

BRIDGING THE SINCERITY GAP: A CASE FOR TURKEY'S BID FOR A NON-PERMANENT SEAT ON THE UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL

The conflict zones it works in are as politicized as its process of appointing its members. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has entered an election year and will decide which states are best fit to be non-permanent members for the 2009-2010 term. Turkey is bidding for a seat in the Western European and Others Group (WEOG) along with Austria and Iceland. With much of the Council's resources committed to the Middle East, the Council would be wise to bring Turkey into the leadership fold.

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The Republic of Turkey straddles so many supposed divides. It speaks with sincerity as a Muslim country as well as a member of NATO. Once a nation of Europe and Asia, it also belongs to several sub-regions: the Mediterranean, Southeast Europe, the Black Sea, the Caucasus and the Middle East. Like its Middle Eastern neighbors, it is directly affected by happenings in Iraq, Iran, and Syria and the consequences of deteriorating relations with the West.

So, when the neighbors sneeze, Turkey gets the flu. The contagion affect Turkey has with its sub-regions gives it every right to preach cooperation and UNSC compliance for the good of the region and the world. To borrow a Turkish idiom, Turkey will “have a finger under the stone” when pleading for regional cooperation on behalf of the Council.

Furthermore, Turkey can offset some of the stigma towards member states, who are often perceived as being physically, economically, culturally and emotionally distant from the issues at hand. It has a shared destiny with many of the places where the UNSC has intensified its efforts: Iran, Syria, Iraq, Nagorno Karabakh, Cyprus, Palestine, and Israel. The presence of Turkey in the region empowers the Council to overcome the “sincerity gap” and present itself as a true regional stakeholder.

Diplomatic Alliances

Key among Turkey’s strengths is its unique ability to pursue its national interests through a diverse range of international alliances. On the one hand, Turkey has strong ties with the United States, Europe and Israel. On the other hand, it has been pursuing, for the past few years, a track of deepening diplomatic relations with all its Middle East neighbors including Iran and Syria.

Turkey’s broad-reaching involvement in multilateral organizations speaks of its strategic significance in world order. It is party to all major global organizations, including the United Nations and the World Trade Organization. It has security cooperation through its membership of NATO as well as with Asia through CICA-Confidence Building Measures in Asia. Its diplomatic relations reach the West through the Council of Europe and its Candidacy for full Membership to the European Union, and the East through the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). Its trade alliances span northwards through the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC) to Central Asia through the Federation of Euro-Asian Stock Exchanges, while remaining a member of the OECD, having a customs union with the European Union and the G-20. It has held observer status in the Organization of American States since 1998. These diverse alliances are valuable levers to add thrust to the Council’s peace initiatives.

Taking one example, the Israeli - Palestinian conflict, Turkey could help bring the debate away from one frequently framed along religion lines. UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Lynn Pascoe explained to Council members in January that events surrounding the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip following Israel's closure of the territory underscore the gap between "the aspirations of the political process and the grim realities of the situation on the ground."¹ Past experience demonstrates that brokering peace in this conflict is beyond bringing Israelis and Palestinians to the table but also getting the cooperation of others, mainly the USA, Iran, and Syria. Only Turkey has fully functioning diplomatic relations with all groups party to the conflict.

Common Economic Spaces

Over recent years, Turkey has intensified its purchasing and supplying relationships with neighboring countries and regions. It has matured its manufacturing industries to become a leading supplier for white goods (home appliances), food products, textiles, and automobiles to the European and the Middle Eastern markets.

Turkey's trade with its Middle East neighbors is rapidly increasing with registered annual trade volumes with Iraq reaching three billion dollars, Iran eight billion dollars, and Syria approximately one billion dollar. Regional oil and gas producers are now flush with capital, and are investing heavily in the Turkish real estate, telecoms, and infrastructure.

Trade between Turkey and the EU has reached a record annual trade volume of 110 billion dollars, much to the credit of Turkey's progress to EU accession.

For investors, the discussion of whether Turkey belongs in Europe or Asia seems increasingly irrelevant. Turkey provides geostrategic advantages for production and export to both geographies.

An abrupt slowdown in Turkey's economy would have a considerable impact on neighboring countries and the regional economy. Economic shocks emanating from conflict or trade sanctions in a single nation will be felt regionally. That kind of sensitivity cannot be said for the other candidate members of the UNSC. Turkey is thus able to present security proposals of the council with economic implications as a regional stakeholder.

Looking West from Turkey, in the last four years, the Republic has anchored itself in the EU *acquis* and begun streamlining its legislation in-line with EU standards. Consequently, foreign investment has poured in at unprecedented

¹ "UN Security Council Holds Open Debate on Middle East", http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-01/31/content_7529653.htm

sums, exceeding 40 billion dollars in the last four years. A number of global investors have identified Turkey as an optimal manufacturing base and distribution point for sales to the Middle East, Central Asia, Europe, and Africa.

According to Alpaslan Korkmaz, head of the Prime Ministry of Turkey Investment Support and Promotion Agency, “Turkey is becoming a major center for trade, manufacturing, engineering and development for Europe, the Middle East as well as America and East Asia. Our unique geographic position places us in an advantageous position for businesses serving markets in three continents.”²

Cultural and Ethnic Ties in the East and the West

Turkey’s Ottoman Empire legacy brought together a vast geography reaching from the doorstep of Russia in the North, to the rim of Africa in the South, and from India in the East to Bosnia in the West. For centuries a common culture emerged and in some areas the Islamic faith practiced and the Turkic language spoken (Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan). Turkey has significant ethnic intermixtures with many Turks proudly claiming their family ties to neighboring regions.

Today, Turkey celebrates its shared heritage with states of Central Asia and the Caucasus through countless festivals and exhibitions. Promoting this shared identity naturally warms social and diplomatic relations thereby deepening trust.

Some 3.5 million Turks reside in the European Union and 300,000-400,000 in the United States. Mehmet Çelebi, a Turkish-American community leader and former Vice President of the Assembly of Turkish-American Associations which serves to foster US-Turkish relations says, “The Turkish-American community tops the economic and social pyramid of the United States. We are represented in the country’s top companies, universities and hospitals at the leadership levels from the CEO of the Coca-Cola Company to world renowned surgeons like Dr. Mehmet Öz”.³

Religious Ties

For many, the most critical divide on the international scene today is between the Islamic world and the West. Today, this secular, Muslim-majority nation is striving for the correct balance between its religious identity and its secular republicanism, upholding the rule of law and maintaining social diversity, all within an understanding of a pluralist democratic system. Turkey has developed stronger religious credentials with the Muslim world in recent years. Western nations need Turkey as a bridge between nations and faiths. This is particularly true today when Western credibility in the Middle East is at a low point.

² Interview, 22 February 2008.

³ Private interview, 19 February 2008.

Resource Security

Turkey is energy dependent and its annual cost of total energy imports was 29 billion dollars in 2006. This reliance has created a diplomatic lever against Turkey from supplier countries. However, the current and planned construction of new routes through Turkey diversifies its supply. Turkey's neighbors are flush with natural resources and Turkey offers the most feasible transit route for their export. Turkey is now vying to become the Rotterdam of the Near East since it is geographically positioned to be the gateway country for oil and gas originating from Russia, the Caspian, the Middle East and North Africa. A gas pipeline now extends beyond Turkey into Greece, but graduation to a major energy corridor country requires the expansion of other pipelines westward to Europe as well as southward toward Lebanon and Israel.

Turkey's recent gas production and pipeline agreement with Iran took it a step closer to its goal of becoming a major "energy bridge" for oil and gas supplies from several Caspian states to Europe. This energy bridge will increase its dominance in the region and elevate its importance with the EU. It appears that the most viable source of non-Russian gas for the EU is Iran, and will remain so for decades. Feasibility studies are underway to develop an LNG liquefaction hub to export Russian and possibly Iranian gas to Europe and the U.S.

Turkey's significance as an energy bridge gives her significant importance in the realm of energy security. In both supply and demand side countries Turkey's pleads for security cooperation will resonate loudly.

What Turkey lacks in home harvested oil and gas resources it compensates with water supplies. The Tigris and the Euphrates originate in Turkey and flow south through Syria and Iraq. Syria and Iraq are both dependent on a consistent flow of water from Turkey and on heightened alert to the possibility of dwindling supplies. 21st century water diplomacy is likened to the energy diplomacy of the 20th century.

Military Support

Beyond its regional alliances and cultural ties, Turkey is also regionally preeminent and globally recognized for her ability to wage "diplomacy by other means." Born from the crucible of defending her territorial integrity in the aftermath of the First World War, Turkey's military capacity has served as a bedrock of national confidence. From the Cuban missile crisis and the Korean War to Turkish contributions to UN peacekeeping, and from its role in two Iraq wars to a variety of other regional security confrontations, Turkey has played a role that a less militarily powerful nation would not have been able to do. It is one of the few countries in its region with heavy-lift capacity and she has a proven willingness to deploy her assets in Somalia, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kosovo and, more

recently, Lebanon. Turkey has the largest army in Europe and the eighth largest in the world.

Turkey has supported UN initiatives on regional and global levels in providing troops, civilian police officers to Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Balkans, The Caucasus and the Middle East. When a UN mandated force is conscribed, Turkey has considerable resources on hand. And if it were part of the decision making process, it would arguably be more willing to do so. According to Col. Sadi Çaycı, Associate Prof Dr in Public International Law from the Turkish Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies (ASAM), “Turkey’s level of commitment to UN sponsored efforts would likely be greater if she served on its Security Council, and received more fair treatment from her Western friends and allies, especially in her struggle against terrorism.”

Opposing Perspectives

Some opponents suspect that Turkey’s intimate ties to certain UNSC disputes spoils its capacity to address such disputes objectively. One involves longstanding disputes with Greece – including the divided island of Cyprus as well as airspace and sea boundaries in the Aegean Sea. To Turkey’s credit she made a sincere gesture to break the deadlock over Cyprus by backing the Annan Plan. The historical visit of Greek Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis to Turkey on January 23 (the first of a Greek premier in 50 years) was a mutual call for rapprochement. Considering Turkey’s admission to the EU hinges on a resolution, it is in Turkey’s interest to do so.

Armenia, another opponent, gives a veiled opposition to Turkey’s appointment by suggesting that the addition of a non-permanent Muslim member could cause divisions in the council along religious lines. Their case in point is Pakistan who as a non-member singly sided with Muslim Azerbaijan over the plight of the Azeris in the Armenian enclave of Nagorno Karabakh. Turkey, a close ally of Azerbaijan, has clearly stated its support for Azeris over the dispute. But Turkey’s differences with Armenia are more rooted in a nationalist response to Armenian claims of genocide of Ottoman Armenians in WWI. These standing disputes remain the pretext for Turkey’s refusal to open its border for trade with landlocked Armenia.

Conclusion

Turkey’s significance in bridging the sincerity gap is best described by President Abdullah Gül:

Turkey is in a unique position to serve as a bridge between the Islamic world and the West... it has contributed to peacekeeping forces from Bosnia to Afghanistan, provided humanitarian aid to Palestinian and to Sudan's war-ravaged Darfur region, and worked to promote stability in the Middle East. For this reason, our bid for the non-permanent seat is in tune with Turkey's larger efforts to secure peace, stability and security in its region and beyond. The U.N. Security Council should have a more representative and balanced character.

Turkey's capacity to assume a leading role in fostering confidence and trust between the West and the Muslim world is gleaned from its own successes. The country's respectability and credibility evolves from her religious, cultural, and ethnic ties, burgeoning economy, natural resource interdependency, and regional military pre-eminence. Such a cadre of attributes could empower Turkey to help break diplomatic standoffs on behalf of the Council.