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Vision, the crux of the matter

Stavros N. Yiannouka, *For The Straits Times*

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ON OCT 3, the European Union is scheduled to begin formal accession negotiations with Turkey. In its almost 50-year history, the EU has never started negotiations with a candidate country that did not end with that country being admitted. So will Turkish membership in the EU - first mooted in 1963 - become a given after next week?

Not necessarily. European public opinion is overwhelmingly opposed to Turkish membership and many governments are sceptical. The accession negotiations will offer ample opportunities to delay and even scupper full membership as compliance with each of the 30-odd chapters of the European legal code need to be verified by all current 25 member states.

Why this hostility? Three factors are often cited by those opposed to Turkish membership of the EU.

First, they note that Turkey is home to 70 million people whose number is expected to reach 100 million by mid-century. This will make Turkey the largest country in Europe. Turkey is also relatively poor, with a per capita Gross National Income around two-thirds that of Latvia, currently the EU's poorest member. So the argument goes that absorbing Turkey would overwhelm the EU budget, with its generous agricultural and infrastructure subsidies.

Second, Turkey is a predominantly Muslim country. Moreover, those opposed to Turkish membership cite its human rights record, noting that the rule of law is weak and that the military still plays a constitutionally enshrined political role. As such, Turkey's traditions and values are said to be fundamentally different from those of the current EU membership.

And third, Turkey occupies slightly over a third of the territory of Cyprus, and disputes Greek territorial waters and airspace in and over the Aegean Sea. These historical foes of

Turkey - both EU members - will never acquiesce to allowing their 'old enemy' to join, it is said.

While these are formidable obstacles, they are by no means insurmountable. Indeed, there are powerful counter-arguments in support of Turkish membership.

To begin with, Turkey has the potential to inject much needed vitality into the EU economy. In the labour market, its young population can supplement a rapidly greying Europe. Early experience with the current 10 new member states (whose combined populations approximate that of Turkey) suggests that new members are an economic asset, providing opportunities for new investment and growth. And as for the budget, EU members know it is unsustainable and needs to be reformed regardless.

Next, it needs to be remembered that Turkey's history and geography have been inextricably linked to that of Europe for millennia. The Anatolian landmass that forms the bulk of modern-day Turkey was an integral part of the ancient Greco-Roman world, and was later the heartland of the medieval Byzantine Empire, whose capital, Constantinople (today's Istanbul), is still the official seat of the Greek-Orthodox Church.

Turkey is a direct 'successor state' of the Ottoman Empire, as is Greece, Bulgaria and Romania - all current or soon-to-be EU members. Hence, historically, Turkey has as much right to be a part of Europe as do Greece, Bulgaria and Romania.

In terms of values, there are enough precedents to suggest that the accession process is likely to transform Turkey. Eight of the 10 new member states (the exceptions being Cyprus and Malta) were admitted within a relatively short period following the collapse of their older (communist) regimes.

In all these cases, the argument was made that EU membership would strengthen democratic institutions and the rule of law and entrench human and minority rights. Arguing that the same cannot apply to Turkey places an artificial limit on Europe's transformative power.

Moreover, both Cyprus and Greece recognise that a Turkey excluded from Europe is a more dangerous neighbour than one embedded within the new European order. Indeed the closer Turkey moves towards EU membership, the harder it will be for it to ignore legitimate Cypriot and Greek demands: To end the occupation of Cyprus and even allow the reincorporation of the occupied territories into the Republic of Cyprus; and adjudicate claims over the Aegean Sea and airspace before the International Court of Justice. Hence, Cypriot and Greek foreign policy will be broadly supportive of EU membership for Turkey.

So if traditional analyses of European opposition to Turkish membership of the EU are flawed, what then lies behind the veil? In fact, there is no uniform EU policy stance on Turkish membership.

Major European powers are roughly divided between 'Old' and 'New', with the Old, particularly France and Germany, leading the opposition to Turkish membership. What is at stake is nothing less than the nature of the EU.

In a letter to the Financial Times, Mr Egemen Bagis, a Turkish parliamentarian and foreign policy adviser to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, writes: 'We believe the UK's current presidency will be pivotal in injecting the necessary good sense into minds. I am glad to reiterate that Ankara and London share exactly the same views about the EU and its future.'

Mr Bagis thus presents an 'Atlanticist' view of the EU as an ever-expanding free trade area with a limited pooling of sovereignty on select economic and social issues. Atlanticists view the EU as predominantly an instrument of Western foreign policy. Its primary purpose is to export prosperity and stability to the states on its periphery, using the discipline of the accession process and the rewards of full membership as a geopolitical stick and carrot.

Here, the EU is seen to play nothing more than a complementary or supporting role to Nato as a vehicle through which key nations are gradually absorbed into a broader Atlantic community.

The Atlanticist vision for the EU conflicts with the traditional Franco-German federalist vision of 'ever-closer union'. And if Turkey sees the EU as an Atlanticist project, its EU membership could be interpreted by Old Europe as supporting the neo-conservative American foreign policy agenda of preventing the emergence of any potential rival to the US. This is the crucial reason behind the resistance to Turkish membership.

As one of Washington's most important allies, Ankara would be expected to be a paid-up subscriber to the Atlanticist vision for the EU. Thus, Turkey together with the United Kingdom (and other 'New' Europeans) could form a powerful Atlanticist bloc as a counterbalance to the Franco-German core.

As the accession negotiations begin, Turkey and its leaders need to consider what kind of vision they have for the EU's future. If that vision is too avowedly Atlanticist, they may find the road ahead permanently blocked, notwithstanding the fact that traditional concerns have been successfully addressed.

The writer is vice-dean for executive education and development at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. The opinions expressed in this article are his own.

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