuss the most pressing transatlantic themes, and by examining ways in which transatlantic cooperation can address a variety of global policy challenges. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 through a gift from Germany on the 25th anniversary of the Marshall Plan as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has seven offices in Europe: Berlin, Bratislava, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, and Bucharest.