

Turkish FM sets out terms for Aegean

Ahmet Davutoglu suggests Kastelorizo should not be part of a package agreement



By Alexis Papachelas

Turkey's determination to improve relations with Greece is unwavering, insists Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in an exclusive interview with Kathimerini.

The top Turkish diplomat is hopeful that a comprehensive solution can be reached in the Aegean, indirectly leaving open the option of going to The

Hague. However, he insists that the island of Kastelorizo cannot be part of such a solution because it is in the Mediterranean, not the Aegean.

He also defends the right of Turkish warships' "harmless passage" through Greek waters near the coast, adding that Hellenic Navy vessels are welcome to do the same.

The Middle East is experiencing a period of popular revolts and unrest. How will this affect our region and the role of Turkey?

Turkey has deep-rooted cultural, religious and historical relations with the countries in the Middle East. We share the same geography with them and our destinies are intertwined to a large extent. We cannot think of our own security, stability and welfare apart from our neighbors in our immediate vicinity and beyond. Therefore, in accordance with our "zero problems with neighbors" policy, we have been trying to maximize cooperation and minimize problems with these countries. While doing so, we have also emphasized the importance of countries in the region facing up to its problems, and the need for reform and democratic transformation.

Therefore, recent developments in the Middle East did not come as a surprise to us. Actually, they were long overdue. Change and transformation in the Middle East started two decades ago in the aftermath of the Cold War. These developments show that meeting the legitimate aspirations of the peoples of the region can no longer be delayed. In a globalized world, where people have become more interconnected than at any other time in history and new social networking tools like Facebook and Twitter have rendered censorship almost impossible, the frustration of people with the autocratic regimes ruling them started finding means of expression. Now people are able to access information regarding democratic societies with which they can compare their own condition, and, as a result, demand the political and economic freedoms that they believe will bring them a higher standard of living. The Tunisian experience proved to be a case in point, where a single human being lit the spark that shook the entire nation with regional and global implications.

I believe that the process is irreversible now. It implies a paradigm shift on a global scale. There are huge opportunities and daunting challenges involved. If the transition process can be managed smoothly, the regional sociopolitical landscape will certainly change dramatically. However, much remains to be done to ensure an orderly transition to a fully functioning democracy and a rationalized economic system. Otherwise, protracted turmoil and instability cannot be ruled out. Therefore the international community needs to make concerted and integrated efforts to help the countries in transition to build their institutions and rehabilitate their economies.

The peace, stability and welfare of these countries, with which Turkey shares a common past, is of paramount importance to us. Turkey has always been of the opinion that sustainable stability can only be ensured through guaranteeing the welfare, prosperity and security of the people. In order to realize these objectives, it is essential that the fundamental rights and freedoms of the people are duly protected. In this regard, we believe that governments that will assume power in the post-revolutionary period need to be responsive to the demands of their people. Turkey, in this respect, will always be ready to share its own democratic experience, technical know-how and institutional accumulation with the countries of the region.

Turkey has become more critical of Germany and France. Do you believe that the European Union has now decided to reject Turkey, and, if so, how will this affect your foreign policy?

Our accession negotiations continue with the goal of membership on the basis of decisions taken unanimously by the members of the European Union, including Germany and France. Commitments made by member states are legally binding. Therefore, we cannot change the rules of the game right in the middle. The Council Conclusions taken together with Germany and France constitute legal and moral obligations. It is inaccurate to claim that the EU has decided to reject Turkey. In fact, the bloc continuously reaffirms its strong support for taking the enlargement process forward in general, and Turkey's accession process in particular. The member states are well aware of our government's strong determination toward achieving Turkey's strategic goal of EU membership.

Apart from very few member states, EU countries strongly support Turkey's accession process. Nevertheless, despite our efforts to make further progress, the pace of the accession negotiations does not correspond to the extent of our multidimensional and multilayered relations with the EU due to the political obstacles created by some members. These obstacles are not in the interest of those parties either. Turkey's negotiation process should be pursued in a visionary and constructive manner. In today's rapidly changing world, there is a growing need for a stronger Europe. I am convinced that Turkey has the potential and ability to help the EU take on its desired role and weight in global affairs, and advance the Union's internal and external interests. The goals and objectives of our foreign policy are in harmony with those of the EU.

Has business between Greece and Turkey increased? Was there specific interest by Turkish business leaders after Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to Athens last year?

When we look at the statistical data of our economic and trade relations, we observe

that the most concrete outcomes of the dialogue and cooperation between Turkey and Greece have been achieved in the field of economic and trade relations. For example, in the year 2000, the volume of bilateral trade stood at just \$870 million. In just a decade it more than tripled and amounted to nearly \$3 billion in 2010. Similarly, total foreign direct investment inflow from Greece to Turkey did not exceed \$56 million until 2001. In the last decade it has risen 116-fold to reach a spectacular \$6.5 billion in 2010. This is a concrete indication of how positively our business communities perceive the new climate of our relationship and how sure they are that there will be no turning back.

The Turkish-Greek business forum held during our prime minister's visit to Athens in May 2010 displayed the enthusiasm of Turkish and Greek business circles to increase mutual cooperation in various fields.

After Prime Minister Erdogan's visit to Athens in May 2010, business forums were held in Istanbul, Edirne, Thessaloniki and Komotini. Besides these, the 12th Meeting of the Turkish-Greek Working Group on Trade and Economic Cooperation and the fourth session of the Turkish-Greek Joint Economic Commission were held in Ankara last autumn. We are ready to further develop our economic cooperation in every field. We would like to see increased Turkish investment in Greece, which is far from satisfactory. Bilateral economic and trade relations can only develop mutually. If the necessary incentives are adopted in Greece this will certainly facilitate attracting Turkish investment.

Settlement of disputes over territorial waters

Are Turkey and Greece close to a comprehensive agreement on the Aegean issues?

Turkey is determined to explore every avenue to attain a comprehensive and lasting settlement on all Aegean issues, as it believes that the Aegean should be a sea of friendship and cooperation between our two countries. Settlement is a prerogative if we are to further improve our bilateral relations. Yet it will only be functional and lasting if it is mutually acceptable and built on a common denominator, that is respecting the fundamental rights and legitimate interests of both countries. That is why the exploratory talks have been carried out in such a diligent manner by both sides. It is no secret that these talks had lost momentum for a long time. But thanks to our prime ministers, since last May we have given a new and fresh impetus to this exercise in a result-oriented manner.

I am therefore confident that the newly energized exploratory process is progressing toward a commonly desired objective and will eventually lead us to agree on peaceful ways to address and finally resolve all outstanding Aegean issues. I should also add that we do not rule out any means of peaceful settlement to be based on both countries' consent.

A lot has been written in the press about potential oil and natural gas reserves in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. Do you share these estimates? Is joint Greek-Turkish exploration and exploitation of these resources a goal for you?

Turkey and Greece already cooperate extensively in the energy field. We would like

to further enhance and deepen our energy relations.

The implementation of the Turkey-Greece section of the Interconnector Turkey-Greece-Italy (ITGI) added a new dimension to our existing cooperation in the field of energy. The completion on time of the Greece-Italy connection, which is now scheduled for 2015, is of great importance. As for the exploration and exploitation of the potential oil and gas reserves in the Aegean Sea, we would be willing to take up the matter with Greece, provided that both parties agree on the legal and political terms.

Does Turkey object to the inclusion of Kastelorizo in a comprehensive deal? If so, why?

The exploratory talks process is purposefully mandated to deal with the outstanding issues in the Aegean. Therefore, our focus and priority is the Aegean. Yet the island of Kastelorizo is located in the Mediterranean. As to the island of Kastelorizo, Turkey has a well-considered political and legal position based on international law as well as the adjudication of relevant international tribunals, including those of the International Court of Justice. And we know that Greece and Turkey uphold different views with regard to their maritime jurisdiction areas in the Eastern Mediterranean. Notwithstanding the geographic relevance or other specificities, we would like to settle all our differences with Greece sooner than later.

Even though the two countries have come closer there seems to be no peace dividend in the Aegean. Greek authorities believe that is due to the fact that Turkey has raised the threshold of its operations. Do you see any potential for confidence-building measures that will lead to a peace dividend?

I truly believe that both Turkey and Greece should enjoy the benefits of a peace dividend and I see no reason why we shouldn't achieve this. That requires, in the first place, a change in the misleading threat perception of Greece against Turkey and of course the settlement of all Aegean issues. Pending the settlement, I see great merit in further developing confidence-building measures between the two countries through concrete and constructive ideas. That would not only serve to prevent potential tensions but also create a conducive atmosphere for the solution of all Aegean issues. In this respect, we are ready to work with Greece on such ideas, in particular those related to a code of conduct for military activities and the improvement of flight safety in the Aegean, without prejudice to our respective political and legal positions.

Naval routes and air force overflights

In recent years, Turkish warships have often appeared in areas that are very close to the Greek mainland. What is the purpose of these maneuvers? Will they continue, even though they creates a climate of distrust and anger among the Greek public?

This is not a new type of conduct by Turkey at all. Indeed, many Turkish naval vessels conducted similar passages through Greek territorial waters in the past. But to our disappointment the media and certain circles try to attribute a different meaning to those passages. I find them quite difficult to understand. As such they give the impression that Greece is gradually taking the position to fully shut off the

Aegean Sea to Turkey. I believe this is not the real intention of Greece.

Both Turkish naval and commercial vessels, like those of any other country, enjoy freedom of navigation in the Aegean Sea. This freedom is exercised both in high seas and in territorial waters. As far as territorial waters are concerned, the principle of “innocent passage” in international law regulates the passage which leaves no room for national interpretations.

The navigation routes followed by the Turkish naval vessels in the Aegean Sea and their conduct during the innocent passage fall entirely within the confines of international law and practices. I should also add that these passages pose no threat to Greece or any other country. Likewise, if a Greek warship conducts an “innocent passage” through Turkish territorial waters and even passes the Turkish mainland at a very close distance, Turkey will not react to it. On the contrary, we would welcome this ship to our ports and would like to offer a cup of coffee to her crew.

Does the same go for the flights over Greek islands such as Farmakonisi by Turkish jets?

The crux of what I have just said about the freedom of maritime navigation in the Aegean is also valid for air navigation. By the same token, military aircraft belonging to Turkey or any other country should enjoy freedom of navigation in international air space over the high seas in accordance with international law and practice. But if the international air space, be it in the Aegean, the Mediterranean or elsewhere, is regarded as a national air space or territory, this will be totally wrong in every sense and create problems, like those we have in the Aegean. We have to overcome this misperception on the part of Greek public opinion that has been generated over the years which I believe is a major stumbling block for the settlement of air issues in the Aegean. In that sense, the answer to your question is directly related to outstanding air issues in the Aegean such as the practice of differentiated national air space boundaries, the perception of FIR responsibility and to some extent the delineation of maritime boundaries in the Aegean. I am convinced that when we find a comprehensive solution to all the Aegean issues, that will render these topics meaningless, including the respective military flights of both countries in the Aegean.

Ankara’s relations with Turk Cypriots

There have been some tensions between Ankara and Turkish-Cypriot community. Do you believe this will affect the course of talks for a resolution on the Cyprus issue?

The government of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is currently pursuing reforms aimed at restructuring the TRNC economy and sustaining the fiscal balance. Turkey is collaborating with the TRNC government in implementing these economic reforms.

In the long run, these reforms will not only contribute to the amelioration of the economic situation in northern Cyprus but also to the aim of comprehensive settlement. Of course, in democratic states there will always be some reaction to economic measures taken by the government. You also experienced them recently in Greece.

However, in the demonstrations held on January 28, some fringe groups exploited the peaceful atmosphere and carried a few provocative banners that caused indignation both in northern Cyprus and in Turkey. The organizers and most of the Turkish-Cypriot political leaders have denounced the activities of these marginal groups. The majority of Turkish Cypriots were disturbed by these provocative actions and protested them heavily.

Therefore, the recent demonstration no way indicates that there is a tension between the TRNC and Turkey.

In keeping with its legal and moral rights and responsibilities stemming from the 1960 treaties on Cyprus, Turkey, as a guarantor power and motherland, has always stood by the Turkish-Cypriot people in their decades-long struggle to uphold their inherent rights on the island.

It goes without saying that Turkey's unwavering solidarity and political, economical and moral support for the Turkish-Cypriot people shall continue in the future.

Vision for the world

Some of the experts who have read your book on the Turkish foreign policy doctrine believe that this is a product of your power projection concept. Is that the case?

“Strategic Depth” is a book of analysis, describing and re-evaluating the strategic position of Turkey vis-a-vis a dynamic international background. The book intends to reflect an alternative, and a more realistic if I may, perspective for Turkey, by drawing a framework of strategic analysis at a time when both Turkey and the international system are going through intense transformations. It aims at drawing attention to the correlation and interaction between the theoretical dimension and the practical implementation areas of the strategic ground Turkey stands on.

Furthermore, “Strategic Depth” is an attempt to take a fresh look at our history and geography with a view to understanding its true potential and point at what could have been and what could still be its natural course. The book tries to present a strategic vision and a role for Turkey to pursue, by advocating a fresh approach called “strategic depth.” This approach calls for integration of the regions neighboring Turkey, since all people living in this wide region share the same destiny, based on their long common history.

Thus, my book is a call for developing a new strategic mind-set and foresees a strong role for Turkey to play toward this end. The role that Turkey is advised to play is one of promoting security for all, enhanced political dialogue, increased economic interdependence as well as cultural harmony and mutual respect. And this is indeed what we have been doing for the last eight years. We do so by leaning on our fast-growing economy, social dynamism, improved democratic standards, well-established set of values, rich cultural diversity and unique historical ties with a large number of countries in all four directions. These are also the elements of our growing soft power and, yes, one might very well see this whole endeavor as the projection of our soft power. That is something we will continue to do in the future, since the

countries and regions concerned not only benefit from it but they also request Turkey to bring its added value to the ongoing transformation in the region.