

INTERPRETING THE INTERPRETATION: CONTEMPORARY TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

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1. TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

Prof. Dr. Tansu Çiller interpreted the vitality of contemporary Turkish foreign policy (Perceptions, September-November 1996) as a traditionally peace-orientated foreign policy in a post-Cold War climate, outlining in particular possible successes and difficulties ahead in terms of co-operation, relations with the West, Russia, the Middle-East and Islamic countries and concluding with an impressive set of statistics with regard to the Turkish economy and the consolidation of democracy. I use the term interpreted in a specific, rather than throw-away sense.

Knowledge, or understanding of foreign policy within the discipline of international relations is, fundamentally, historical knowledge and therefore rests upon judgement and interpretation, rather than facts or data. This is not to say that facts or data are non-existent, but that facts get their importance from what is made of them in interpretation. Thus, no one disputes the fact that the Turkish Republic, since its foundation in 1923, has followed a consistent policy of protecting its national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity; there is however, a dearth of interpretative disagreement as to whether Turkish foreign policy has been as successful as it could have been in pursuing the aims noted above, along with its aim to attain a level of development and welfare in line with modern developed countries. In addition, a number of commentators, including politicians from the European Union (especially Greek) and an array of European journalists (especially Greek), have produced downright hostile interpretations of Turkish foreign policy.

Çiller's interpretation of the tradition of Turkish foreign policy as pursuing mutually beneficial harmonious relations with all countries, especially those surrounding Turkey, is contested by a number of foreign policy analysts, a significant number of pro-Greek politicians from the West and journalists alike. The Foreign Ministry in Greece, for instance, continually prods the international community with its powerful political lobby in the United States by arguing that Turkish policy regarding the Aegean and Cyprus is aggressive, expansionist and out of step with international morality. A number of hostile academics and journalists, furthermore, have interpreted a link between 'aggressive' Turk domestic policy and Turkish foreign policy.

2. PARADIGM SHIFT, INTEREST AND DIFFERENCE

The above, last point is interesting and has important overtones in the sense that, theoretically at least, the traditional distinction between any country's domestic and foreign policy, and the distinction between theory and practice (realism) has broken down in the face of intense theoretical activity resulting in a paradigm shift in international relations. A paradigm shift which has resulted in the acknowledgement, by and large, of the interdependence of domestic and foreign policy and the notion that theory is practice. And yet, this notwithstanding, interpretations of what is aggressive, both in terms of domestic and foreign policy (to grant a theoretical concession), are dependant on interest. The following example is clear enough. No academic, politician, or journalist simply happens upon Turkey, Turkish foreign policy, Turkish culture, or Turkish society. Rather, Turkey is encountered in the university (largely within the field of Middle-Eastern studies), or as a result of intense media attention in its fight with PKK separatists, or as result of a hostile tradition of commentary on Turkish affairs-not least from Greece and Syria. Therefore, the significant thing to be aware of when encountering such negative images of Turkey is their distance, having emanated from an outside culture and with no explicit acknowledgement of how such foreigners has shaped such an interpretation. A brief illustrative example will suffice here. A book published recently by the British journalist Tim Kelsey, *Dervish, the Invention of Modern Turkey (1996)*, is critical of Turk aggressive 'domestic policy with regard to its multi-ethnic population'. He argues that Turkey would be a far better and fairer nation if it were to return to the era of the Ottoman empire where people of different cultures and religions had autonomy over their own affairs-something like the old Ottoman millet system. He mourns all 'that is lost!' Aside from such

brehtaking historical naivete-set against the contemporary age of the nation-state, I might add that such an interpretation of where Turkey stands bears all the hall marks of an interpretation which is distant, historically uninformed and part-and-parcel of a view of Turkey as a 'hostile culture'. The author, at a point of departure, lacks even the basics of the historical development of modern Turkey, not least set out in Niyazi Berkes's scholarly text, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (1964). He obviously doesn't realise that the millet system was a system by which imperial powers divided and ruled a potentially fractious population, and as Çiller intimates in her opening remarks, the recent history of modern Turkey has been a struggle to progress beyond ethnic and religious divisions towards a unitary secular democracy. The sad thing here, is that this book has received a number of positive reviews. Of course, nothing is said in these reviews which questions his 'objectivity', his interest in writing this book. And in terms of the interest behind this author's interpretation, one can only surmise that this individual's own history, sensibility and curiosity in the subject of contemporary Turkey is tempered by such things as the promise of consultancy work on things Turkish, and indeed the need to 'prove' that Turkey in its present position is in a state of disrepair!

3. INTEREST: SYMPATHY OR HOSTILITY?

The above negative interpretation serves as a lesson to all commentators on Turkey, and that this lesson first of all is to be aware of the interest behind interpretations of Turkish foreign and domestic policy. It is obvious that conventions, associations, habits and values are a significant part of any interpretative process. In other words, there is no such thing as a value-free interpretation of Turkish domestic and foreign affairs. For a scholar to understand Turkish foreign policy involves a totally different sort of engagement with a subject area than that of the natural scientist decoding a chemical or biological formula. Above all else an interpretation of interest needs to interpret interest (an interpretation is always based on an interpretation, as a form of methodological self-questioning) in its dialectical aspect. In other words, the interest behind an interpretation of Turkish foreign policy is either based on an interest to put intellect in the service of hostile nationalism (e.g. Greek commentators on the 'Turk mentality', which is about as useful as the racist idea of a 'Negro mentality' in understanding the Civil Rights movement in the USA), or based on an interest to put intellect at the service of what Çiller called a peace-orientated foreign policy (e.g. Turkey maintaining mutually beneficial harmonious relations with all countries-made concrete by its present position as the only country which is a member of NATO, the OECD, the OSCE, the Council of Europe, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, the Economic Co-operation Organisation and the Black Sea Economic Co-operation all at the same time, along with associate member status of the European Union and the Western European Union).

4. CHOICE

The individual commentator on Turkish domestic and foreign affairs, then, ought to feel answerable to and in contact with the culture and policy under analysis (Kelsey and hostile Greek commentators are clearly not), and he or she has to develop a strong self-awareness of his or her interest which underpins the particular interpretation being offered. In the final analysis an interpretation is based on the willed intentional activity of the human mind-a mind which makes a choice which can be said to be a choice between hostility or sympathy. Interpretation must, therefore, be self-conscious in its methods and aims if it is to be alert and sensitive. Anti-Turk Greek commentary or roving journalistic inaccurate reporting are occasionally and seemingly more persuasive and influential, say in the United States or in the European Union, than other sympathetic interpretations of Turkish foreign policy. The success of this coverage, however, can be attributed to the political influence of those people and institutions producing it rather than to the truth or accuracy pertaining to the actual situation. Such hostile commentary on Turkish foreign and domestic affairs is not just a particular form of knowledge of Turkey but rather a particular interpretation which needs to be challenged and balanced in the way that Çiller has done.

5. SITUATION

Let me reiterate once again that in spite of behaviourist claims to the contrary, all knowledge concerning foreign policy is subject to 'unscientific' imprecision and to the circumstances of interpretation. In a strict sense furthermore all interpretations are situations: they always occur in

a situation whose bearing on the interpretation is linked to what other interpreters have said. Thus, in the case of contemporary Turkish foreign policy, what is interpreted as a successful, or a less or unsuccessful foreign policy will depend on what others have said (when writing about foreign policy one is not doing physics, and one cannot therefore aspire to the radical originality possible in that activity). How can one interpret another culture and its foreign and domestic context unless prior circumstances have made those policies available for interpretation in the first place? As a brief example of this point we can note that contemporary hostile Greek interpretations of Turkish foreign policy in the Aegean are inter-linked with past hostile interpretations, and these interpretations were linked to others. In other words, there is no escaping interpretation. As scholars, politicians and journalists, to make the point once more, we need to be honest and self-aware about our interests.

6. TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY: ON THE RIGHT TRACK

If I were to offer a brief interpretation of Turkish foreign policy based on a clear-cut choice I would put my intellect at the service of peace, of criticism, of community, and moral sense. The interest, moreover, behind my interpretation of Turkish foreign policy, would be that Turkish domestic and foreign policy must keep to the Kemalist maxim of 'Peace at home, peace abroad'. Such a moderating, moral influence is wanted by Turkey's friendly neighbours, especially by Russia which for the first time welcomes Turkish influence in the Central Asian republics, rather than a radical Islamic influence. Turkish policy in the Balkans furthermore should continue to be active in participating in the implementation of both the military and civilian aspects of the peace accords and also in the international efforts to reconstruct and rehabilitate Bosnia-Herzegovina. In addition, Turkey should continue to support the peace initiatives emanating within the OSCE Minsk group which has to maintain its efforts in seeking a peaceful solution to the Azeri-Armenian dispute. UN peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations should continue to receive a vital input from Turkey. Within the global economic arena, lastly, Turkey should continue emphasising the practice of economic interdependence as the best way forward for international peace and stability and above all else, co-operation.

In the above, detailed sense such traditional moderation has led Turkey into an enviable position. As Çiller said, 'Turkey is, today, a trusted and respected member of the international community whose friendship is sought by many'. My interpretation is thus self-consciously similar to that of the deputy prime minister and foreign minister, and the reason for this is that I am not writing about a distant culture but actively engaged in its everyday processes. I am also sympathetic to Çiller's line because I do not have an axe to grind over the Aegean, nor do I believe in the restoration of the millet system, and neither do I seek to be 'proved' correct (and neither I am I looking for consultancy work with regard to 'things Turkish'). In outlining these last points, finally, I have, like Çiller, made the interest behind my interpretation, however brief it may be, as transparent as possible. Others may need to do the same.