Turkey's democratic steps have a lot in common with US interests

YINICA PEÇETÖR DÖĞAŞ, ISTANBUL

Michael Weizen, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress (CAP), a liberal think tank in Washington, D.C., has said if Turkish society continues on its path of democratic reforms and vigorous public debate about its future, it will play an important role in the region where it has a lot of interests in common with the United States.

"Turkey is engaged in developing its foreign and domestic policies for the coming decades. Since the foreign policy and the exercise of Turkish power are tied to a democratic political process, it will have a lot of contact points with US interests and politics in the region," he said. The Turkish government has been breaking taboos in a dialogue concerning the country's own interests, including the Kurdish problem, he started.

Schools closed in Ankara after first death from H1N1

HARVAN SAGÜNDÜ, ANKARA

Turkey, which has documented slowly increasing numbers of swine flu cases since it was first discovered in the country in May, recorded its first fatality from the virus on Saturday. A 26-year-old man, Murat Çelik, died at the Atatürk Sanatorium after being misdiagnosed and treated for pneumonia. After the death of Çelik, Antakya Governor Khalettin Oral announced that the government had decided to suspend primary and secondary schools in the capital for seven days from Monday on to ward against the further spread of H1N1 in the city.

Oral advised parents to not send their children to other educational programs such as private courses. The governor also said they will consider the situation next weekend and will share their decision on whether to extend the school closures with the public.

Two suicide car bombs exploded in downtown Baghdad on Sunday, killing at least 136 people and delivering a powerful blow to the heart of the city's government in the worst attack of the year, officials said. While violence has dropped dramatically in the country since the height of the sectarian tensions, such bombings like Sunday's demonstrate the precarious nature of the security gains and the insurgency's ability to still pull off devastating attacks in the center of what is supposed to be one of Baghdad's most secure areas. Black smoke could be seen billowing from the frantic scenes, as emergency service vehicles sped to the area. Even civilian cars were being commandeered to transport the wounded to hospitals. The walls collapsed and "we had to run out," said Samir Almakh, 24, an employee of the Baghdad provincial administration, which was targeted by one of the car bombs. "We were many wounded, and I saw them being taken away. They were pulling victims out of the rubble, and rushing them to ambulances."

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Government halts return of PKK-affiliated groups to Turkey

The government has decided to halt the return of individuals linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) for a time in order to reassess the democratization process due to agitation among various segments of society. "We don't have any right to destroy one part while trying to construct the other part," Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was quoted as saying on Saturday.

The PKK, declared over the weekend that they will not send additional groups to surrender to authorities, last Monday eight members of the PKK and 26 people from the Maldamene refugee camp, which is considered by Antakya to be a hotbed for the PKK, turned themselves in to Turkish security forces. After initial interrogations, they were released and received a festive welcome, leading to criticism from many segments of society, including the government and opposition parties.

INVESTMENT DECLINES
BY TL 61.6 BLN AS PRIVATE INVESTING FALLS IN 2009

3 Total investment in Turkey is expected to register a decline of TL 61.6 billion this year, ranging in TL 148.7 billion at the end of 2009 year-end, mainly due to a drop in private sector investment. According to the State Planning Organization's (DPT) "General Economic Goals and Investments" report for 2010, total private sector investment is expected to fall from TL 148.7 billion in 2009 to TL 107.8 billion this year. The total amount of public investment, which was TL 40.6 billion last year, is not predicted to change much this year, increasing slightly to TL 40.9 billion. The report forecasts a decline in total investment from TL 231.3 billion last year to TL 148.7 billion this year.

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TURKEY'S DEMOCRATIC STEPS HAVE A LOT IN COMMON WITH US INTERESTS

Michael Werz, senior fellow at the Center for American Progress

His work focuses on climate change, nuclear security and, as well as transatlantic foreign policy including Turkey. Previously, he was a senior transatlantic fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States and served as the executive director of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung in Istanbul. He is currently the visiting scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C., and as a John F. Kennedy Memorial Fellow at Harvard’s Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies.

In one of your recent research papers, you wrote about how future US policies will be determined by the balance in the region between the Soviet-Camp and India. You write: “There is a very clear indication that the 21st century will be the Pacific century. On top of that, the USA for the foreseeable future will be pendant, militarily and geopolitically, to the region between the Soviet-Camp and India. One possible consequence of the behavior we have mentioned so far is that Europe will be pushed geopolitically and politically from the centers to the margins in terms of global importance if its conscious effort is not made to establish a balance between Atlantic and Pacific together with the USA.”

Where does Turkey fit into that picture?

Indeed, the Pacific will become a much more dynamic entity and will connect Latin America, North America, Southeast Asia and East Asia in a much more intense way. If the Pacific moves into the center of world history, this means that the European world will always be in the shadow. However, Turkey has a peculiar role and it has a lot to offer not only to the United States, but also to the region and Europe. It is uniquely situated geographically and geopolitical, which makes it the exception to the rule of increasing geopolitical rivalry. In addition, it is a large country with 70 million people which has had a petty stable economic development over the last 15 years. Another important difference is that the EU countries and Russia is a young population - in the demographic setup, Turkey is a future-oriented nation. And Turkey continues the path of democratic reforms and vigorous public debate about its future, which play an important role.

One further point: To develop successful foreign policy in Turkey, you have to be very sophisticated because it is surrounded by no different countries. It is impossible just to say this is the unchangeable principle of the Turkish foreign policy and we are going to apply it blindly, whether it is Greece, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Russia. It is not going to work. It has to develop a differentiated, complex and approach to each and every one of its neighbors and also take into account how they relate to each other. This is a very complicated region and it is much more challenging to do foreign policy in Turkey than it is in Belgium, France or Germany. Turkey succeeds in persuading politicians and policy makers that we are able to negotiate in this complex environment, and it will have a class of people uniquely qualified to be leaders in international organizations and able to understand ethnic, religious and other non-traditional conflicts.

So you see, Turkey is a democratic society and it will decide on its own where its interests lie. But it is certain that the country will be growing in importance. For example, from Washington's perspective, it is obvious that Turkey has become a much more important player in maintaining the balance of security and stability for Europe and for the Western Alliance. Again, this has to do with the country's geographic location in the center of many dynamics that will be important for both Europeans and Americans. I think one can see that there are great expectations that Turkey will continue to be a constructive voice vis-a-vis the ravishment of Israel and Syria and that Turkey will play a role in helping to frame and discuss the greater Middle East stability initiatives.

In being Turkey today, it is impossible to miss that many things are happening at the same time; from a casual conversation with the PKK to broader opening discussions with America to a very public debate about the Treaty of 1967. This indicates that Turkey is engaged in developing its foreign and domestic policies for the future. Under this foreign policy and the exercise of Turkish power are tied to a democratic political process. This is a great lesson of contact points with US interests and policies in the region.

Balancing democracy and change

Is it possible to talk about a set foreign policy in Turkey?

Turkey is not the only country trying to meet several challenges simultaneously, and the Foreign Ministry as well as the military for this task difficult. We must know Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's book "Strategic Depth." He is certainly someone approaching the practical ques- tions with a theoretical mindset. At the same time it is a very obvious that Turkey's foreign policy is set in stone; it is good, because there are existing alliances and problems in the immediate neighborhood. It will be interesting to observe how pragmatically Turkey's foreign policy adapts to new emerging challenges. I am not sure about joint cabinet meetings – but that again is a decision that will have to be made in Ankara and we are just ob- servers. It would be not to expect rapid outcomes and problems and I personally think it was not a good idea to dictate from the recent Atlantic Eagle Air Force exercise.

Obama will not limit himself to the use of soft power

Mr. Natanzahy recently said Turkey is not an honest broker. I don't think that was a helpful comment. On the other hand, one would hope that Turkey sees that its interests are tied to Israel in more ways than one. There are not only common security and national interests. These are the two stable and vital democracies in the region and it is impor- tant to realize that there is a lot of overlap and to deepen co- operation in as many fields as possible.

And Iran? Do you think the United States will con- tinue in its soft power approach in the face of Iran's nu- clear ambitions and anti-Israel stance?

This depends on Iran. Iran has the choice to return to the international community as a responsible stake- holder. No one doubts that Iran has the right to the peaceful use of nuclear power. But it is clear that the combination of political rhetoric and development of nuclear material is reason for more than just concern. In my opinion, the US president has made the right deci- sion to offer a conversation while at the same time not taking the military option off the table. Barack Obama has asked the European allies to support tougher sanc- tions and if something happens it will also depend up- on them. One could only hope that the countries that are interested in a peaceful solution will also do their part. The question is then whether the US administration will be able to play an important role.

Do you see signs of it?

Well, let me make very clear that Turkey is a democratic so- ciety and will decide on its own where its interests lie. But it is certain that the country will be growing in importance. For example, from Washington's perspective, it is obvious that Turkey has become a much more important player in maintaining the balance of security and stability for Europe and for the Western Alliance. Again, this has to do with the country's geographic location in the center of many dynamics that will be important for both Europeans and Americans. I think one can see that there are great expectations that Turkey will continue to be a constructive voice vis-a-vis the ravishment of Israel and Syria and that Turkey will play a role in helping to frame and discuss the greater Middle East stability initiatives.

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