

A thoughtful relationship

By **SUZAN SABANCI DINÇER**

CHAIRMAN AND EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBER OF AKBANK, TURKEY



SUZAN SABANCI DINÇER is the Chairman and Executive Board Member of Akbank. A member of the Chatham House Panel of Senior Advisors, she is also the Chairman of the Turkish-British Business Council and member of numerous organisations including Citigroup's, NBK's and Blackstone's International Advisory Boards and the IIF Board of Directors. She also assumes the role of Luxembourg Honorary Consul and has been a WEF Young Global Leader since 2006.

The special relationship in Britain is a term reserved for a transatlantic friendship founded on a shared language and in many cases common ancestry. Britain's friendship with Turkey may not be as intense as with the US but is certainly older. The first mission to the Porte was in 1578, and our two nations have been allies and sometimes sparring partners ever since. If Britain looks at America across the unobstructed horizon of the Atlantic Ocean, it views Turkey across a crowded European continent. This is landscape shaped by mini-disputes and micro-alliances on everything from financial regulation to fisheries. Turkey is an aspirant nation to join the European Union. Britain is one of the gatekeepers. Not unnaturally, we eye each other tactically today as we have in times past.

Yet, Turkey and Britain also enjoy a relationship that is special – one that is founded on a profound understanding of what interdependence means in our modern world. It is not just about furthering narrow interests but protecting common values and a vision of our common future. Turkey's relationship with the UK rests on very sound pillars – a sense of respect, a genuine understanding of each others place in the world, and (that rarest of commodities) a sense of empathy. It is not just special but thoughtful.

There is no easier demonstration of this than the decision of Chatham House members to bestow the prestigious annual prize to Abdullah Gül. I am naturally delighted that so soon after assuming my own place on the Chatham House panel of senior advisors, that the president of my own country should be recognised as statesman of the year. But of course the award was not mine but the result of a ballot of Chatham House members. One could not invent a more thoughtful electoral college – men and women whose energies are spent trying to grasp the bigger picture. They have recognised in the Turkish president the qualities which the Turkish people themselves see, and they have signalled their approval of the Turkey which he represents.

Dr Gül was Prime Minister of the Justice and Development party when it was elected in 2002 and he understood and articulated the need for our country to plough on with political and economic reforms. It was these reforms which opened the way for Turkey's full candidacy to the European Union. This was not an easy process and it was his skills and persistence as

foreign minister which allowed Turkey to navigate the many obstacles on the way to the negotiating table. Abdullah Gül's performance after elevation to President of the Republic has reconfirmed his calibre as a world statesman. He has a talent for pouring oil on troubled waters both in the domestic arena but also in the many of the conflicts in Turkey's region. No doubt when he leaves high office he will assume a place in the exclusive inner circle of international "wise men."

If Chatham House understands the constructive role which President Gül's Turkey is trying to play in the world, then Britain gets it too. Turkey was impressed by the unequivocal endorsement which David Cameron lent to Turkey's EU membership application so soon after becoming prime minister. We were equally impressed that he made his second official visit – the first being to the USA – to Ankara to make the point. He expressed in plain language our own disappointment at the slow pace of negotiations. "When I think about what Turkey has done to defend Europe as a NATO ally, and what Turkey is doing today in Afghanistan alongside our European allies, it makes me angry that your progress towards EU membership can be frustrated in the way it has been" is what he said.

Britain would not be Britain without its cynics and there were those commentators who suggested the prime minister's passion was stage managed and that Britain's support for Turkey is a "wrecking ball" directed at a federal Europe. This is not the view from our end of the continent. Turkey believes that a Europe which defines itself not by whom it excludes but whom it can include is truly a greater Europe. And it is a grave miscalculation to doubt Turkey's sincerity in trying to build a unified continent.

Turkey now acts from strength. We are politically determined and economically powerful. I am happy to be associated with a financial industry which has emerged from global crisis stronger than when it went in. Indeed, we are back in the business of lending which helps to explain why Turkey will grow by 7 per cent this year, a record for the OECD. Of course, we understand that Mr Cameron's visit was about cultivating this high-growth market. I speak as the head of the Turkish-British Business Council when I say how welcoming we are to this initiative. Peace and prosperity are values which underlie the strong relationship between Britain and Turkey and we will make good Europeans of each other yet. **F**