

**TURKEY-CHINA RELATIONS:
CLOSER YET APART**

Colin DUERKOP

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Executive Summary

1. Turkey-China relations are multi-layered, multifaceted and fluctuating, showing a “roller coaster” pattern at times.
2. Early contact was made between the Ming and Qing Dynasties and the Ottoman Empire through the historic Silk Road.
3. Diplomatic relations between Turkey and the then Republic of China were first established in 1934 with a Turkish consulate in Nanjing.
4. In the 1950-53 Korean War, China and Turkey were adversaries and even militarily engaged on the battlefield.
5. During the Cold War period China and Turkey stood on opposite sides of the ideological divide. At the time Turkey maintained diplomatic relations with Taiwan.
6. Turkey officially recognised the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1971, a move which was heavily contested in the Turkish parliament. In the following decades relations remained rather low profile until the first AKP (Justice and Development Party)-led government came into power.
7. An “Enhanced Partnership” was announced in 2000 during the visit of President Jiang Zemin to Ankara when a corresponding agreement was signed with President Süleyman Demirel.
8. A “Strategic Partnership” followed in 2010. Since then President Erdoğan has met Chinese President Xi Jinping on nine occasions, including his official visit to China in July 2019. During the visit several consultation mechanisms were established – indicating the growing importance of bilateral relations for the two countries.

9. Several mutual and reciprocal misperceptions or limiting factors remain, however. These include a knowledge gap on both sides and an asymmetric relationship in the areas of trade, investment and tourism.
10. Several conflict-laden issues also persist, however; among them the Uighur problem, the cancellation of a major arms contract and the Syrian war, with the Uighur issue remaining as the most salient. Lately a softening from the Turkish side towards the situation of the Uighurs in Xinjiang can be observed and mutual interests are likely to prevail over occasional tensions.
11. Among converging issues are economic interests like investment, trade and Turkey's inclusion in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), undertakings which are mutually beneficial for both sides.
12. Although Sino-Turkish relations are becoming increasingly important in Turkish foreign policy, the latest intensification of relations should not be interpreted as a fundamental shift of axis. Ideological differences persist and Turkey is still embedded in Western structures such as NATO.
13. Overall, relations appear to be steadily advancing but need more content, operationalisation and institutionalisation. China is currently the more influential partner in this asymmetric bilateral relationship and will remain so in the future.

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Colin DUERKOP*

China-Turkey Relations in Retrospect

- 1.1 Turkey's relations with China are characterised by frequent ups and downs and have not shown linear progress over time. This sometimes "roller coaster" path and development pattern in their relationship has met with frequent hiccups in recent times.
- 1.2 Early and occasional contacts between China and Turkey took place during the Ming and Qing Dynasties with the Ottoman Empire, mainly through the historic Silk Road. However, little research has been conducted on the historical Turkey-China relationship.
- 1.3 It would be exaggerative to describe these sporadic contacts of the two imperial powers – situated at the far ends of Asia - as a "relationship". The contacts between the two countries had been limited to trading along the Silk Road since the 12th century. Thereafter, the two interacted via their European embassies rather than through direct contact. People-to-people contact between Muslims in China and Muslims from western Asia took place through the various Chinese dynasties.
- 1.4 In 1870 the Ottoman Empire supported an independent Kashgar Khanate in Xinjiang region for a brief period, an episode which has yet to be forgotten in China. At the government level, however, there existed practically no contact between the two countries until towards the end of Qing rule when both countries were in their declining years and preoccupied with their domestic upheavals.¹

* Dr Colin Duerkop is the former director of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's regional programme *Political Dialogue Asia* in Singapore.

¹ See Giray Fidan, *Ming Tarih Kayıtlarına Göre 16. Yüzyılda Osmanlı İmparatorluğu – Ming Çin'i İlişkileri*, (Ottoman Empire – Ming China Relations in 16th Century According to Ming Historical Records),

- 1.5 First diplomatic relations between Turkey and China were established in 1934.
- 1.6 Contemporary relationships between China and Turkey are thus rather young. A Turkish consulate was first established in Nanjing, which was later moved to Beijing and upgraded to an embassy. Currently, there are two Chinese consulates in Istanbul and Izmir in addition to the embassy in Ankara, and three Turkish consulates are separately housed in Shanghai, Guangzhou and Hong Kong.²
- 1.7 During the Korean War, China and Turkey were adversaries and Turkish and Chinese soldiers were engaged in battles on the Korean peninsula on several occasions between 1950 and 1953.
- 1.8 In the early period of the Cold War, being a loyal ally of the United States of America, Turkey dispatched a brigade of soldiers to the Korean peninsula to fight against the Chinese People's Army. General Douglas MacArthur reportedly said "the Turks are the hero of heroes. There is no impossibility for the Turkish Brigade".³ These encounters on the battlefields of the Korean War thus constituted the first direct confrontation between the two countries in recent history which contributed later to mutually negative perception.
- 1.9 During the Cold War, Turkey and China stood on opposite sides of the ideological divide. During this period Turkey maintained diplomatic relations with Taiwan (1949 – 1971).
- 1.10 After the end of the bipolar world, in 1989 a Taipei Economic and Cultural Mission was established in Ankara. In 1993 a Turkish Trade Office opened in Taipei in line

in: Selçuk Üniversitesi Türkiyat Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Türkiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi (Journal of Studies in Turkology), Vol. 30, 2011, pp. 275 – 287, <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/257744>, accessed 6 January 2020.

² A brief chronological overview of recent diplomatic relations can be found on the website of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. See Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Relations between Turkey and China, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-china.en.mfa>, accessed 8 January 2020.

³ Richard Weitz, Turkey: Forgotten Ally in a Forgotten War, Hudson Institute, 27 July 2012, Real Clear World, <https://www.hudson.org/research/9164-turkey-forgotten-ally-in-a-forgotten-war>, accessed 20 February 2020.

with a deliberate policy of expanding relations with Taiwan. Taiwan subsequently became Turkey's main economic partner in Asia. Trade between Turkey and Taiwan peaked at US\$2.3 billion in 2017 but showed a similar pattern of imbalance as trade between Turkey and the People's Republic of China. Taiwan was still the fourth largest investor in Turkey in 2017. Cooperation focuses, inter alia, on health care, medicine, science, agriculture, smart cities and culture. No FTA (free trade agreement) and no double taxation agreement could be negotiated due to China's objection and the existing Customs Union of Turkey with the European Union forcing Taiwan to seek new market opportunities elsewhere.⁴

- 1.11 In 1971 Turkey recognised the People's Republic of China (PRC), a move which was heavily contested in the Turkish Grand National Assembly.⁵ In the following decades, only superficial relations evolved until the first AKP-led government came to power in 2002.
- 1.12 In the remaining three decades of the last century, Turkey was concerned with many internal problems (among them military coups in 1971, 1980, 1997, the Cyprus Crisis, emergence of the Kurdish PKK and prolonged efforts to become member of the EU) and relations with China were not a priority. Turkish President Kenan Evren visited Beijing and Shanghai in 1982 at a time when Turkey's relations with the West were occasionally strained and Turkey had begun to gradually liberalise its economy. "What if we can sell one orange to every Chinese?" remains a hallmark moment of his visit, showing that economic themes predominated bilateral relations during that period.⁶

⁴ Selçuk Çolakoğlu, Turkey-Taiwan Relations: Opportunities and Limitations, Taiwan Insight, University of Nottingham Taiwan Studies Programme, 5 April 2018, <https://taiwaninsight.org/2018/04/05/turkey-taiwan-relations-opportunities-and-limitations/>; and "The Turkish Understanding of "One China": Turkey's Delicate Policy Balance Between Taiwan and China, <https://theasiadialogue.com/2019/08/22/the-turkish-understanding-of-one-china-turkeys-delicate-policy-balance-between-taiwan-and-china/>, all accessed 17 February 2020.

⁵ For the analyses of the domestic implications and consequences of the recognition in domestic politics see also Türkiye'de Çin'i Düşünmek: Ekonomik, Siyasi ve Kültürel İlişkilere Yeni Yaklaşımlar, (Thinking About China in Turkey: New Approaches to Economic, Political and Cultural Relations), ed. by Selçuk Esenbel, İsenbike Togan and Altay Atlı, İstanbul: Boğaziçi University Press, 2013.

⁶ Giray Fidan, "Sino-Turkish Relations: An Overview", Middle East Institute, 4 October 2013

- 1.13 In 1984 President Li Xiannian visited Turkey, a move reciprocated a year thereafter by Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Özal to China. In 1986, Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang visited Turkey. Yet until the 1990s little improvement in political relations was evident. Turkish President Süleyman Demirel visited China in 1995. A year thereafter in 1996, among other projects, the two countries embarked on military co-operation, notably, the co-production of missiles.
- 1.14 An “Enhanced Partnership” was announced in 2000 during the visit of President Jiang Zemin to Ankara where an agreement was signed with President Demirel.
- 1.15 In 2002 the then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (the architect of Turkey’s new foreign policy and sometimes characterised as “Turkey’s Henry Kissinger”), with his policy of “Strategic Depth” readjusted Turkish foreign policy, called for a balanced relationship and active engagement with all global and regional actors, including emerging political and economic power houses like China.⁷
- 1.16 This policy heralded the start of a series of high-ranking visits at the political and economic levels.
- 1.17 For example, in 2008 Jia Qinglin, a top political adviser made a goodwill visit to Turkey, met President Abdullah Gül and Prime Minister Erdoğan, and a high-profile Turkey-China Economic and Trade Opportunities Forum was organised in Istanbul.⁸ Turkish President Abdullah Gül subsequently visited China in 2009, marking the first presidential visit in 14 years. He met his counterpart Hu Jintao in Beijing, visited Xi’an, Shenzhen and Urumqi - the first and only Turkish president to have done so - where he also received an honorary doctorate. In the same year, six other agreements were signed, among them an agreement to deepen defence industry cooperation following an earlier agreement to co-produce missiles.⁹

⁷ Ahmet Davutoglu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye’nin Uluslararası Konumu*, (Strategic Depth: The International Position of Turkey), Küre Yayınları, 1 June 2014, Istanbul.

⁸ China signed 19 purchase contracts with Turkey, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/chinagate/2008-11/29/content_7256322.htm, accessed 11 March 2020.

⁹ Embassy of the People’s Republic of China Ankara, Turkish president concludes China visit, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cetur/eng/ztgx/t572762.htm>, accessed 4 March 2020.

- 1.18 Subsequently, a “strategic cooperation” agreement in 2010 was signed during Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s visit to Turkey. Several consultation mechanisms were established at different levels thereafter.¹⁰ In the same year Turkey was the first North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) country to hold joint military exercises with China in the city of Konya, home to a NATO air base, followed by a second joint military exercise in Turkey. This was the first time Chinese ground forces operated on NATO soil.¹¹ Vice-President Xi Jinping was in Turkey in 2012 and in the same year then Prime Minister Erdoğan visited China, the first prime ministerial visit in 27 years. This period of active diplomacy marked a sort of honeymoon phase in the bilateral relationship.
- 1.19 At the regional level, Turkey and China are participants in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) which has eight member states including China and several observers as well as dialogue partners. Turkey was granted dialogue partner status at the SCO 2012 summit in Beijing. Erdoğan on several occasions had stated the possible option of scrapping Turkey's European Union membership candidacy in favour of full membership in the SCO - especially after the European Parliament had unanimously voted to suspend accession talks with Turkey. However, these political statements remain without concrete consequences until today.
- 1.20 Since 2015, President Erdoğan has met President Xi Jinping nine times. He visited China in July 2015 and met President Xi at G20 Summits in Antalya (November 2015) and Hangzhou (September 2016). In 2017, Erdoğan appointed a close adviser, Abdulkadir Emin Önen, (a former AKP Member of Parliament who has business interests in China) as ambassador to China. Önen was received by President Xi shortly after his arrival in Beijing in a diplomatic gesture interpreted as an indication of China’s strong and growing interest in Turkey.¹²

¹⁰ For the the development of the visit diplomacy between the two countries, see also Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Relations between Turkey and China”, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/reasons-between-turkey-and-china.en.mfa>, accessed 6 March 2020.

¹¹ Chris Zambelis, “Sino-Turkish Strategic Partnership: Implications of Anatolian Eagle 2010”, *China Brief*, Vol. 11 Issue 1, The Jamestown Foundation, Washington, 14 January 2011, <https://jamestown.org/program/sino-turkish-strategic-partnership-implications-of-anatolian-eagle-2010/>, accessed 4 March 2020.

¹² Mehmet Söylemez, *Turkey and China: An Account of a Bilateral Relations Evolution*, Hong Kong Baptist University, 2017, p. 8.

- 1.21 In May 2017 the two leaders met again at the OBOR (One Belt, One Road) Summit in Beijing, where Erdoğan was invited to deliver one of the two keynote speeches. This meeting was followed by the BRICS Summit in Pretoria (July 2018), Buenos Aires G20 Meeting (November 2018), CICA Summit (Dushanbe 2019) and G20 Summit in Osaka (2019). Most recently, President Erdoğan paid an official visit to China in July 2019.
- 1.22 As a result of these visits, several consultation mechanisms and bilateral agreements have been established at different levels to discuss and negotiate bilateral, regional and global issues. These issues include Cooperation Agreements for Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energies and Renewable Energies (2016) and a Turkish-Chinese Business Council. Earlier, cooperation agreements on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), railroads as well as in the fields of culture and tourism were concluded.
- 1.23 A series of meetings was held within the framework of the Turkey-China Ministers of Foreign Affairs Consultation Mechanism. Foreign Ministers Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and Wang Yi met in Ankara (November 2016). In the same year an Action Plan for Trade and Investment Co-operation was inaugurated and Turkey became the founding member of the Asian Investment and Infrastructure Bank (AIIB). The foreign ministers met again in Beijing (August 2017) and Çavuşoğlu visited China in June 2018.¹³
- 1.24 Some political observers argue that relations between China and Turkey have yet to be conducted at a real strategic level. Relations can, however, be described as significant in terms of diplomatic, economic and security cooperation. In the wake of the unsuccessful 15 July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey and with Ankara's relations with the West seemingly under stress, the AKP government has moved to strengthen ties with China even further.¹⁴

¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China website, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/xybfs_663590/gjlb_663594/2898_663796/2900_663800/default_3.shtml, accessed 16 March 2020.

¹⁴ Selçuk Çolakoğlu, "Turkey-China Relations: From 'Strategic Cooperation' to 'Strategic Partnership'?" Middle East Institute, 20 March 2018, Washington, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkey-china-relations-strategic-cooperation-strategic-partnership>, accessed 15 March 2020.

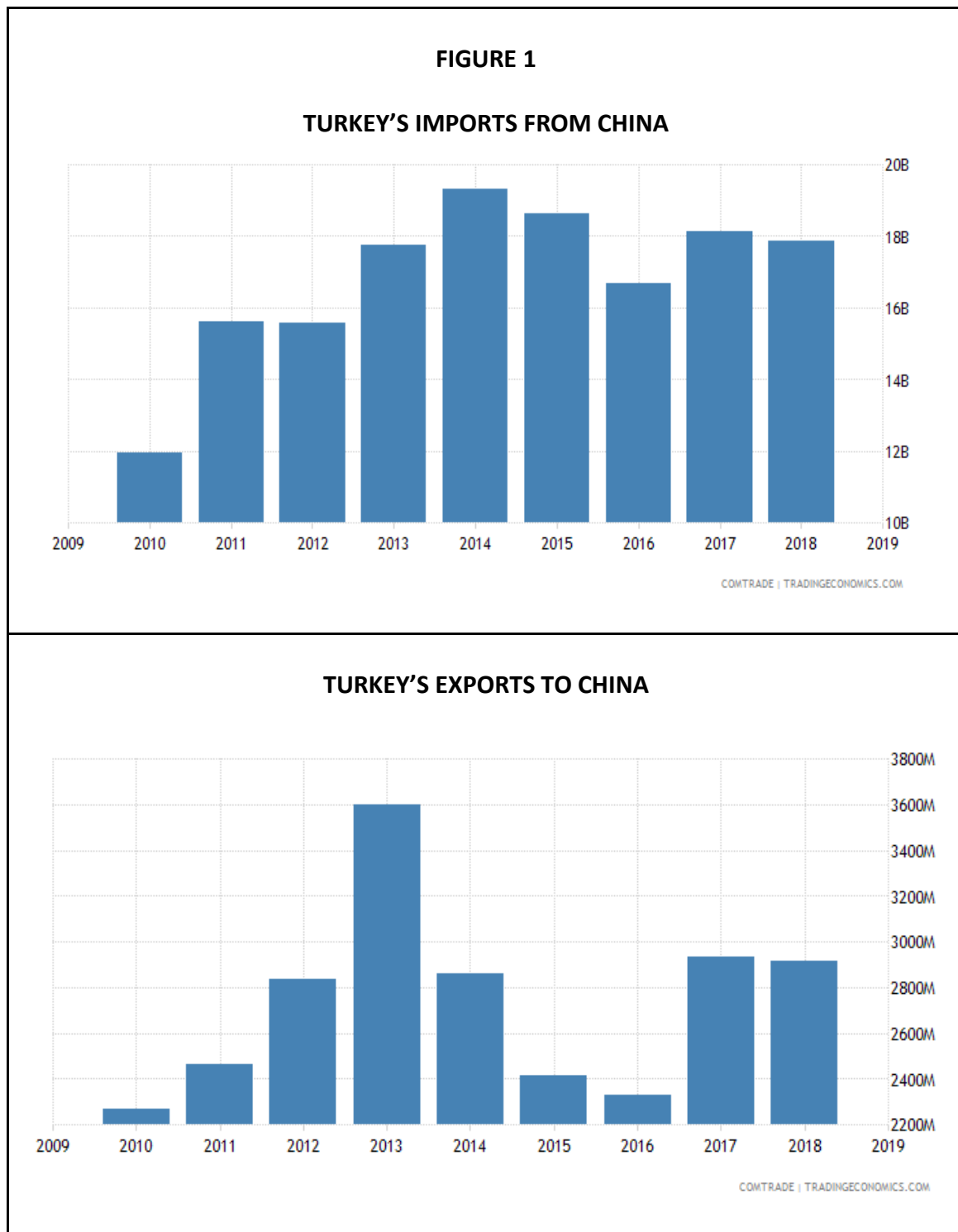
- 1.25 Yet a number of mutual and reciprocal misperceptions and other limiting factors remain, such as a knowledge gap on both sides and an asymmetric relationship in the areas of trade, investments and tourism. Mutually negative perceptions persist, as depicted in several surveys such as the Pew Research Centre Global Attitudes Survey. According to the survey only 21% of the Turkish people held a positive view while 68% had negative perception of China. Furthermore, 57% was of the opinion that the growing Chinese economy is a bad thing for their own country.¹⁵ Ceren Ergenç also draws attention to the ambivalent and contradicting Turkish public perception of China.¹⁶
- 1.26 The Korean war perpetuated a mutually negative image between the two nations. In the Cold War Turkey was perceived as a servile follower of the capitalist United States of America. Such widespread misperceptions and prejudices can be a factor hampering the further progress of relations. Furthermore, little factual knowledge of each other is seemingly another factor. The geographical distance also contributes to the gaps in knowledge.
- 1.27 In addition, asymmetries and imbalances in terms of trade, investments and tourism persist. Figure 1 may – even if only being a “snapshot in time” – yet confirm a long-term trend. According to the United Nations COMTRADE database on international trade, in 2018 Turkey exports to China were US\$2.92 Billion, while China exports to Turkey amounted to US\$17.86 billion during the same year.¹⁷
- 1.28 In the same context, Atli argues that the long-term, insignificant economic interdependencies (trade, FDI) are ultimately prone to more volatile relations between Turkey and China.¹⁸

¹⁵ Pew Research Centre, Global Attitudes and Trends, China's Image, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2014/07/14/chapter-2-chinas-image/>, accessed 25 February 2020.

¹⁶ Ceren Ergenç, Can Two Ends of Asia Meet? An Overview of Contemporary Turkey-China Relations, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281040343_Can_Two_Ends_of_Asia_Meet_An_Overview_of_Contemporary_Turkey-China_Relations, accessed 25 February 2020.

¹⁷ Historical charts and statistics, <https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/exports/china>, last updated in March 2020, accessed 20 February 2020.

¹⁸ Altay Atli, “China and Turkey: Sailing Through Rough Waters”, in *The Red Star and the Crescent: China and the Middle East*, Reardon-Anderson, J (ed), 2017, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 103-121.



1.29 Several conflict-filled issues persist, among them are the taking of opposing stance on the treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang and in the war in Syria, and cancelling of a major arms contract.

Salient Issues

The Uighur issue

- 2.1 This case remains the issue with the largest bilateral conflict potential due to its sensitivity for both sides which has led to occasional tensions in the past.¹⁹ Uighurs are Turkic Muslims. Therefore, the situation and (mis)treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang matters a lot to the Turks. They see them as their ancestors and fellow Muslim brethren while the present AKP-led government perceives Turkey as the leading protectors of Muslims in the world.²⁰
- 2.2 After the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) took Xinjiang in 1949, many Uighurs fled to Turkey, including their leader Isa Yusuf Alptekin. Even to this day, there is still a considerable Uighur diaspora living in Turkey and several opposition groups have long been active in Turkey. When a park in Istanbul was named after Alptekin in 1994 (by the then Mayor Recep Tayyip Erdoğan), this led to one of the several periods of strain in Sino-Turkish relations.
- 2.3 The years 1995 and 1998 saw the curbing of East Turkestan activities by the Turkish government. In 1999 East Turkestan Liberation Organisation militants were arrested in Turkey. Subsequently, in 2000 Turkey and China signed a cooperation agreement on "Countering Transnational Crimes". In 2002, China even permitted the leader of the ultra-nationalist MHP party, Devlet Bahçeli, who is generally critical of China, to visit Urumqi and Kashgar.

¹⁹ See, Ondřej Klimeš, "China's Xinjiang work in Turkey", paper presented at the workshop "Mapping China's footprint in the world II", organised by Sinopsis and the Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences, 8 November 2019; Soner Cagaptay with Deniz Yüksel, "Will Turkey and China Become Friends?" *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 14 August 2019, Washington, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/will-turkey-and-china-become-friends>, accessed 28 February 2020; Kılıç Bugra Kanat, "The Securitization of the Uyghur Question and Its Challenges", in *Insight Turkey*, Winter 2016 issue, Ankara, <https://www.insightturkey.com/article/the-securitization-of-the-uyghur-question-and-its-challenges>, accessed 20 February 2020.

²⁰ Gönül Tol, "Turkey's Bid for Religious Leadership - How the AKP Uses Islamic Soft Power", *Foreign Affairs*, 10 January 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2019-01-10/turkeys-bid-religious-leadership>, accessed 22 February 2020.

- 2.4 Three short-term crises in the Sino-Turkish relationship erupted again in 2009, 2015 and 2019 when there were temporary closure of consulates, calls for consumer boycotts, visa restrictions and the like before relations returned to normal again.
- 2.5 During the 2009 Urumqi riots, then Prime Minister Erdoğan's comments likened China's crackdown on Uighurs to a "kind of genocide" which resulted in a Chinese outrage. Nevertheless, in 2011, following the enhanced partnership agreement in 2010, direct non-stop flights linking Turkey with Urumqi were started and kept operational for a number of years. In 2015, an alleged fasting ban in Xinjiang was followed by widespread protests in Turkey coupled with an anti-Chinese media campaign. In Istanbul a mob attack on a group of Korean tourists mistook for Chinese resulted in China's issuing of travel warnings and imposing of new visa restrictions on Turkish citizens.
- 2.6 Turkey's efforts to build closer relations with China have also increased since the failed coup attempt in July 2016. In the same year Turkey abandoned its traditional function as a Uighur refuge. Previously, Turkish embassies in Southeast Asia had reportedly helped Uighur refugees find refuge in Turkey by providing them with necessary travel documents.²¹
- 2.7 Due to widespread public protests and pressures from political opponents, in February 2019, the Turkish government criticised China for violating the fundamental human rights of the Uighurs. In its statements the Turkish government referred to mass detentions in particular, likening them to forced assimilation. These strong statements marked a departure from Turkey's previous silence on the issue. The death in prison of the renowned folk poet Abdurehim Heyit, who had been sentenced to eight years for the content of one of his songs, prompted further condemnation of China's human rights policy on the part of the Turkish public. China promptly responded in its usual way of urging Turkey to refrain from unjustified and irresponsible accusations, and justifying its policies to combat separatism, religious extremism and terrorism in Xinjiang.

²¹ Reportedly, Uighurs caught in some Southeast Asian countries had been deported back to China where they faced harsh consequences.

- 2.8 As Chinese investment and inclusion in the “Belt and Road Initiative” became apparently more important for Ankara, the situation of Uighurs in Xinjiang has retreated into the background. This attitude seems to reflect a pattern of Chinese investment in countries, thereby creating dependencies. This dependency results in a situation whereby criticism towards Beijing is silenced, a situation for which many countries do not seem to have found a solution as yet.
- 2.9 In another context, China has more pull and maintains the upper hand: though Beijing has never recognised the “Kurdistan Workers’ Party” (PKK) as a terrorist organisation (like the EU and USA), Turkey has designated the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as such. China may, therefore, use its influence on the PKK anytime as a bargaining tool or bargaining chip to put pressure on Turkey.

Arms issue

- 2.10 In 2013 Turkey entered into negotiations with state-owned China Precision Machinery Import-Export Corporation to purchase a long-range air and anti-missile defence system. This business transaction seemed attractive for Turkey as China allowed for technology transfer and co-production as part of the \$3.44 billion deal. The price was also more favourable than other international offers. However, due to pressure from the United States Turkey finally abandoned its intention to buy this system from China and in 2015 cancelled the deal. As this withdrawal happened shortly before the Antalya G20 summit, the timing of the revocation was considered to be humiliating for China and a personal loss of face for President Xi.²²

War in Syria

- 2.11 In the protracted war in Syria, the two countries are on opposite sides, supporting different parties. While China sides with Russia and Iran in their support for the Assad regime, Turkey is with the West and NATO while pursuing its own agenda

²² Selçuk Çolakoğlu, “Turkey-China Relations: From ‘Strategic Cooperation’ to ‘Strategic Partnership’?”

and political goals. In this context China is uneasy about Uighur jihadists alleged to have been channelled through Turkey being active in Syria.²³

- 2.12 In Syria and the Middle East, Turkey and China are political competitors while economically complementing each other in the rebuilding process. Atli argues that the relationship between Turkey and China will be one of the important factors affecting the dynamics of the region.²⁴

Prospects of Relations

- 3.1 Despite the existing conflicting and controversial issues discussed earlier most political observers share the view that these issues – particularly the Uighur dispute – can be seen as temporary hiccups in the bilateral relationship. They also believe that ultimately mutual interests will prevail over occasional tensions in the bilateral relationship.
- 3.2 Among converging issues are mainly economic interests like investment, trade and Turkey's inclusion in the BRI, undertakings which are potentially and mutually beneficial for both sides. These aspects have been examined by several Turkish China-experts.²⁵
- 3.3 Despite a number of limiting factors and conflict-ridden issues there are also several opportunities: Turkey forms part of the BRI/OBOR Middle Corridor where investments in the order of US\$40 billion (mainly financed through AIIB loans) are envisaged. Turkey sees China as the world's new great power, as an economic partner complementing the West as well as a source of FDI and a supplier of

²³ Converging as well as diverging aspects in relation to the policies of both countries towards Syria are discussed in detail by Altay Atli. Altay Atli, "A View from Ankara: Turkey's Relations with China in a Changing Middle East", in *The Mediterranean Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2015, p. 135.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 136.

²⁵ See Kadir Temiz, Türkiye- Çin İlişkileri: Güçlü Siyasi İrade ve İstikrar (Turkey-China Relations: Strong Political Will and Strength) edited by Kemal Inat, Ali Aslan, Burhanettin Duran, in *AK Parti'nin 15 Yılı Dış Politikası (15 Years' Foreign Policy of AK Party)*, SETA Foundation publications, series 29, 2018, Ankara; and Altay Atli, Making Sense of Turkey's Rapprochement with China, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 26 November 2018, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/making-sense-turkeys-rapprochement-china>, accessed 6 March 2020.

technology. Similarly, China sees Turkey as a growing market for its exports and as a vital link in its BRI, and as a partner in major infrastructure projects.

- 3.4 The economy - despite low dependencies - still plays a pivotal role in the bilateral relationship. Chinese investment cooperation can be seen in the transport, energy and telecom sectors, including a possible Chinese nuclear plant project in the northwest of Istanbul as reported by Reuters.²⁶ China is also reportedly pursuing plans to invest in four container ports (Kumport, Candarli, Mersin and Zonguldak) and high-speed railroads (Kars-Edirne).
- 3.5 In regional and global politics the two countries are committed to upholding a multipolar world order. Turkey and China are also members of the Group of 20 where they are cooperating in the official Engagement Groups (such as, inter alia, Business 20, Think 20, Civil 20, Science 20 and Labour 20). During the CICA Summit in Dushanbe the two presidents expressed the desire for strengthening their communication and coordination on multilateral arenas such as the G20 to expand their cooperation in economy, trade, finance, infrastructure, construction and other fields.²⁷ The two countries are also aligned on projects including developing a cultural dialogue, education programmes and people-to-people exchanges.
- 3.6 As an example of recent bilateral cooperation during the unfolding of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, Turkey had imported a special drug from China (Favipiravir) which is claimed to slash the intensive care period from 11 to 12 days to four days.²⁸ As there is an export ban on this medicine, this exceptional transaction – facilitated by the Chinese ambassador to Ankara – is interpreted as an indication of the good relations between China and Turkey.²⁹ Interestingly, China also provided Turkey

²⁶ “Turkey to build third nuclear plant in Thrace, cooperate with China – minister”, Reuters, <https://af.reuters.com/article/commoditiesNews/idAFI7N1UR056>, accessed 6 March 2020.

²⁷ “Chinese, Turkish presidents vow to promote bilateral cooperation”, *Xinhua*, 15 June 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/15/c_138146070.htm, accessed 30 March 2020.

²⁸ “Turkey using 'special drug' from China to treat coronavirus patients”, TRT World, 24 March 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/life/turkey-using-special-drug-from-china-to-treat-coronavirus-patients-34809>, accessed 30 March 2020.

²⁹ Abdülkadir Selvi, “Çin'den gelen ilaç Favipiravir nedir? Corona virüs tedavisi için kullanılan Favipiravir ilacının ilginç öyküsü” (What is the Favipiravir medicine coming from China? The interesting narrative about the Favipiravir medicine used for the cure of the Coronavirus), *Hürriyet Online News*, 28

with 50,000 rapid test kits for free which prompted social media users to state that Atatürk had already paid for it (referring to the episode when Turkey had donated one million vaccines to China during the cholera epidemic in 1938).³⁰ However, Turkey like several other EU countries also rejected sub-standard rapid detection kits and face masks from China as has been reported in several media (inter alia, *Financial Times*, *Middle East Eye*, *Duvar English* and *Daily Sabah*).

- 3.7 Although bilateral relations with China are gaining in importance and becoming more multi-faceted in Turkish foreign policy, the latest improvements and intensification of relations – according to the majority of political observers – should not necessarily be interpreted as a fundamental shift in the axis of Turkey or a general anti-Western stance.³¹ Ideological differences persist and Turkey is still firmly embedded in Western structures, particularly the NATO, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Council of Europe and its Venice Commission as well as the European Court of Human Rights. Furthermore, Turkey is a candidate to the EU membership and is still in negotiations to eventually become a full member of the EU. China, therefore, is not seen as a partner to replace the West, but as a very important additional partner for Turkey’s global presence.
- 3.8 Some observers remark that there is no comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Turkey as yet even though Turkey becoming a Dialogue Partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in 2013 is an indicator of this diversification policy. The Turkish foreign policy approach vis-a-vis China is to follow a diversification strategy of its foreign policy. Turkey has been eyeing a stronger role as a regional power and global player including closer and stronger ties with China. The launch of the ‘Asia Anew Initiative’ by the Turkish government in 2019 –

March 2020, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/galeri-cinden-gelen-ilac-favipiravir-nedir-corona-virus-tedavisi-icin-kullanilan-favipiravir-ilacinin-olgunc-oykusu-41480276/2>, accessed 30 March 2020.

³⁰ Yeniçağ Gazete, “Çin 2 milyon virüs kiti gönderdi... Ücretini Atatürk ödedi dediler” (China has sent 2 Million virus kits... Atatürk has paid the fee), <https://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/cin-2-milyon-virus-kiti-gonderdi-ucretini-ataturk-odedi-dediler-272607h.htm>, accessed 30 March 2020.

³¹ See Altay Atlı, “Turkey’s Relations with China and its Repercussions on Transatlantic Relations: The Turkish Perspective Chapter Fifteen”, p. 242; and Selçuk Çolakoğlu, “The Rise of Eurasianism in Turkish Foreign Policy: Can Turkey Change its pro-Western Orientation?” Middle East Institute, 16 April 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/rise-eurasianism-turkish-foreign-policy-can-turkey-change-its-pro-western-orientation>, accessed 12 March 2020.

opening Turkey to the whole of Asia region including China as the new centre of global economy – “appears to represent a continuation of such diversification efforts, rather than a new approach or a fundamental shift in Turkey’s strategic orientation. However, given Turkey’s current economic circumstances and institutional capacity constraints, there is reason to be sceptical regarding how much of a commitment the new opening to Asia will entail and how much of a payoff it will ultimately yield”.³²

- 3.9 Overall, relations show that they are steadily advancing but need more content, operationalisation and institutionalisation. China currently is also the more influential partner and will remain so in the relationship. Although there is political will on both sides, practical progress in relations will likely take some time.
- 3.10 Despite the asymmetric relationship with low economic interdependencies there is considerable room for growth. Altay Atli provides a number of concrete recommendations on how to improve, institutionalise and operationalise Turkey-China relations.³³ The relationship needs more content, operationalisation, “drive” and institutionalisation such as increasing Chinese FDI to Turkey, joint investment and economic cooperation projects in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region or along the BRI route, or joint production in (defence) industries. In the political realm both sides have an interest in building an interconnected and interdependent global system and enhancing bilateral dialogue in multilateral platforms (G20, the UN and so on). More dialogue channels like a Turkish-Chinese Strategic Dialogue body and/or a China policy coordination board might be steps in this direction.
- 3.11 Expectations so far seem to have outstripped actual achievements. According to Selçuk Çolakoğlu, Turkey-China relations have yet to develop into a comprehensive

³² See Selçuk Çolakoğlu, “Turkey’s Asia Anew Initiative: Assessment and Shortcomings“, Middle East Institute, 15 October 2019, Ankara, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkeys-asia-anew-initiative-assessment-and-shortcomings>, accessed 12 March 2020.

³³ Altay Atli, “Turkey’s Foreign Policy Towards China: Analysis and Recommendations for Improvement“, Young Academics Policy Paper Series, Global Relations Forum, 2016, Istanbul.

strategic partnership and such a mechanism should not be expected.³⁴ Admittedly, the AKP government's efforts since the July 2016 coup to broaden and deepen relations with China have shown positive results. However, China remains by far the more influential partner.

- 3.12 On the other hand, society, business communities, academia and think tank exchanges have increased, particularly after G20 Summits. Public diplomacy developments have also intensified. There are now four Confucius Institutes and one Yunus Emre Institute operational in Turkey and China. The year 2012 was the Chinese Culture Year in Turkey and 2013 saw the Year of Turkish Culture in China.

³⁴ Selçuk Çolakoğlu, "Turkey-China Relations: From 'Strategic Cooperation' to 'Strategic Partnership'?"