

Colloquy

*Is the West turning
its back on Turkey?*

**Zbigniew
Brzezinski***

* Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Counselor, trustee and co-chair of the Center for Strategic and International Studies' (CSIS) Advisory Board, former national security advisor of U.S.

CI: *Can you talk about your specific thoughts on Turkey in relation to its neighborhood? Which areas do you think are most critical right now, in terms of U.S. interests in the context of the immediate demands of the situation in Syria, and what is happening with Turkey in the region?*

Brzezinski: First of all, one has to take into account the fact that “a strategic vision” is not the same thing as “a strategic blueprint.” My concern with the U.S. relationship with Turkey and also with Russia is that Eurasia – as the central and most important continent in the world - needs to have a fundamental internal balance between what I hope would be a more vital West and a more energetic East. To accomplish that, both Russia and Turkey should, out of self-interest, become part of Europe, and Europe, both the existing Europe and the narrower Europe, should welcome them out of its own self-interest. With regard to the more immediate question of the current difficult circumstances, dealing with them is a matter independent of this larger vision. Obviously, Turkey is the preeminent player in the Middle East. It is a successfully modernizing democracy. And it is a successfully democratizing modern state. Its role in the region is preeminent. Accordingly in my view, American policy towards Syria ought to be essentially supportive of the policy that Turkey shapes in close collaboration with Saudi Arabia.

CI: *In your recent book, *Strategic Vision, America and Crisis of Global Power*, you talk about this idea of breaking with the past, and the sense in which Ataturk reoriented Turkey. You briefly reference the idea that America is working with Turkey in the Middle East. Unlike many in Washington, you don't see a disjunction between that idea and the fears about Turkey becoming too Islamic or too populist under these authoritarian tendencies. What drives that optimism?*

Brzezinski: First of all, these authoritarian tendencies are declining overtime. Turkey has made some impressive and significant accomplishments in the process of self-democratization. I think anyone who goes to Turkey, and sees how it works, is aware of this process. Fears about Turkey becoming such a state strike me as residual anxieties following the anti-Islamic tendencies that developed in the U.S. after 9/11, which unfortunately have been given added impetus by some officials, and interested elements or lobbying groups who would in general prefer that the United States does not have a constructive relationship with Turkey.

CI: *So, the Turkish Foreign Minister was just in town and no doubt you had a chance either to speak with him personally or to hear his thoughts on the post-Cold War logic Turkey is trying to implement. It sounds very similar to your strategic vision, and*

you reference him in your own book, specifically his strategic depth. How would you compare your vision of where Turkey fits in with Professor Davutoglu's?

Brzezinski: First of all, what I say in the present book is to some extent what I said in another book called "Grand Chessboard", written more than a decade ago. I think Turkey is the preeminent player in an extremely sensitive part of the world. The differences between what Professor Davutoglu advocates for Turkey and what I advocate for the United States are essentially rooted in our different perspectives. He is a Turk and he is operating within a consciousness of Turkish history and an awareness of the challenges that Turkey faces in its geographical neighborhood. I look at it from the American point of view, which takes into account the fact that the United States is the most dynamic force within the Atlantic community, and that the Atlantic community in its own interests should seek to embrace those who already share some of its views, or will likely share some of its views in the future, particularly pertaining to internal democracy. I think that perspective makes the case for Turkey and for Russia, though two different cases, quite compelling.

CI: *If the vision for Turkey makes sense because of its democratic progress and position as a preeminent power in the region... your optimism regarding Russia was striking*

throughout the book. I think many in Turkey will actually agree with your assessment, but many in Washington may not. How did you come up with that assessment?

Brzezinski: Because of what I observe within Russia. It seems to me that the forces of authoritarianism are weakening, that there is a nationalist backlash developing in Russia which could be quite dangerous as it becomes more successful; it would also be terribly self-destructive for Russia, because Russia is without any options in a geopolitical setting in which to its East there is a more vital China and to its West there is a more vital Europe and America. Therefore the nationalist option is self-defeating. Putin is trying to articulate some intermediary concept which he calls the Eurasian Union, but that is a pipe dream, because no one wants to be in it bar a few of his own associates who are still captivated by a dream of Russian imperial restoration of some sort. In brief, Russia no longer has any alternative but to become part of the West. Secondly, internal changes within Russia already indicate that there is a genuinely democratic civil society developing, at this stage composed primarily of the younger element of the new urban middle class. Many of them have studied abroad, most have travelled abroad, and all are in touch with the West through the new means of communication - and increas-

ingly they see themselves as part of the West. So in spite of some probable regression in the near future, my optimism is not just wishful thinking but is rooted in observation of the underlying geopolitical imperatives and social changes that are transpiring within Russia itself.

CI: *Coming to the Eurozone crisis that has only gotten worse since this book was written, particularly looking at it from Turkey and Russia on the outside of Europe, how has that changed some of your analysis? Does it change at all or reinforce your views on what Europe needs?*

Brzezinski: I don't agree that the Eurozone situation has worsened. I think Europe is grappling with it responsibly and seriously. The Euro crisis was aggravated by fundamental structural inadequacies, and the European Union and the preeminent members of the EU are in agreement that these structural limitations or handicaps need to be overcome.

CI: *Do you worry that the Eurozone crisis will fuel what some have called Turkish hubris? The notion of "look, our economy is growing so much faster - we don't need the European Union, we will go in our own direction; we don't need the West anymore, we will focus on the East"...*?

Brzezinski: Well, if that is the conclusion they have reached I think they will regret it. I think it will be based on a short-term reaction - and

as you say, to some extent hubris. The fact of the matter is Turkey can be an important European state and therefore indirectly play a kind of a global role which on its own it cannot pursue, except in its narrower regional setting.

CI: *You emphasize in the book the notion of keeping the U.S. outside of the Asian landmass of Eurasia as kind of an offshore balancer. Can you talk more about that, in terms of why you don't think America should be directly involved in a neighborhood that is crucial to Turkey? And what do you mean by that?*

Brzezinski: What I mean by that is that American involvement on European soil was a byproduct of an age in which the struggle for global preeminence, for global domination was a reality - a reality that was underscored by the underlying issue at stake in World War I and World War II, and then the protracted contest for global supremacy with the Soviet Union. Today, we are entering an age that sees a shift in the global center of gravity from West to East. The emergence of a new and dynamic Asia and the appearance of the new phenomenon of global political awakening collectively signify that no single power can be dominant.

CI: *Could you speak more about these unintentional consequences, particularly in terms of the Arab Spring, and perhaps what you see developing with the Arab Spring in*

reference to Turkey's direct role. You have mentioned Syria.

Brzezinski: I speak about the East, and I don't mean the Middle East. I am talking about the East; I mean Asia. I think the Arab Spring is a separate phenomenon. And that is related first of all to the phenomenon of the global political awakening, which incidentally does not necessarily equate to democracy and does not necessarily mean democratization quite yet. But secondly, it is also related to the fading of American preeminence in the Middle East, due to the diminishing role of the United States in contributing to a more wide-ranging peace in the region – and as a consequence today, American influence in the Middle East is probably lower than at any point since 1950.

CI: *Do you think this decreasing influence is a good thing or a bad thing, from the Turkish perspective?*

Brzezinski: I don't see it in terms of good or bad. It is however significantly different in terms of the role the United States can play. This is why today, for instance, it is more sensible for us to deal with the problem of Syria by supporting whatever policy Turkey and Saudi Arabia construct together, as opposed to taking the lead on strategy, which would have been possible even twenty years ago..

CI: *I was struck by the fact that in the book, when you talked about Tur-*

key, you spent a lot of time discussing Turkey in the West and the EU, but you also made this comment about Central Asia and of course everyone remembers the Turkish model from the 1990s and right now the Turkish model is fashionable again in the Middle East . Do you see Turkey playing a larger role in Central Asia vis-a-vis this concept broader cooperation with Russia and Turkey?

Brzezinski: Not as overtly as one of the earlier Turkish leaders seems to have had in mind. But there is no doubt that when one goes to the Central Asian region it is striking the extent to which Turks are present, and is a point of attraction and interest on part of these countries in the region as they try to define themselves, to establish their own identity, and to find their own place in a setting which is still potentially unstable. It be may be a question of lingering imperial aspirations confronting them from one side, of course the growing influence of China from another, and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism from yet another, and hence Turkey is becoming an attractive point of reference.

CI: *With regard to perceptions of Turkey as an attractive point of reference, you spend a lot of time focusing on the U.S. and some of the domestic challenges that make America less globally engaged. What are the challenges of the U.S.-Turkey relationship, which entails two democracies that sometimes have very different*

tendencies and very different views – here I’m speaking specifically about Governor Perry’s comments about Turkey having Islamic terrorists as leaders.

Brzezinski: I don’t think it is worth 30 seconds of my time to comment on Governor Perry’s remarks.

CI: *Do you see this tendency of democratization in Turkey continuing after Erdogan, or are you worried that the next leader could be “make-or-break” in the Turkish case?*

Brzezinski: If the West turns its back on Turkey, I think that the chances of the negative development would increase, but by and large it seems to me that there is general identification in Turkey with the changes that have taken place in the recent decades.

Colloquy conducted by Joshua Walker, Transatlantic Fellow, The German Marshall Fund of the United States