

Conference on “Greece-Turkey in the 21st Century

organized by

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Remarks by Ali Tuygan

The Course of Greek-Turkish Relations

Mr. President of the Centre for Progressive Policy Research,

Mr. Chairman,

Distinguished Guests, Friends, Colleagues,

I would like to start by thanking the Centre for Progressive Policy Research and its President, Minister Papantoniou for the kind and generous invitation to take part in this conference. It is always a pleasure to come back to Athens, the most enjoyable of all my foreign assignments and this is public knowledge, and to see friends of many years.

In preparing my statement I asked myself if I should go directly into today’s topic or make an attempt to provide a general setting. I decided that Greek-Turkish relations cannot be treated in isolation of the global environment, in particular the regional issues which dominate the international agenda and the cultural/mental background which has a deep impact on how these issues are perceived. So, if you allow me, Mr.Chairman, as an introduction perhaps, I would

like to make some observations on the international scene from a Turkish perspective, and the challenges we face.

9:11 was the day when people made the observation that the world will no longer be what it used to be. I think they were right.

Nine years ago we had the Middle East problem, now we have the Middle East-Afghanistan-Iraq triangle. I say "triangle" because the three are linked in many ways and share a certain background.

My last assignment abroad was UNESCO. The Constitution of UNESCO starts by the following : " ...since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed... a peace based exclusively upon the political and economic arrangements of governments would not be a peace which could secure the unanimous, lasting and sincere support of the peoples of the world and that if it is not to fail, it must be founded upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind..."

Do we see much of this when we look at this Middle East-Afghanistan-Iraq triangle? I regret to say "no". On the contrary, we see a vicious circle where internal and external problems feed on one another, creating rocky terrain in the minds of men where the defenses of peace need to be constructed.

The conflicts in this triangle have created a profound sense of disappointment among the peoples of the region. They have the feeling that they are not treated with justice. The West has not been able to address regional expectations. So much so that even the Western discourse on democracy is viewed with suspicion and is attributed to ulterior motives.

The sentiment in the West is not any better. 9:11 followed by other acts of terror in Europe, involvement of local individuals in these acts have not only underlined the urgency of internal/external security but has also created suspicions towards Muslim communities in the West. And now there is the question of growing resistance to what some call "a changing way of life".

Walls on both sides are rising.

The question then is “are we heading for a clash of civilizations?” Hopefully not, but nations must collectively do their best to avoid what I would call “border incidents of growing numbers and intensity”. How? First try to resolve these conflicts and secondly encourage intercultural dialogue. The latter will help but will not constitute a remedy by itself.

Since we generally agree that the spread of democracy will help overcome these political questions and problems of culture, identity then we also have to take into account the fact that democracy as it is defined and practiced in the West has also faced some challenges in recent years. This is essentially a by-product of the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Here, I am referring to the discussion regarding how much information was provided to or withheld from the public during the lead in to the Iraq war, and the alleged violations of human rights and international conventions in those two countries which have eventually become the subject of investigations.

Moreover, we now have the global economic crisis which is giving rise to strong criticism of certain aspects of the existing economic order on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond. Let us not forget that long before, but especially since the collapse of communism, the “free market” economy had become the twin sister of democracy. The two had become inseparable. Therefore, one should not overlook the impact of the shortcomings of the free market on the perception of democracy.

I am sure that our friends and allies will deal with these problems, because their democracy is based on strong institutions and aberrations here and there will be corrected, perhaps at a price, but in a definitive way. In the meantime, however, these challenges will likely slow down the overall effort to promote democracy elsewhere. As a matter of fact, there are those who advocate different understandings of democracy based on differences of culture, tradition and experience of history. There are places where people, in view of their most fundamental needs, may give priority to economic stability over the broad mechanics of democracy. The West, therefore, and we are part of it, must rise up to these challenges.

I know that I have moved away from our immediate agenda for today but I find it worthwhile because this is the broad international setting and it may encourage us to look at our problems in a different light. The challenges that the world faces in the “triangle” dwarf, if I may say so, whatever differences we may have. This the way I feel as a Turk because we are a neighbor to the “triangle”. You are also close by but you have Turkey in between. Having a bilateral agenda with fewer thorns is fine but it also puts on our shoulders the responsibility to resolve our differences in good time and perhaps set an example for others to follow. I should say a very valuable example considering:

firstly, that the Greek identity and the Turkish identity are similar in certain ways and different in other ways , and

secondly, the international reputation these questions have earned: “the endless Turkish- Greek quarrels”.

I will conclude this deviation from our agenda with a final note : most of us believe that democracy is the remedy to many of those challenges within and around the Middle East-Afghanistan-Iraq triangle. But it is extremely difficult to externally impose it and unrealistic to expect it to flourish rapidly. It can, however, be encouraged. This is where Turkey can play a role. When the West, the European Union advocate democracy in this wide area they are not heard loud and clear because of the cultural background I referred to. But for them Turkey is a “local”. The ultimate success of our democracy will set an example. So, as my colleagues from Turkey underlined earlier this morning, Turkey’s remaining on track with the EU is of paramount importance. Greece is in a better position, given your experience in the wider region to see the relevance of this. I hope that your support to Turkey’s accession process would be based on its own merits and on Turkey’s success with its reforms.

When I looked at the title of the Conference, “Greece-Turkey in the 21st Century” I was very pleased because it represents a desire to look forward .And,“ looking forward” always reflects a positive spirit.

If I am to look back, however, just for a minute, I would say that Greek-Turkish relations are like a long, very long road. We have travelled on this road together for a thousand years. We have crossed rough terrain, different seasons. When I look at the signs on this road I read, “war “ and “peace”, “confrontation” and “reconciliation”, rivalry” and “friendship”, “competition” and “cooperation”, “adversity” and “alliance”. So I am tempted to call this road “the road of antonyms”. I believe that on this long road we have finally reached, over the last decade, wide fertile plains and a good climate. So, we have to start thinking of a new name, one that emphasizes only the positive. By saying this now, rather than at the end of my presentation, I am already displaying a high level of confidence on our common future. At least, I am saying that there is no going back to the past. If I were to be criticized someday for lack of judgment or foresight, or for being an optimist, I would respond by saying that “it was not my lack of foresight but the lack of foresight of those who failed to seize the opportunity.”

Does this mean that we have overcome all our differences. No, but it means that we have covered good distance in understanding that our interests are served better when we cooperate.

I am of the opinion that we have made remarkable progress since 1999 which was the second year of my stay here. A process of dialogue and cooperation has been in place for a decade now. More than 30 agreements, protocols and memoranda of understanding have been signed. Numerous CBMs have been adopted.

Steady improvement in our economic and trade relations is promising. Energy, tourism and transport stand out as strategic sectors, offering new opportunities. Statistical data of our economic and trade relations is an important indication of the spillover effects of dialogue between our two countries. For example in the year 2000, the bilateral trade volume was about 870 million US dollars. It amounted to over 2,7 billion US dollars in 2009. Similarly, foreign direct investment inflow from Greece to Turkey was merely 55 million US dollars between 1980 and 2000. It has reached a spectacular 6 billion US dollar level in

2009. This is a solid indication of how positively our business communities perceive the new climate of our relationship.

To put it in a nutshell, we now have certain mechanisms in place which provide a legal and practical framework for our relations, better political understanding between us and substantial economic cooperation. All of this has given our perceptions a certain maturity. And, we also have the unresolved issues.

So the question is, “where do we go from here to keep up the momentum and to cover additional ground?”

I believe that a decade is a good period to allow us to sit down and take stock of what has been accomplished. The existing bilateral framework and mechanisms which have functioned well so far. But, in spite of high level visits from time to time they are essentially at the level of senior officials. We have the exploratory talks, we have the political consultations, a steering committee and its working groups. Over time these have been expanded in accordance with our growing cooperation. The Joint Economic Commission, the Mixed Commission on Land Transport, the Joint Standby Disaster Response Unit, the Joint Agricultural Committee and the Tourism Forum have been added. We can see if these arrangements need to be improved, taken to higher level and if we can inject renewed political will into the process.

I think this is doable. Prime Minister Papandreou was Foreign Minister when we turned a new page. He and Minister İsmail Cem contributed a great deal to the process of rapprochement. Prime Minister Erdoğan has also expressed readiness for more and I know that there is an invitation extended to him to visit Greece.

Within an energized new framework we can undertake a fresh effort to resolve our differences.

Earlier, I made a reference to the Constitution of UNESCO to underline the importance of popular support in achieving lasting peace. Understandably, the public, with the help of the media, can form its own opinion on a wide range of issues. But governments can exert a certain influence. This is not say that we should mislead our peoples or keep them in the dark. This is possible neither for

you nor for us. But, we can put the emphasis on the positive and refrain, where we can within the limits of reason, from highlighting what may lead to negative perceptions which our current relationship does not deserve. I can tell you that Turks, in general have a positive perception of Greece and are ready to move forward. We do not put our bilateral issues on top of our list of challenges. We have other worries. This does not mean that Turks are indifferent to our bilateral agenda, but they are very favorably disposed towards further cooperation and the settlement of the questions which divide us. We want this to happen on the merits of our own relationship and our converging interests.

If we can together create an enhanced framework for our relations and start moving forward then we can start calling the road on which we travelled for a thousand years, the "Road of Partnership". We both face economic and other challenges some of which are beyond our control and this may create some distraction. But I still believe that nothing should prevent us from taking charge of our problems in a result-oriented way.

Our bilateral issues may not be on top of world's agenda but they are complex enough or have become more complex over time. Though some may not fall directly under the scope of our bilateral relations, several, such as Cyprus, Aegean issues, minority issues, illegal migration require our close attention. When I look at these problems, some of them at least, appear to be some sort of a structure, not a perfect wall, but some sort of a wall. Blocks of stone have been placed on top of one another without a master plan or architectural design. I tend to call these blocks, "blocks of action/reaction or retaliation", reflecting a "if you put a block there, I will put a block here" sort of approach.

You also referred to this nature of our problems, Mr. Minister, much more eloquently. You mentioned the difficulty our peoples have in understanding them. You asked if they appear more significant than they really are...

The first thing to do could be, therefore, to look closely at these blocks and see if they are actually the same material, shaped or polished differently and whether all of them or only some of them are relevant to a new and better designed

structure. In other words, we need to see with a cool mind, without emotion if our positions are indeed so far apart? Can we find common ground?

I am not going to go into further detail of our problems because I know that our intention is not to solve them here but address the broad framework, at least for a start.

Within the span of a few minutes, I have used the word “perception” a good number of times because I strongly believe in the fundamental role perceptions play in any given situation, in any relationship. Perceptions are not easy to change. But they can change if enough attention is paid. I believe that our mutual perception of Greek-Turkish relations has begun to change for the better and for me this is where the opportunity lies.

Resolving our differences in a timely fashion will expand our opportunities for further cooperation, both bilaterally and internationally. It will give us an edge in a wider area. It will serve our economic and political interests. It will help raise our image internationally.

If we want to continue with the present course and allow the relationship to mature even more, hopefully not forever, that is also a choice.

The title of our conference is “Greece-Turkey” in the 21st Century”. This means that we have exactly 90 years before us. That is long enough a period to prove our talent for establishing a partnership, considering the fact that the European Union started to take root only 13 years after the end of the Second World War.

Yesterday our flight from İstanbul to Athens took one hour. Ten years ago it was one hour and fifteen minutes. So, either the airplanes have started to fly faster or the ground has shifted and we have moved closer. I hope the latter is the case.

Thank you.