

TURKEY: UNITER OR DIVIDER?

Turkey wants to rotate onto the Security Council after a nearly 50-year absence. The Turkish leadership has claimed that the country can serve as a bridge across a growing gap between the West and the Islamic world. Although it has made great strides over the last decade to strengthen its credentials as a mediator, Turkey still faces divisive problems with its minority populations at home and its neighbors abroad. Nevertheless, Security Council membership may prompt Turkey to live up to its declared standards and move to resolve outstanding issues with Greece, Armenia and ethnic and religious minorities domestically.

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For decades the world was held hostage to a Cold War that pitted the capitalist West against the communist East. The United Nations, which was created in part to bridge that emerging divide, could not help but succumb to the Manichean politics of the Cold War era. The structure of the international body, designed to unite across ideological lines, served instead to divide along the very same lines. The permanent five members of the Security Council—the United States, England, France, the Soviet Union, and China—wielded their vetoes to thwart international consensus on critical issues.

Today a new and already dangerous divide has emerged between the Islamic and non-Islamic world. It has not yet coalesced into two undifferentiated blocs. After all, the United States maintains strong military and political alliances with major Islamic countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. But even within these entities can be glimpsed more exclusionary tendencies – Islamist movements that dream of restoring the caliphate and crusader movements that view the entire Islamic world as a threat to freedom and democracy.

Finally liberated from Cold War paralysis, the UN could play a role in bridging this gap. But the UN remains a Cold War structure. There are no Islamic countries among the permanent five. Among the current non-permanent members are two key Islamic countries –Indonesia and Libya– and several Islamic countries have rotated onto the body for two-year terms. But the UN does not reflect the true economic and political balance in the world today, and it remains ill-equipped to keep the peace in local and regional conflicts much less negotiate a global confessional divide.

Enter Turkey. It has been nearly 50 years since Turkey last served on the Security Council. In 2008, it will compete against Austria and Iceland for one of the two seats reserved for the “Western Europe and Others” group. In support of this campaign, Ankara has presented its strategic position between Islam and the West. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has spoken of Turkey’s unique role in “bringing religions and culture closer together to avoid a global clash of civilizations.” Over the last five years, Turkey has lobbied hard to gather support from more than 100 countries. In 2005, it joined Spain in creating the Alliance of Civilizations under the auspices of the UN to address the major polarizing tendencies within the international community.

Turkey wants a slot on the Security Council for several reasons. It would confer immeasurable prestige upon the country and provide the international political correlative to Turkey’s status as the 17th large economy in the world. It would strengthen Turkey’s position within the Muslim world. And it would improve Turkey’s case for membership in the European Union –a far greater challenge– by helping to overcome some European concerns that Turkey is somehow not part of the West.

Until recently the idea that Turkey could serve as a bridge across this new post-Cold War religious divide would have been preposterous, given its inability to resolve the conflicts in Cyprus, with Armenia, and domestically among different confessions. But Turkey has recently improved its bridge-building skills at home and abroad. Will a seat on the Security Council provide Turkey greater latitude to play this role, or is such a high-level acknowledgement of its mediating capacities and intentions premature? As importantly, perhaps, would a rotation on the Security Council change Turkey as much as Turkey hopes to change the world?

Change in the Air

A country cannot hope to serve as a mediator across global divides if it faces insuperable divisions at home. Until recently, Turkey did not admit that it had an ethnic problem for it considered all citizens of the country as Turks, according to the homogenizing nation-building model that Atatürk borrowed from Europe. While the situation is still far from ideal, a sense of ethnic diversity and tolerance is slowly emerging in Turkey. Rather than being viewed as agents of foreign powers bent on splitting up the country, ethnic groups such as the Kurds and Armenians are finally able to express their collective identity through language, culture, and political parties.

The process by which Turkey proves its bona fides –for both the EU and UN audiences– is not uncomplicated. In particular, Turkey has been a magnet for criticism lately for the ruling party's decision to overturn the headscarf restrictions which secular nationalists have argued is the thin edge of the Islamists' wedge. From the viewpoint of bridging the civilizational divide that Turkey has made the basis of its Security Council bid, however, the AKP's approach seems eminently sensible. The ruling party is struggling to accommodate Islam and democracy – in a way that Algeria, Egypt, or Syria have not yet been able to do. Initially the proposed repeal generated a large street protest, but the subsequent amendment to the constitution with the intention to allow women to wear head scarfs on college campus has not triggered a military coup (though this always remains a risk). More importantly, the repeal is extremely popular and can be justified on the grounds not only of religious freedom (an argument that goes over well in the United States) but respecting the democratic desire of the citizenry (an argument that can appeal in Europe).² As Christopher de Bellaigue has written, "It is possible that an Islamist movement with a history of intolerance and bigotry will succeed in transforming Turkish politics along genuinely democratic lines. This seems to be the task that the AKP has set itself."²

The changes are not just domestic. In January 2008, Greek Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis visited Turkey on the first official visit of a Greek leader in

¹ Owen Matthews and Sami Kohen, "The True Turkish Believer," *Newsweek*, 18 February 2008.

² Christopher de Bellaigue, "Turkey at the Turning Point?" *The New York Review of Books*, 25 October 2007.

nearly half a century. Bilateral trade is booming. A gas pipeline connects the two countries as does a military hotline. The Cyprus issue remains unresolved, as do several other questions, but the reconciliation has proceeded far enough that Athens now supports Ankara's bid for EU membership. Greece sees EU membership for Turkey as a way to inscribe particular goals –minority freedoms, resolution of border and history disputes– within the larger project of “harmonization” to European Union standards.

France, which still considers EU membership for Turkey beyond the pale, has backed Turkey's bid for a seat at the UN to signal that there are no hard feelings. What Turkey envisions as a step toward the EU, France views as a consolation prize.

A Measure of Neutrality

A country also can not serve as a mediator, in other words a friend to all sides, if it is too associated with one party in a conflict. Turkey's more neutral position in geopolitics serves it well. It is no longer the same country that enthusiastically supported the first Gulf War. A U.S. client state during the Cold War and its immediate aftermath, Turkey has more recently taken several important steps away from the U.S. camp.

For instance, Turkey's discomfort with the U.S. invasion of Iraq put it in good stead with the Islamic world. Its opening to the East –first the largely unsuccessful attempt to become the head of a new alliance of Turkic peoples, then the mending of fences with Russia, and now the cultivation of ties with the Middle East– has given a boost to Turkey's bridge-building claims. Turkey is even opening to the south. In 2005, Erdogan declared Africa a priority area for investment.³ With its numerous UN votes, important Muslim populations, and ongoing wars, Africa represents a key audience in front of which Turkey can prove its global credentials.

The United States has been concerned over Turkey's more independent foreign policy, particularly when it narrows America's room for maneuver in a strategic part of the world. But the Iraq War, and preserving stability in the Kurdish north, has transfixed the attention of the Bush administration. As such, the United States has been willing to look the other way at much of what goes on in Ankara, even if it comes at the expense of Turkish democracy.⁴ As such, Turkey has greater leverage, and greater neutrality. “It is unrealistic to assume that Turkey, with its pronounced sensitivity to questions of national sovereignty, will automatically agree to facilitate American action in the Middle East or Eurasia,” writes Ian Lesser.⁵

³ Richard Gueli and Oguzhan Kase, “Turkey Ready to Befriend Africa,” *Independent Online*, 10 February 2008

⁴ Omer Taspinar, “The Old Turks' Revolt,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2007, p. 129

⁵ Ian Lesser, *Beyond Suspicion* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2007), p. 88.

Occasionally, Turkey seems to take its role of “friend to all sides” a little too far. Erdogan’s visit to Sudan in 2006 and the return trip by Sudanese leader Omar Bashir to Turkey in January 2008 shows an inability to distinguish between cozying up to dictators and helping to mediate intractable problems by reaching out to all sides.⁶

Power of Institutions

Membership on the Security Council will make Turkey a more confident international player. Thwarted as the head of the Turkic world, it can play a more assertive role in the Muslim world. Turkey can help facilitate Kosovo’s path to independence. It can help the West understand the importance of reaching out to organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood.⁷

Of course, countries do not simply shape institutions. Institutions also shape countries. The European Union has transformed the economic and political realities of its members. NATO has restructured the militaries of its members. Even a relatively amorphous institution like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has begun to alter the course of Russian and Chinese foreign policies.

And thus, a seat on the Security Council could help to strengthen the very capabilities of which Turkey boasts. Invested with the authority to bridge a global divide, Turkey might be inspired to reach out to communities closer to home. To live up to its newly minted reputation, Ankara might move more resolutely to mend relations with Armenia and bring resolution to divided Cyprus. It might work harder to solve its disputes with Kurds in northern Iraq diplomatically rather than militarily. To demonstrate that it is committed to a true “alliance of civilizations,” Turkey might hold itself to this new higher standard at home, where to insult Turkishness remains a crime and certain minority religious communities (Alevi, Orthodox Christians) still struggle with second-class status.

Turkey aspires to a new global role. By all means, it should be invited back to serve on the Security Council – for all that Turkey can contribute to the world and for all that such global responsibilities can contribute to Turkey.

⁶ Morton Abramowitz, “Bashir in Turkey – the Unanswered Questions,” *Turkish Daily News*, 24 January 2008.

⁷ Robert Leiken and Steven Brooke, “The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2007.
