“It’s not good for Europe if Turkey turns its attention elsewhere” (Interview)

2011-07-04

Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle in an interview with Die Welt newspaper on his visit to Istanbul and the prospects for German-Turkish cooperation in the Middle East.

Published on 4 July 2011

Mr Westerwelle, as Foreign Minister this is the third time you’ve visited Turkey.

You call your Turkish opposite number Davutoğlu “my friend Ahmet”.

You seem to like it very much there.

That’s true, I’ve been a frequent visitor since my youth and have travelled around a lot. As Foreign Minister I value Ahmet Davutoğlu as an extremely reliable colleague. But what’s even more important is Turkey’s strategic clout, its role as one of the world’s new power centres.

In its own region or also for Europe, as Europe’s link with the Arab world, for example?

The rate at which Turkey’s economy is growing is the envy of many countries in the European Union. The internal reform process now under way is something I commend, even if not everything meets our benchmarks as yet. What’s crucial, though, is that Turkey is a bridge to the Islamic world. So a close partnership between Europe and Turkey is not just in Turkey’s interest, it’s also and above all in Europe’s interest.

Is this also understood in other

EU

capitals?

It’s increasingly recognized that the locus of power in the world is shifting. Both as an economic and a political player, Turkey now enjoys a status many would never have thought possible a few years ago. We have an interest in Turkey staying engaged with Europe, so all of us in Europe should deal with Turkey fairly and with respect, as an equal partner. We could

reach a point where Europe's interest in Turkey is greater than Turkey's interest in Europe. And that's a situation I'd prefer to avoid.

There are clearly reasons for Turkey's current self-assurance.

Ankara could turn away from Europe and focus instead on the Balkans and the Arab world – a kind of non-imperial neo-Ottomanism geared to ensuring its influence.

Is that a realistic prospect?

Given the Ottoman Empire's history, there are certainly people who may think along these lines. There's one thing I would warn against here, however. Anyone who suggests that Europe is doing Turkey a favour by allowing it to draw closer to Europe is making a great mistake. Forging closer links with Turkey is in Europe's own best interest, in economic terms, in terms of good-neighbourly relations and in political and strategic terms. No one in Turkey, after all, expects us to predict if and when Turkey will join the European Union. But they do expect a negotiating process whose end-result is not predetermined – rightly so, because that's what's been agreed ...

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and at the end of which one option is also full membership.

... at the end of which there is no automatic progress in one direction or another. The outcome at the end will depend on whether or not the criteria have been met. The way the debate is conducted in Germany, I sometimes have the impression that Turkey's accession is just around the corner. In fact fewer than half the negotiating chapters have been opened. Only one has been concluded to date. If for domestic reasons we Europeans systematically offend Turkey merely in order to pick up a few points at home, there's a great risk it will turn its attention elsewhere. That wouldn't be good for Europe.

You call yourself "the best advocate Turkey has in the

EU

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Not the best advocate, but a fair advocate. I do what I can to ensure that when Turkey makes progress, this produces results, for example, the opening a while ago of the two chapters dealing with environmental matters and food safety. For a year now no new chapter has been opened. That means standstill, which isn't good for either side. We're keen to overcome this standstill, for which, by the way, there are reasons on both sides. One way to do this is by opening the chapter on competition policy and that's what we should now aim for. On the Turkish side this will require also the implementation of the Ankara Protocol.

Let’s turn for a moment to Syria.

Germany’s standing in the Arab world is traditionally high, Turkey has perhaps the best connections there.

So by working together they could achieve something.

If Germany and Turkey agree to work on something together, that carries a lot of weight. Germany is greatly respected in the Arab world and North Africa for three reasons. We have no colonial baggage; we’re seen as highly reliable politically and economically successful; and we stand for a policy of military restraint. What we aim for, in other words, are negotiated, political solutions. We’re not suspected of having ulterior motives, our policy is transparent, fair and consistent. And people recognize that. Turkey is a bridge to the Arab world, for many Arab countries it’s a role model – and it’s a stunning economic success story.

On 1 July Germany assumed the Presidency of the

UN

Security Council.

Will there now be a resolution critical of Syria?

Neither Turkey nor Germany have broken off contact with Damascus. However, the messages both have conveyed to President Bashar al-Assad’s regime are tough and unambiguous. My Special Representative met Syrian Foreign Minister Muallim a few days ago. At the same time we’re working with our

EU

partners in New York on a resolution that will unequivocally condemn the clampdown in Syria on behalf of the international community, too.

But you’ll only table it if its adoption is certain, isn’t that so?

A resolution along these lines will only be put to the vote if it’s likely to be approved. That’s why I’ve also discussed this with my opposite numbers in Russia and China …

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the two veto powers who’re against any such resolution.

Yes. But I’ve also discussed it with my Brazilian counterpart, and the South African Foreign Minister will be in Berlin on Monday. We’ll see what can be done. One needs staying-power for such a resolution. It’s important we don’t forget that the way the resolution on Libya was

implemented with a great deal of criticism in Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa and the African Union. We need to make clear that in the case of Syria nothing similar is planned. What's critical here, in our view, is to keep up the political pressure on the Assad regime. That, along with the sanctions that have been imposed, is the right way forward here. The claim that military solutions work faster and more effectively than political ones has been disproved time and again in recent years.

To return to Libya: wasn't the German abstention on the resolution in the Security Council a mistake?

No, it was the right decision. I've always pointed out that I regard the decision other countries took here as an honourable one taken for reasons I respect.

In Benghazi, the rebel power base, all kinds of flags can be seen flying, only the German one is missing.

There at least people seem to feel very disappointed in the Germans.

I'm one of the few people who've actually been to Benghazi. The wholehearted welcome we were given by the National Transitional Council, the warmth and openness we were shown and the applause that greeted us when I said that Germany regards the Transitional Council as the legitimate representative of the Libyan people belies or casts doubt at least on any suggestion that the Libyans have a poor opinion of Germany. Mahmoud Jibril, the Council's spokesman on foreign affairs, was in Berlin a few days ago. He made plain that he respected Germany's abstention on the resolution and appreciates the contribution we're making. We're providing humanitarian aid. We support the efforts to find a political solution. We've pledged assistance in rebuilding the economy once Muammar al-Gaddafi goes. Our abstention has neither placed a strain on the Western Alliance nor reduced our political leverage vis-à-vis North Africa. Repeated assertions to the contrary have a lot to do with domestic point-scoring here in Germany.

But it wouldn't have cost us much to say yes – or do you take a different view?

It was a difficult decision and one we weighed very carefully. Germany has already thousands of soldiers deployed around the world, especially in Afghanistan. We decided not to participate with combat troops in the military operation in Libya. Had we said yes in New York, there was no way the largest European

NATO

member could have said no in Brussels. German combat troops would have been sent to Libya long ago. That would be the situation today.

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Source : https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/110704-bm-welt-244214