

TURKEY WITH A SEAT ON THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL: TOUGH DECISIONS AHEAD

Turkish foreign policy makers thread a thin, delicate line in a series of important regional and transnational issues – such as the Russia-Georgia dispute, the Middle East conflict, the Cyprus question, or Iran’s nuclear program. Moreover, the world economic crisis is likely to compound the severity of political conflicts. So long as one follows a policy without having to make hard choices, one can play for the time and avoid the necessity of taking sides. However, especially as issues are voted upon in the UNSC, Turkey will increasingly find itself in a position where it will have to make clear preferences in favor of one or the other party.

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After an extended campaign, Turkey has won a seat on the UN Security Council and will serve there for two years starting on 1 January 2009. This is the fourth time that Turkey becomes a UNSC member, but the first in almost fifty years. It is thus timely to examine the role international organizations have played for Turkey in these organizations. To understand the significance and the challenges of Turkey holding a UNSC seat for the upcoming two years, one must also take into consideration the current regional and global upheavals.

Introduction

Among the primary instruments that nation-states utilize in the pursuit of their foreign policy objectives are international organizations. They are also the venue for the adjudication of differing national positions on regional and international issues. More importantly, they regulate matters in their specific areas (e. g health, environment, trade) within their competence. Hence, international organizations are a vital part of our lives. As the process of globalization accelerates and interdependence increases, the number and authority of international organizations is likely to grow.

Turkey's Record in International Organizations

Turkey has always been a country for which international organizations have held special significance. Turkey's historical record is an outstanding one, being among the founding members of most of the leading international organizations. Among them are the United Nations, the Council of Europe, Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), Organizations of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Economic Cooperation Organization, Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC), and D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation. Turkey has also initiated the establishment of a number of regional organizations, past and present. Most recently, Turkey launched the idea of a Caucasus Peace and Stability Platform to address the problems of this critical region.

Turkey's record in terms of its performance as a member of the various international organizations is also noteworthy; Turkey pays its dues, contributes to the UN, NATO and OSCE-led peace keeping, peacemaking, conflict resolution activities and operations, and abides by the rulings of the courts.

Turkey's performance in terms of providing international civil servants, especially in high positions, has been rather poor, however. In recent years, the only notable exception is Kemal Derviş as head of the UNDP. The reason is that Turkey has not encouraged nor actively sought the placement of its officials as civil servants in international organizations.

Turkey's Unique Position

Turkey's location and history are the factors that put Turkey in a unique position in terms of its membership in international organizations. It enjoys a multiplicity of geographically diverse memberships in a large number of organizations. On the one hand, Turkey is a member of the major Western/Euro-Atlantic organizations: NATO, OECD, OSCE, Council of Europe, seeking EU accession. At the same time, Turkey has membership or observer status in most of the important non-Western organizations: OIC, observer status in the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Turkey is a member of the G-20 Group on the one hand and of the D-8 on the other. Turkey is associated with the EU led initiatives on the Mediterranean while at the same time playing host to BSEC.

An interesting footnote in this regard is that Turkey is the only UN member with simultaneous membership in two geographic groups, the Asian Group and the Western and Other States Group (WEOG). (Turkey's candidacies for various UN organs are from the WEOG.)

The same factors of geography and history are, however, also responsible for keeping Turkey out of major international arrangements. Turkey is one of just several countries that has not signed or ratified the Law of the Sea. The long-standing disputes in the Aegean have prevented Turkey from joining this convention. Similarly, Turkey has refrained from being a party to the treaty of the International Criminal Court based on fear that the Court might undermine Turkey's fight against terrorism.

Turkish Foreign Policy in International Organizations

International organizations have always been an important instrument and element of Turkish foreign policy. Turkey's past record and its advantages emanating from its history and geographic location place Turkey in a uniquely promising position in international organizations. This enables Turkey to pursue its own national objectives while serving the cause of peace, security and stability in different parts of the world. Its presence in diverse organizations allows Turkey to act as a conduit of communication and improving the quality of understanding among their members. UNSC membership will permit Turkey to bring its historical depth, its power of its geopolitical value and the tenets of its foreign policy to bear on the deliberations and decisions of the UNSC the next two years. Turkey will make a positive contribution to the work of the UNSC, given its commitments to security, stability and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. UNSC membership will enhance Turkey's prestige and help improve its image across the globe.

There are also potential risks for Turkey. Turkish foreign policy makers thread a thin, delicate line in a series of important regional and transnational issues. This is the case with regard to such matters as Iraq, Iran and its nuclear program, the Middle East conflict, the Russia-Georgia dispute, the Nagorno Karabagh problem, the Cyprus question and the disputes with Greece over the Aegean. So long as one follows a policy without having to make hard choices, one can play for time and avoid the necessity of taking sides. As most of these conflicts remain unresolved, Turkey may often find itself in a position where it will increasingly have to make clear preference in favor of one or the other party. This will simply be inescapable when any of these issues are voted upon in the UNSC. At is worth noting that voting on the same issues in the UN General Assembly is different from voting on them in the UN Security Council because of the fact that the UNSC decisions are binding while General Assembly resolutions are not.

The proposed risk does not imply that Turkey's foreign policy is not principled. It is. However, sitting at the UNSC in the 2009-2010 periods will surely be a new experience for Turkey. All the issues handled by Turkey in Ankara and in its foreign missions abroad are to obtain a different coloring for Turkish diplomats as a member of the Security Council. The road Turkey is going to travel may not always be smooth.

Another exacerbating factor that will test the foreign policy of Turkey in the near future is the probable escalation of the major conflicts in the regions surrounding Turkey. The world economic crisis should compound the severity of political conflicts. Turkey is likely to face increasingly tough choices as a NATO member, a partner of the U.S. and as a country aspiring for EU accession when it comes to issues like Iran, relations with Russia and access of non-littoral states to the Black Sea. Oil and natural gas pipeline projects as well as the intention to build a nuclear power station will present Turkey with choices that will have deep and lasting foreign policy implications.

In short, Turkey is looking at a period of difficult foreign policy decisions in the next several years at a time when its domestic situation is also undergoing rapid change.