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Turkey and China: Seeking a Sustainable Partnership

Selçuk Çolakođlu



ABSTRACT

Turkey and China have forged a good economic and political relationship in the current decade. Both countries provide great economic, political, and strategic opportunities for each other in their own regions. Despite Ankara's effort to push for a more integrated Uyghur community in Xinjiang under the Chinese Administration, the current difficulties transformed the issue into a problem area between China and Turkey. Turkey's reiteration of its one-China policy may motivate China to display certain signs of improvement on the conditions of the Uyghur people. There is still considerable need to strengthen the relationship between Turkey and China and transform it into a strategic partnership. Realization of this prospect requires more systematic effort from both countries.



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Selçuk Çolakoğlu*

Recent History of Turkish-Chinese Relations

Turkey recognized the People's Republic of China (PRC) on August 5th, 1971 as the sole legal representative of China. While the 1970s and 1980s were marked by low levels of exchanges between China and Turkey, the bilateral relationship gained a new momentum and form after the radical transformation in the geopolitical structure of Central Asia. It was the collapse of the USSR (The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) and the emergence of newly independent Turkic States (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) that enabled Turkey to re-discover Central Asia in its foreign policy in that region. The Turkish public emotionally welcomed the newly born Turkic republics and began to pay more attention to Turkic and Muslim groups living in the Russian Federation and Xinjiang (Eastern Turkistan)¹ region of China.² However, enormous and unexpected Turkish public interest toward non-independent Turkic peoples living in Russia and China in the first half of the 1990s consequently made Moscow and Beijing more suspicious of Ankara's intentions. As a result, Russia and China displayed a negative attitude against Turkish policy toward Central Asia and the Caucasus.

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1. The terms of 'Xinjiang' and 'Eastern Turkistan' are used synonymously in this article. Both terms refers to Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in Northwestern China. Turkish literature, unlike English literature, commonly uses 'Eastern Turkistan' as the name of the region instead of 'Xinjiang'. However, the PRC has absolutely rejected any kind of use of 'East Turkistan' as a moral support to the separatists.

2. Selçuk Çolakoğlu, "The Turkic Brotherhood Policy and Its Effects on Globalization Process in Central Asia", *International Seminar on Globalization and Eurasia*, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, November 9, 2008.

Turkey considered China as a major potential trade partner and attempted to improve economic relations with Beijing.

The initial emotional welcome for the Turkic world has been followed by an adoption of a more pragmatic regional policy by Ankara due to certain economic, political, and strategic shortcomings. Since the mid-1990s, Turkey has pursued a more cautious diplomatic policy toward Central Asia instead of an assertive policy, and tried to improve relations with Russia and China. In this respect, Turkish officials began to pay more attention to the Chinese authority's stance on Xinjiang/Eastern Turkistan. The new Turkish regional policy was warmly welcomed by China. This pragmatic shift found its positive responses within a short time, such as the speech delivered by the Chinese Ambassador to Turkey, Wu Koming, on February 16th, 1997, which emphasized that Turkey and China's relations were very good politically and both governments had a very respectful stance on one another's territorial integrity.³

The Scope of Bilateral Relations

Turkey revised its policy toward China in 1997 because of certain political, economic, and security concerns. At that time, Turkey was going through its own domestic political instability, which was coupled with a sense of international isolation. In this context, Turkey began to have a more problematic relationship with some of its traditional allies, particularly because of the increasingly harsh criticism of Turkey by the EU and the US, as they were accusing Turkey of violating human rights in the Turkey's struggle against the PKK, a separatist terrorist organization targeting not only military but also civilians. Feeling isolated in the international realm, Turkey, a close ally of the Western bloc during the Cold War period, began to look for new political support for its policies. In this way, China as an economic giant and a permanent member of the UN Security Council was found to be a potential strategic partner for Turkey. It was assumed that China might play a balancing role for Turkish foreign policy in international relations. Further, in terms of the economy, Turkey considered China as a major potential trade partner and attempted to improve economic relations with Beijing. In addition, China, providing economically more feasible options, was a strategic alternative for Turkey's defense industry.⁴ Beijing wanted to gain a share of Turkey's developing defense market, while Ankara considered Beijing as a potential source for defense technology.⁵

While these concerns encouraged Turkey to improve its relationship with China, China had its own reasons to push for a more positive policy toward Turkey. Turkey was seen as a potential gate to the Middle East, the Caucasus and the Balkans in the eyes of

3. Abdülhamit Bilici, "D. Türkistan insan hakları istiyor", *Aksiyon*, sayı 116, 22 Şubat 1997.

4. Eyüp Ersoy, *Turkish-Chinese Military Relations*, Ankara, USAK Press, 2008, pp.113-115.

5. Ümit Enginsoy and Burak Ege Bekdil, "Uighur Crisis Sours Turkey on Chinese Arms", *Defense News*, 20 July 2009.

the Chinese to expand their economic influence. A possible Chinese-Turkish partnership would have provided Beijing with a more efficient role in West Asia. Additionally, getting Turkey's support was critical for China's domestic ethnic issues specifically because of its international implications. Turkey has the largest and the most active Eastern Turkistan Diaspora in the world and Turkish people were highly sympathetic to the pro-independence Uyghur activists, due to their ethnic and religious affinities. After the collapse of the Second East Turkistan Republic (1944-1949), many Republican loyalists, including Mehmet Emin Buğra and İsa Yusuf Alptekin, fled into exile to Turkey and began to organize a strong pro-independence campaign for the Turkish public.⁶ China, by providing international political support and some economic benefits to Turkey, expected to see a pro-Chinese position by Turkey on the Xinjiang issue.⁷

The consequent developments predicate China's expectations. A sharp transformation in Turkey's policy shift toward China and on Xinjiang issue was seen most symbolically in the secret Prime Ministry circular signed by Mesut Yılmaz in December 1998. The circular letter banned Turkish ministers and bureaucrats from attending any kind of activities organized by Eastern Turkistan institutions in Turkey.⁸

President Jiang Zemin's Turkey visit on April 18-21, 2000 was a clear declaration of the opening of a new chapter in bilateral relations. At the summit, President Süleyman Demirel and President Jiang Zemin signed several agreements in the field of political, economic, and energy cooperation. The presidents made a common statement on the compromise of fighting against international terrorism, ethnic separatism, and religious extremism.⁹ China, through these agreements and statements, had taken enough guarantees from Turkish officials not interfere with the Eastern Turkistan issue. In contrast, Turkey left all the initiative to China without establishing any concrete proposal or program for protecting the minority rights of the Uyghur people. Turkey had to content itself with considering the Uyghur people as a friendship bridge between two countries.¹⁰

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Seeking a New Framework for Bilateral Relations

Throughout the developments in the bilateral relations from 1997 to 2009, China has had an advantage, as the relations have been oriented in China's favor, at least in the economic field. As is mentioned previously, one of the main motivations of Ankara's

6. İsa Yusuf Alptekin, *Doğu Türkistan Davası*, İstanbul, Seha Neşriyat, 1992, s. 261.

7. Reuters, "China seeks Turkish help against Muslim separatism", *MSNBC*, 18 April 2002.

8. *Hürriyet*, "Başbakanlıktan Gizli Doğu Türkistan Genelgesi", 4 Şubat 1999.

9. *Cumhuriyet*, "Çin'le Gündem, Uyghurlar", 19 Nisan 2000.

10. *Sabah*, "Bu kadarını da beklemiyordum", 20 Nisan 2000.

According to 2008 figures, China had a large trade surplus with Turkey in the amount of 15.5 billion dollars.

rapprochement with Beijing was to ensure certain economic advantages for Turkish businessmen in China. However, the increasing trade volume with China caused huge trade imbalances for Turkey. According to 2008 figures, China had a large trade surplus with Turkey in the amount of 15.5 billion dollars. Despite economic imbalances, Chinese investment in Turkey remained at a mere 60 million dollars in 2008.¹¹

There were also certain issues, which have undermined Turkish trust of Chinese political and economic promises. The *Varyag* case, an old Soviet aircraft carrier bought by China from the Ukraine in 1998 is one of those examples. China gave assurance to Turkey that *Varyag* would be used for touristic purposes only in passing through the Turkish straits in 2001 and permission for passage was requested. However, China modernized *Varyag* as a warship in 2009,¹² which was in clear violation of the Montreux Convention regulating military activity in the Black Sea.¹³ China also promised Turkey that 1 million Chinese tourists would visit Turkey in return for the passage permission of *Varyag*, however, the number of Chinese visiting Turkey reached only 100,000 by 2007.¹⁴

In addition to the mentioned issues, cooperation with Beijing in the defense industry did not meet Ankara's expectations. Turkish demand to reduce its dependency on the Western defense system through transferring military technology from China did not reach the initial targeted level. From Turkey's standpoint, its international situation was no better off. In fact, Beijing adopted positions contrary to Turkish policies in such cases as Kosovo, Bosnia, Cyprus, and Karabag.¹⁵ Furthermore, China, as of 2003, began to establish very close relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. In particular, at a time when the crisis between Turkey and KRG escalated because of the PKK militants' infiltration onto the Turkish soil.¹⁶ China has officially objected to a possible cross-border operation by Turkey into neighboring Iraq in order to eliminate the presence of the PKK based in Northern Iraq since June 2007. The Chinese spokesperson made no comment on whether China considers the PKK as a terrorist organization during Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's official visit to Beijing in June 2007.¹⁷ All these policy differences and difficulties emerged in the bilateral relations, increasing Turkey's suspicion of China's intentions regarding Turkey's neighboring regions.

11. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, "Turkey's Commercial and Economic Relations with China", http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-commercial-and-economic-relations-with-china.en.mfa, (21.09.2009).

12. *Akşam*, "Çin Hükümetinden Varyag Kazığı", 7 Ocak 2008.

13. Ian Storey and You Ji, "China's Aircraft Carrier Ambitions: Seeking Truth from Rumors", *Naval War College Review*, Winter 2004, Vol. 57, No.1.

14. *Star*, "Çin Varyag'ın Bedelini Taksitle Gönderiyor!", 24 Aralık 2007.

15. Eyüp Ersoy, *Turkish-Chinese Military Relations*, Ankara, USAK Press, 2008, pp.160-168.

16. Yitzhak Shichor, "China's Kurdish Policy", *China Brief*, Volume: 6 Issue: 1, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=3919&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=381&cHash=e9c8e65b75](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=3919&tx_ttnews[backPid]=381&cHash=e9c8e65b75).

17. *Today's Zaman*, "China officially objects to incursion into Iraq", June 30, 2007.

President Abdullah Gül's China visit in June 2009 was carried out in this context. The Turkey had tangible demands from China. Economically, Turkey wanted compensation of the bilateral trade imbalances in favor of China through an increase in Chinese investments in Turkey, inbound tourism from China, joint-ventures in other countries, and more opening of the Chinese market to Turkish products.¹⁸ During this visit, Turkey and China did build a new political partnership. And President Gül stressed Turkey's "one-China" policy and repeated the emphasis that Xinjiang is an integral part of China.¹⁹ Indeed, Beijing's trust in Ankara's "one-China" stance was exemplified in granting President Gül a visit to Xinjiang, a rare opportunity seldom given to foreign visitors. President Gül said, in his speech on 28 June 2009 at Xinjiang University in Urumchi, that Xinjiang constituted one of the most important bonds between the two countries, and that the Uyghur people in Xinjiang would form a bridge of friendship between China and Turkey.²⁰ In sum, President Gül's China visit was a successful breakthrough.

Xinjiang Issues

East Turkistan (today's Xinjiang) refers to the eastern part of the greater Turkistan region of Central Asia, dominated by Turkic-Muslim peoples. Since the mid-19th century, Russia had occupied the western part and China expanded toward the eastern part of Turkistan. However until 1949, because of the instability of Chinese governance, China's control over Eastern Turkistan was weak. In fact, Eastern Turkistan declared a short-lived independence twice in its history, once in 1933 and the other time in 1944. The instability in the control over the region ended when the Chinese People's Army entered and took control of Xinjiang in 1949.²¹ The new Communist Regime under the leadership of Mao Zedong established the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in 1955 and granted some political and cultural rights to all ethnic groups.²² According to the Regional Autonomy System, which was put into effect in Xinjiang, 16 district-level, 6 county-level and 5 special office-level national autonomous regions were founded. Although 13 different nationalities have been officially recognized by China in the region, Xinjiang has been known more as the land of the Uyghur people,

Beijing's trust in Ankara's "one-China" stance was exemplified in granting President Gül a visit to Xinjiang, a rare opportunity seldom given to foreign visitors.

18. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, "Turkey's Commercial and Economic Relations with China", http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-commercial-and-economic-relations-with-china.en.mfa (15.08.2009).

19. *China View*, "China raises five-point proposal on advancing relations with Turkey", 25 June 2009, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-06/25/content_11602403.htm

20. Selçuk Çolakoğlu, "Cumhurbaşkanı Gül'ün Çin Ziyaretinden İzlenimler", *USAK Gündem*, 31 Temmuz 2009. <http://www.usakgundem.com>

21. Michael Clarke, "Xinjiang and China's Relations with Central Asia, 1991-2001: Across the 'Domestic - Foreign Frontiers'?", *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol.4, No.2, June 2003, pp.209-210.

22. *The Facts and Figures on Xinjiang, China, 2009*, China Intercontinental Press, p.59.

The Uyghur dissidents accuse China of trying to assimilate minority groups in Xinjiang under the dominant Han culture.

similar to other cases in Central Asia, such as Kazakhstan for the Kazakhs, Tajikistan for Tajiks, etc. According to Chinese statistics in 2008, Uyghur people consist of 46% of the total population (21 million) of Xinjiang. The Han population is 39%, the Kazakhs are 7%, and the Hui nationality (Chinese Muslims) constitutes 4.5%. The remaining 9 nationalities have a population of less than 1 % each.²³ However, dissident Uyghur sources indicate that the Uyghur population in Xinjiang actually exceeds 15 million.²⁴

In the first years of PRC's sovereignty, the Uyghur people had enjoyed autonomous political, cultural and economic rights. However, from 1949 to 2009 the rights of the Uyghurs and other ethnic groups have been systematically undermined by the central government.²⁵ The Uyghur dissidents accuse China of trying to assimilate minority groups in Xinjiang under the dominant Han culture.²⁶ Some of the major problems faced by the Uyghurs are indicated below:

1. *Compulsory Bi-Lingual Education for Minority Groups*: The Chinese Ministry of Education made nine-year bi-lingual education compulsory for all ethnic minorities and the project extended to 96 percent of all ethnic counties by 2008. The program will cover all minority areas by 2010. According to this system, minority groups have been urged to learn the language of their own ethnic group and the standard Chinese at the same time. Consequently, education in minority languages like Uyghur was reduced if not discarded. The Chinese Ministry of Education justified the project arguing that minority groups would have the opportunity to explore the whole of China with the help of the Chinese.²⁷ However, the Uyghur dissidents claim that Beijing has tried to weaken the Uyghur language and the so-called bilingual education system includes only some symbolic classes in the Uyghur language, while the Chinese language dominates the whole education system.²⁸ Further, the Uyghur language has been disappearing day by day from the streets of Xinjiang cities. Even today, the majority of new road signs in Xinjiang include only Chinese rather than the bi-lingual form of Uyghur and Chinese.²⁹ The official use of sinicized toponyms in minority regions (e.g., *Tacheng* for *Chöchäk*, *Kashi* for *Kashgar*) reinforces the impression that minority languages are being deliberately eradicated.³⁰

23. *The Facts and Figures on Xinjiang, China, 2009*, Beijing, China Intercontinental Press, 2009, p.26.

24. Uyghur American Association, "About Uyghurs", <http://www.uyghuramerican.org/categories/About-Uyghurs/>, (30.10.2009).

25. Stephen E. Hess, "Islam, Local Elites, and China's Missteps in Integrating the Uyghur Nation", *Journal of Central Asian & Caucasian Studies*, Vol.4, No.7, 2009, pp.93-94.

26. Remi Castets, "Doğu Türkistan'da Gerginlik Artıyor", *Doğu Türkistan'ın Sesi*, Yıl:25, Sayı:69-70, 2009.

27. Tan Yingzi, "Bilingual education key for development", *China Daily*, 3 August 2009.

28. Stephen E. Hess, "Islam, Local Elites, and China's Missteps in Integrating the Uyghur Nation", *Journal of Central Asian & Caucasian Studies*, Vol.4, No.7, 2009, p.89.

29. Selçuk Çolakoğlu, "Doğu Türkistan İzlenimleri", *Anayurttan Atayurda Türk Dünyası Dergisi*, Yıl:9, Sayı:21, 2001, ss.69-79.

30. Arienne M. Duyer, *The Xinjiang Conflict: Uyghur Identity, Language Policy, and Political Discourse*, Policy Studies 15, Washington, East-West Center, 2005, s.51

2. *Restrictions on Religious Freedom:* The Chinese Communist Authority has put forward some restrictions on education and practice of Islam in Xinjiang. Young Muslim generations have serious difficulties in learning and practicing their religion.³¹ These restrictions on the daily practices of Xinjiang Muslims constitute a clear violation of basic human rights.³² For instance, according to the US Congressional Executive Commission on China, local governments and schools called for increased control over religious activities during Ramadan in 2007, such as banning students from fasting, forbidding teachers and other state employees from engaging in religious activities, and requiring local restaurants to remain open during the holiday.³³

3. *Destroying the Old Towns of Xinjiang Cities:* Chinese authorities have been destroying the old towns of historical cities like Kashgar, Turfan and Hotan. The Chinese government has justified its urban transformation policy by arguing that the relocation will improve residents' quality of life and that the old quarters are vulnerable to potential fires and earthquakes. Most interestingly, Old Kashgar was not included on a list of Silk Road sites that Beijing recently submitted to UNESCO for World Heritage Status. This has been done despite the fact that the ancient quarter of Kashgar city has been considered one of Central Asia's best-preserved sites of Turkic-Islamic architecture and the heart of Uyghur cultural identity.³⁴ Chinese authorities are planning to knock down at least 85 percent of Old Kashgar.³⁵ Almost half the Kashgar residents will be relocated to modern housing units almost 8 kilometers from their original homes, without consulting with those who will be displaced. Urban transformation plans have also accelerated the Han Chinese migration into Xinjiang's cities, including Kashgar.³⁶

4. *Economic Discrimination of Minorities:* The vast majority of the new jobs in Xinjiang are state-affiliated and many of those positions are off-limits to the Muslim citizens. The Han Chinese has dominantly occupied the majority of high-rank positions at the regional administration offices and companies.³⁷ For instance, the state-run Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, the largest development company in

Young Muslim generations have serious difficulties in learning and practicing their religion.

31. Graham Fuller and Jonathan Lipman, "Islam in Xinjiang", *Beyond Islam: Understanding the Muslim World Curriculum*, World Affairs Council, 2005. www.world-affairs.org

32. Dru C. Gladney, "Islam in China: Accommodation or Separatism?", *The China Quarterly*, Vol.174, June 2003, pp.458-460.

33. US Congressional – Executive Commission on China, "China Human Rights and Rule of Law Update: Xinjiang Items from the January 2008 CECC Newsletter", 5 May 2008, <http://www.cecc.gov/pages/virtualAcad/newsletterListing.php?NLdate=20080131&show=XINJ>, (28.10.2009)

34. George Michell, Marika Vicziany and Tsui Yen Hu, *Kashgar: Oasis City on China's Old Silk Road*, Singapore, Frances Lincoln Ltd., 2008, p.12.

35. Michael Wines, "To Protect an Ancient City, China Moves to Raze It" *The New York Times*, May 27, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/28/world/asia/28kashgar.html?_r=2&pagewanted=1&ref=global-home.

36. Ishaan Tharoor, "Tearing Down Old Kashgar: Another Blow to the Uighurs", *Time*, July 29, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1913166,00.html?xid=rss-topsto>

37. Abanti Bhattacharya, "Conceptualizing Uyghur Separatism in Chinese Nationalism", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol.27, No.3, July-September 2003, pp.368-369.



The Urumchi riots have terribly undermined the new Turkish-Chinese partnership concept.

the province, filled 800 of 840 new job openings with the Han Chinese. Such policies exacerbate inequality between the Han and the non-Han nationalities in Xinjiang.³⁸

The practice of nationality policy of the PRC shows that Beijing has tried to build-up a nation-state relying on the Han Chinese. China highly mistrusts its ethnic nationalities, particularly those living in border areas and representing a majority in their regions like the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the Tibetans in Tibet, and the Koreans in Manchuria. Beijing has an official minority policy and is usually very suspicious of any kind of civil demands by the members of any minority groups. All those policies have negatively impacted the human rights record of China. Most recently, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, expressed concern over the recent events in Eastern Turkistan and Tibet declaring that the underlying causes include “discrimination and the failure to protect minority rights,” while delivering an “update report” to the 12th session of the UN Human Rights Council on 15 September 2009.³⁹

Reconsidering Turkey-China Relations and Possible Policy Coordination to the Xinjiang Question

The Urumchi riots erupted on July 5th 2009. Just six days after President Gül’s Urumchi visit. Consequently, they have terribly undermined the new Turkish-Chinese partnership concept. Despite the fact that the Xinjiang region has been the most fragile aspect of bilateral relationships, there was no systematic effort on the Chinese side to resolve the Uyghurs problems. Essentially, the main problem has been the inadequacy of China’s minority policy that fell behind international human rights standards. Despite Ankara’s effort to push for a more integrated Uyghur community in Xinjiang under the Chinese Administration, and treating the Uyghur people as ‘a bridge of friendship’, the current difficulties transformed the issue into ‘a bridge of trouble’ between China and Turkey.

Escalation of tensions could be prevented, and a mutual trust between Turkey and China could be achieved if the problems and concerns of the Uyghur people are adequately addressed by China. This process would facilitate the integration of the Uyghur people into Chinese society. Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç pointed out that Turkish people have profound historical ties with the Uyghurs.⁴⁰ Apart from the presence

38. Christina Larson, “How China Wins and Loses Xinjiang”, *Foreign Policy*, July 9, 2009.

39. Ngawang Choepel Drakmargyapon, “China Fails to Protect “minority rights”: UN Human Rights Chief”, *Phayul*, 16 September 2009, <http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?article=China+Fails+to+Protect+%22minority+rights%22+%3AUN+Human+Rights+Chief&id=25516>.

40. Pelin Turgut, “Turkey No Longer a Safe Haven for Chinese Uighurs”, *Time*, 27 July 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1912653,00.html>.

of a strong Uyghur community, there is popular interest in the Xinjiang issue amongst the Turkish public, which creates tremendous civil pressure on the Turkish government. Consequently, the government has no other way but to take a decisive position against Chinese policies in the Xinjiang region.⁴¹ This explains the intense level of Turkish response to the Urumchi riots. Indeed, Turkey reacted fiercely to these riots and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan described the events after the Urumchi riots as “almost genocide” against the Uyghurs and urged China to stop the “assimilation” of its Uyghur minority.⁴²

The Chinese authorities have insisted that China has never had an assimilation policy toward the Uyghur people.⁴³ However, since the Urumchi riots, foreign reporters in Xinjiang have been tightly controlled by the government and are often prevented from taking pictures. Local people fear speaking out: a recent government propaganda campaign sternly warned against those ‘creating a negative impression.’⁴⁴ Those kind of restrictive policies toward international correspondents in Xinjiang have undermined official Chinese claims to the international public as well as the Turkish public. In this respect, establishing direct links between Turkey and Xinjiang is quite crucial in persuading the Turkish public that China has a fair policy to all nationalities and that the Uyghurs are enjoying ‘equal rights’ with the Han Chinese.

Despite the problems discussed above, the relationship between Turkey and China can be geared toward a more positive form. There are many ways through which mutual trust mechanisms could be established. Opening a Turkish Consulate in Urumchi could be a central pillar of mutual trust between Turkey and China. Another alternative could be found through giving an active role to TIKA (Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency). TIKA could take part in projects to protect historical and cultural sites in Xinjiang. Ancient cities like Kashgar, Turfan and Hotan could provide the setting for many valuable projects under the sponsorship of TIKA. Opening a Turkish Trade Center in Urumchi or in Kashgar might be quite operational in increasing Turkish-Chinese trade volume via Xinjiang. Further, establishing cooperation and exchanges between Turkish and Xinjiang universities would be an important step in enhancing Turkish and Chinese cooperation. In terms of maintaining an adequate and moderate form of religious education for Muslims in Xinjiang and in China in general, Turkey’s *Diyanet* (The Presidency of Religious Affairs of Turkey) could create valuable

Opening a Turkish Consulate in Urumchi could be a central pillar of mutual trust between Turkey and China.

41. Igor Torbakov and Matti Nojonen, “Cina-Turkey and Xinjiang: a frayed relationship”, 5 August 2009, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/node/48431/pdf>.

42. Mesut Er, “Bu Vahşet Son Bulmalı”, *Sabah*, 9 Temmuz 2009.

43. Embassy of the PRC in Turkey, “Ambassador Gong Xiaosheng: Friendship and Cooperation between China and Turkey in Line with Our Common Interests”, 3 August 2009, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cetur/eng/ztgx/t576720.htm>

44. Ishaan Tharoor, “Tearing Down Old Kashgar: Another Blow to the Uighurs”, *Time*, July 29, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1913166,00.html?xid=rss-topsto>



The Turkish-Chinese Joint Economic Commission held in Shanghai in late September 2009 illustrated an example of bilateral strategic and economic partnership.

alternatives. Operating direct flights from Istanbul to Urumchi is also important in order to increase trade volume between Turkey and Xinjiang. If successful, these steps could persuade the Turkish public that China does not discriminate against the Uyghur minority. However, it is highly unlikely that Beijing is ready to accept any of these offers from Ankara. China considers the Xinjiang issue as a part of its internal affairs, and is not likely to let any state or international organization interfere in its minority issues.⁴⁵

All these alternative ways of enhancing relations should follow a specific vision maintained through agreement and a mutual trust between Turkey and China. Turkey could reiterate its one-China policy while China displays certain signs of improvement on the conditions of the Uyghur people. These are the required steps for strengthening the relationship, which could provide potential benefits to both Turkey and China in terms of maintaining a stable strategic partnership.

Turkish-Chinese Strategic Partnership

Both China and Turkey would benefit from enhancing their strategic partnership as part of their bilateral relationship.

Benefits for Turkey: Turkey has a very weak presence in East Asia. Despite the relatively high trade volume with China, Japan, and South Korea, the lack of political and strategic coordination places Turkey in a secondary position in East Asia. In this respect, China is a potential strategic partner in East Asia for supporting Turkey's high profile presence in the region. During his official visit in June 2009, President Gül described China as a 'unique world' rather than an East Asian country and made special reference to the developing Turkish-Chinese relations.⁴⁶ China would provide an economic and strategic gateway to China's domestic market and East Asia as a whole. And China has the potential to make foreign direct investment in Turkey. Further, Turkish-Chinese firms could build joint ventures in other countries. The Turkish-Chinese Joint Economic Commission held in Shanghai in late September 2009 illustrated an example of bilateral strategic and economic partnership. A Turkish-Chinese joint venture will be formed to construct a coal-based power plant in Belarus with a total capacity of 660 megawatts with a value of \$1.04 billion. Turkey also request foreign exchange reserves of China, which amount to \$2.1 trillion and the opening of a Chinese bank in Turkey.⁴⁷

45. *China Daily*, "Don't twist facts", 14 July 2009.

46. Selçuk Çolakoğlu, "Cumhurbaşkanı Gül'ün Çin Ziyaretinden İzlenimler", *USAK Gündem*, 31 Temmuz 2009. <http://www.usakgundem.com>

47. Osman Erol, "Çağlayan's China trip improves Turkey-China economic relations", *Today's Zaman*, September 28, 2009.

Benefits for China: China has grown into a production base of the world economy and an enormous market place. However, Beijing has faced some potential risks in international transportation. The Chinese economy has been heavily dependent on Middle Eastern energy resources and imports Middle East oil and gas through a route from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea. Chinese goods have also been transferred to the African, West Asian and European markets using the same route, i.e. South China Sea-Malacca Strait-Indian Ocean. The dependence on only one western transfer road creates a quite fragile situation for Chinese trade security. The so-called 'Contemporary Silk Road,' starting from China to Turkey through Central Asia and the Caucasus, could provide a northern landline alternative road to the southern sea line to China. Turkey, having direct links to West Asia, Africa and Europe, is the only potential dealer for Chinese goods of the 'Contemporary Silk Road'.⁴⁸ If the Eurasian transportation link becomes a reality, the Turkish-Chinese partnership would assume more strategic importance in the near future.

Establishing a true strategic partnership between Turkey and China is in the hands of Beijing.

Concluding Remarks

Turkey and China have forged a good economic and political relationship in recent years. Both countries provide great economic, political, and strategic opportunities for each other in their own regions. However, there is a need to strengthen this relationship and transform it into a strategic partnership in order for both sides to have a more competitive edge in international relations. Realization of this prospect requires more systematic effort from China. Establishing a true strategic partnership between Turkey and China is in the hands of Beijing. Ankara has been carefully following and implementing its "one China" policy and considering Xinjiang as an integral part of China without any hesitation. Viewed through this lens, it is not difficult to see that Turkey's interest in the Uyghur people is no different than China's interest towards the Chinese Diaspora living in Southeast Asian countries. Since 1949, the PRC has traditionally considered an integral part of its overseas Chinese affairs the protection and safety of Chinese minorities in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.⁴⁹ As China could actively engage the Chinese minority living in Southeast Asia for decades as a sign of national responsibility, Ankara's interest in the Uyghur people need not be viewed by Beijing as a support of separatism.

In addition to practicing a carefully crafted policy of "one China," Turkey recently has been experiencing a tremendous transformation in the scope and content of

48. Uğur Ergan, "Türkiye Çin'in lojistik üssü oluyor", *Hürriyet*, 26 Haziran 2009.

49. C. Y. Chang, "Overseas Chinese in China's Policy", *The China Quarterly*, No. 82, June 1980, pp. 281-283.

its foreign policy. Turkey now has a very dynamic, and multi-lateral foreign policy covering not only the US and the EU but also Russia, the Islamic World, Africa, and East Asia. Thanks to the extensive practicing of Davutoğlu's 'zero-problem policy with all neighbors' in recent years, Turkey has begun to be an active and effective agent in its region.⁵⁰ There is a process of political and strategic normalization in both domestic and international policies of Turkey, which in return lays the ground for regional stability. Turkey, in this new context, has become an indispensable partner for any state desiring to be active and effective in the Middle East and its surroundings. Furthermore, given that the multi-dimensional Turkish foreign policy approach requires a clear support for and close relationship with Beijing, Turkey is looking for different opportunities to deepen and increase its relationship with China.

Turkey and China have forged a good economic and political relationship in the current decade. Both countries provide great economic, political, and strategic opportunities for each other in their own regions. Despite Ankara's effort to push for a more integrated Uyghur community in Xinjiang under the Chinese Administration, the current difficulties transformed the issue into a problem area between China and Turkey. Turkey's reiteration of its one-China policy may motivate China to display certain signs of improvement on the conditions of the Uyghur people. There is still considerable need to strengthen the relationship between Turkey and China and transform it into a strategic partnership. Realization of this prospect requires more systematic effort from both countries.

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