

Environmental Perspective for Turkish Foreign Policy - Senem Atvur



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Deepening environmental/ecological degradation and the understanding of transboundary impacts of ecological problems led to the development of international environmental politics and cooperation. Since 1972, when the first international initiative on the environment -the UN Stockholm Conference- was launched, nation-states' ecological policies have been influenced by international/global decisions and/or regulations. To cope with the complex environmental problems such as pollution, water shortages, deforestation, erosion, biodiversity loss, ozone depletion, nuclear fallout, climate change and their multidimensional (political, economic, social, and ecological) impacts, global cooperation among states and between state and non-state actors become indispensable.

As environmental politics have been shaped through bottom-up mechanisms within the global ecological negotiations, certain states have begun integrating an environmental perspective into their foreign policy strategies. Environmental foreign policy is a relatively new approach regarding states' policies toward ecological challenges. It defines how states determine their position in international negotiations and safeguard their interests in intrastate and international bargains regarding environmental regulations. In this context, the role and influence of bureaucracy, political elites, and different domestic political and social forces are considered regarding the environmental foreign policy-making process.

Turkey faces crucial environmental challenges due to the ecological destruction in and beyond the state borders. The first environmental institutions in Turkey were established after 1972 following international initiatives. Accordingly, Turkish ecological policy has been formed harmoniously with international regulations, especially by emphasizing the principle of sustainable development and common but differentiated responsibilities. However, the priority of economic growth and development in

Turkish

politics has so far affected the implementation of national environmental regulations, compliance with international ecological procedures, and environmental protection processes. Aggravating environmental problems in Turkey, such as air, water, land pollution, deforestation, and biodiversity loss, create vital risks for health, agriculture, and economic and ecological sustainability.

Moreover, as Turkey is located in one of the climate hotspots of the World -the Mediterranean Basin- the vulnerability of the country has been rising. While the current environmental problems could not be handled solely by the national and/or local governments, climate change, with its potential to multiply the existing risks, poses a significant challenge for Turkey. Therefore, the need for a comprehensive environmental policy that focuses on the root causes of ecological problems and considers future generations' rights has been increasing. Undoubtedly, this new political perspective should include an environmental foreign policy approach, not only for defending the state's interests in international negotiations and not to be excluded from the global community in climate combat but also for strengthening the environmental/ecological and climate resilience of the country.

Environmental issues and climate change have been secondary to Turkish foreign policy. During the ratification process of the Kyoto Protocol, Turkey used diplomatic instruments to change the country's position regarding the responsibility to reduce carbon emissions and assist developing countries. It did not ratify the Paris Agreement for five years with similar economic concerns. Since Turkey has not identified environmental issues and climate change as primary risks or threats, its foreign policy strategy does not include a specific and comprehensive ecological approach. However, Turkey's difficult position in climate negotiations due to the delayed ratification process and the lack of coordination among the national institutions working on environmental issues reveal that a new integrated approach is needed to execute an active foreign policy regarding environmental and climate change policies, develop cooperation between domestic and international institutions, improve country's prestige, and create a vision

foreseeing future risks and opportunities.

The climate crisis, one of the most challenging problems in the global system, creates a vacuum at the intersection of deepening ecological, social, economic, and political concerns. Climate mitigation and adaptation policy achievement, which depends on the states' decisions, commitments, and multipartite cooperation, are vital for coping with climate change's current and future impacts. Beyond participating in climate negotiations, it is necessary to play an active role in them to improve cooperation with different actors -states, corporations, and civil society-to strengthen resilience, and influence other actors' positions. The world is on the threshold of a wide-ranging transformation process; climate change, new technologies, renewable energy, Industry 4.0, and the green economy encourage all actors, institutions, and practices to change. Therefore, an environmental perspective integrated into the Turkish foreign policy would ensure an active climate strategy. This strategy could also serve as a basis to follow and adapt to the global transformation processes. This environmental perspective would no doubt be an alternative to the economy-oriented policies of Turkey that favor short-term economic interests and the sustainability of economic growth. However, a new perspective prioritizing ecological sustainability and social equity would improve Turkey's environmental and climate policies and increase its contribution to climate combat and global environmental protection.

Creating an ecological perspective for foreign policy is not easy as this perspective prioritizes the interdependence between nature and humans and aims to balance economic and social needs with ecological sustainability and the rights of other species. However, an environmental foreign policy, which is more mainstream than the former, ensures at least the implementation of more conscious policies for environmental protection, climate combat, and international cooperation. In this regard, Turkey's environmental foreign policy could be considered a realistic choice rather than a romantic aspect. First, from an ecological perspective, Turkey could improve its position in climate negotiations, participate in multilateral cooperation to develop its mitigation and adaptation measures, and strengthen its bargaining capacity to access new renewable technologies. Additionally, enhancing climate

cooperation could create a spill-over effect to establish political relations for solving everyday problems. Hence, emissions reduction could be facilitated, and the resilience of the states, societies, and vulnerable communities, in particular, could be improved by preserving nature, building social justice, and considering future generations' rights.

Moreover, adopting an environmental perspective could also be compatible with the central aspect of Turkish foreign policy. "Peace at home, peace in the world", the long-used motto of the Turkish foreign policy, could also be referred to in connection with the climate crisis. As the impacts of climate change have the potential to create different risks to the state, people, economy, social integrity, and biodiversity in Turkey, the environmental perspective might be the key to maintaining security in a broadened way. Hence, Turkey's domestic and foreign policy strategies could be integrated to improve living conditions, the sustainability of ecosystems, and a fair economic model.

Furthermore, climate change has been causing interrelated problems threatening the political and socio-economic stability, human life, and the ecosystem in the immediate neighborhood. Thus, crises inflamed in these regions would possibly affect Turkey's security and stability. Therefore, if Turkish foreign policy comprises an environmental perspective that aims to contribute to regional peace and play an active role in solving humanitarian crises, Turkey might present more proactive approaches to future challenges caused by climate change and other consequences of ecological destruction. In this regard, it must be remembered that climate change has the potential to galvanize intra and inter-state conflicts. As a result of an offensive foreign policy prioritizing military power or a conflictual perspective undermining compromise and reconciliation, international discords, new migration flows, and intermingled humanitarian and environmental crises could be aggravated and become more problematic to solve.

According to the climate projections based on

scientific data, even in optimistic scenarios, humanity will face worsening economic, social, political, and environmental challenges by the second half of the 21st century. In this sense, the future of the international system and community will depend on the states' preferences on whether they isolate themselves from the international system to handle these complex risks or create global horizontal cooperation between states and non-state actors. Foreign policy strengthened with an environmental aspect could be the cornerstone of this kind of cooperation. Therefore, if Turkey redesigns its foreign policy with an ecological perspective, it could be easier to holistically consider the impacts of environmental degradation and climate change, humanitarian crises, and political conflicts. Hence, the resilience of Turkey toward the future of intersected concerns could be strengthened. In an evolving global system, Turkey could find a new place and redefine its position for the sake of future generations only if it could understand the pertinence of the environment for a life of dignity and sustainability.



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To cite this work: Senem Atvur, “Environmental Perspective for Turkish Foreign Policy” Panorama, Online, 19 December 2022, <https://www.uikpanorama.com/blog/2022/12/19/sa/>



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This article has been prepared with the support provided to the [International](#)

[Relations Council](#) and the [Global Academy](#) by the Heinrich Böll Stiftung Association Turkey Representative within the scope of the project titled 'Foreign Policy for the 21st Century; Peaceful, Equitable, and Dynamic Turkey'.

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