

PEACE AND SECURITY

# COOPERATION, COMPETITION AND STRATEGIC BALANCING

The Complexity of Türkiye–China Relations

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Focusing on strategic autonomy, Turkish foreign policy has become proactive recently, balancing relations with China along tensions, collaboration and competition.



Turkish-Chinese relations are shaped by economic cooperation, international orders, and the Uyghur issue. Yet, they are challenged by Türkiye's domestic politics, its ties to EU and NATO, as well as attractive regional alternatives.



Both countries may deepen their ties via Chinese investments and their shared view on the Gaza conflict. Still, relations between both countries will remain complex, casting claims of Turkish "dependency" on China in doubt.



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## INTRODUCTION

Türkiye–China bilateral relations are at times overplayed in the policy and academic literature, emphasizing domains of collaboration but downplaying domains of competition as well as tension. This paper will approach bilateral relations in a balanced way, detailing the complexity with which both states as well as non-state actors in these countries interact. To that end it will cover the last ten years of bilateral relations, mostly focusing on areas of economic relations as that seems to be the priority for both countries and their non-state actors. It will also scrutinize the two states' position in the international political order, vis-à-vis multilateral institutions. Finally, it will delve into the domestic actors' narratives on China and how China is mentioned in domestic political debates. It will end by highlighting potential challenges and chances in bilateral relations in the near future and underline that cooperation, economic or political, is never straightforward or easy. Türkiye's pre-established and ongoing ties with the EU zone, trade links with the wider West, and new investment connectivities with its immediate neighborhood, especially the Gulf, provide a significant amount of competition to bilateral relations. Similarly, China's investments in the larger Mediterranean area and the Gulf, point out the rather small role for Türkiye in China's strategy of connectivity.

# HISTORY OF RELATIONS

The last 10 years of relations between Türkiye and China were marked by economic cooperation and partially by sharing a revisionist agenda towards international order and institutions.

## ECONOMIC COOPERATION

### Logistics and Megaprojects

Logistics has been a significant part of bilateral relations for several reasons. First, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) started out as a major logistics infrastructure investment plan in near and far regions, using a great deal of "corridor" terminology. Not only are there economic corridors, but there are also maritime routes and land and rail routes. China, as a successful case of development, discursively put forward BRI as an export of that success and economically it exported capital and goods that China's development stage in 2010s required.

Secondly, the Turkish government, in the late 2000s and early 2010s, enjoyed a period of increased state revenue due to privatizations, some of which was logistics infrastructure such as ports and rail transportation. The rhetoric was that the state was going to build mega infrastructure projects to fuel economic growth, and logistics infrastructure is needed for domestic production and consumption as well as exports and imports. Highways, bridges, high-speed trains, and modernized railways were seen as the symbol of Türkiye's growth, with President Erdoğan declaring at times that that infrastructure was their signature success. In his speech on the occasion of the inauguration of the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge, the third bridge connecting Istanbul's two shores, he said: "Because rising above the level of contemporary civilizations is not a matter of words, it is a matter of deeds."<sup>1</sup> This is a reference to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's words as the goal of the modern Turkish republic.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, mega infrastructure projects underline the deeds of Erdoğan and the AKP government in directing Türkiye. In this particular narrative, building such infrastructure is not just a matter of economic growth but also national pride.

Lastly, before the BRI announcement in 2013, Türkiye was already strategizing to enhance connectivity between Cen-

tral Asia and Europe. This effort, a longstanding theme in Turkish politics since the Soviet Union's dissolution, was embodied in the Middle Corridor initiative. Middle Corridor "seeks to connect Türkiye to China via Georgia, Azerbaijan, the Caspian Sea, and then either 1) Kazakhstan or 2) Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan."<sup>3</sup> There are significant challenges such as varying customs processes, railway modernization within Türkiye (Kars-Edirne route), regional political conflicts, and the need for closer economic ties with Central Asian nations. Türkiye's integration into the BRI in 2015 (titled as harmonization of Middle Corridor and Belt and Road Initiatives) and proactive engagement in multilateral forums like the Organization of Turkic States and the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route underscored its commitment to this vision. Notably, the Middle Corridor's significance grew with the Ukraine conflict (due the war and the sanctions against Russia, both impeding transportation via the Northern Corridor through Russia),<sup>4</sup> as evidenced by a substantial increase in cargo transport in early 2022.<sup>5</sup>

However, bilateral talks between Türkiye and China on Kars-Edirne have achieved only partial success. At times, they have been inconclusive due to a failure to reach a common understanding regarding loan interest rates, construction standards, and sub-contractors. Despite the significant purchase of Kumport (a terminal in Ambarlı Port in Istanbul) by a consortium of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs), there are also significant frustrations in bilateral negotiations due to China's unwillingness to invest in Çandarlı (another port in the Aegean) in the build-operate-transfer model. This model requires initial investment for the infrastructure from a private investor in exchange for long-term operation rights with the ultimate end to the contract being the transfer of the asset back to the state. Hence, the Turkish government is showing a growing interest in securing investment for these mega projects from Gulf nations, particularly the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Discussions include the financing and construction of the railway passage over the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge in Istanbul.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> UTIKAD 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Glyptis 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Eldem 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Sakenova 2023.

<sup>6</sup> T24 2023a.

Originally, the railway passage over the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge was a subject of negotiation within the BRI framework. However, if constructed by China, it would not meet European Union standards. A similar challenge of technical standard discrepancies is evident in the Kars railway project. Nonetheless, due to its geographical positioning, Turkish authorities can address and rectify these standardization issues at the initial entry point. Given the strategic location of the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge, which serves as a direct conduit into Europe, it needs to integrate into the EU rail signalization network. Consequently, according to our fieldwork,<sup>7</sup> collaborating with contractors from the Gulf region for the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge project now seems a more viable and practical option as the Turkish ministerial bureaucracy holds the opinion that the Gulf investment and construction standards tend to comply better with EU standards. China on the other hand at times pushed for Chinese standards, which is a partially politicized issue for China.<sup>8</sup> This will probably be the case for a larger group of projects as BRI announced the slogan ‘small and beautiful’ on the 10th anniversary in October 2023. This would exclude such mega projects due to reasons of the BRI serving China’s domestic priorities for industrial upgrading, avoiding negative perceptions internationally of creating debt traps as well as domestically of overspending abroad, and fostering more sustainable projects, inter alia, as assumed by some scholars.<sup>9</sup>

## ENERGY: CHINESE SOES VS. CHINESE PRIVATE COMPANIES; TRADITIONAL VS. RENEWABLE ENERGIES

China has been involved in Türkiye’s energy sector in the last decade thanks to two factors: (a) the Turkish government’s active energy diplomacy at different periods, and (b) China’s growing presence in the energy-related technology markets after its industrial upgrading macro plan called Made in China 2025 was launched in 2015. The Turkish government’s energy diplomacy attracted Chinese investments in traditional, carbon-heavy energies, and the Made in China 2025 policy campaign got Chinese energy companies interested in Türkiye’s burgeoning renewable energy markets.<sup>10</sup>

The active energy diplomacy of the Energy Ministry in the mid-2010s to diversify Türkiye’s energy dependency and balance the EU’s influence over Türkiye with non-Western actors resulted in the Chinese investment in the coal-operated power plant in Hunutlu on the southern coast of Türkiye. The Hunutlu plant was severely criticized in Turkish public opinion both for the outdated technology it used and its potentially harmful effects on the environment. The former criticism pointed out that the Chinese investment was in a way “wasted” on a power plant that would be rendered inefficient

within a decade. The latter criticism pointed out that building a coal-operated power plant amidst carbon neutrality commitments was counterproductive. In fact, the Chinese investor, Shanghai Electric, is known for its investments in green technology in Türkiye’s immediate neighborhood, the Eastern Mediterranean. Therefore, the Hunutlu investment was seen as a short-term profit-making endeavor for China instead of being a part of its long-term green transformation.<sup>11</sup> However, the environmental NGOs failed to generate large public support because they could not mobilize the local public, who see the power plant as a source of employment and growth, for their cause. Besides, the Turkish partner of the power plant was a business actor close to the government, therefore all the environmental protection reports of the professional associations were disregarded. The Hunutlu power plant started operating in 2023.<sup>12</sup>

China’s green energy investments in Türkiye have been mainly in solar and on-shore wind sectors. There was direct competition between European and Chinese companies in the solar and on-shore wind sectors of Türkiye. European consortiums have so far won over those with Chinese partners, but not necessarily over other Asian consortiums. There are two reasons for that: (a) the Turkish bureaucracy hesitated to encourage Chinese consortiums given their lack of experience dealing with Chinese counterparts, and (b) the Turkish partners of the European consortiums were close to the current government.<sup>13</sup>

Besides their hesitance to work with the Chinese SOEs in large bids, private Chinese companies’ market advantages constitute a concern for smaller producers in the sector and anti-dumping measures are imposed despite complaints from the Chinese companies and the diplomatic representatives in Türkiye. As a result, China withdrew from Türkiye’s renewable sector for a while and redirected its Green BRI investments to other Mediterranean countries such as Egypt and Spain.<sup>14</sup> Huawei’s recent agreements with Turkish renewable energy companies, solar in particular, to provide their digital infrastructure might open a new outlet for cooperation.<sup>15</sup>

Regarding Türkiye’s adaptation to the EU’s carbon neutrality plan called the European Green Deal, Türkiye’s small and medium enterprises (SME) and their representative business associations are rather concerned about the costly transition to carbon-free technologies and the possibility of losing their market advantage, based on their proximity to Europe, against Asian, and Chinese in particular, competitors in the absence of a domestic emission trading system (ETS) in Türkiye. The only functioning measure in Türkiye so far is the subsidies issued by the Ministry of Environment, but they are practically ineffective after the currency crisis and they do not include the heavy industry.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Our fieldwork has been ongoing qualitative research with the relevant bureaucratic and business elite in Türkiye that have experience on collaboration with China. It has been published in several platforms so far: Göçer and Ergenç 2023; Ergenç and Göçer 2022, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Reuters 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Weiwen 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Göçer and Ergenç 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Ergenç and Göçer 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Göçer and Ergenç 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Ergenç, Altun and Göçer 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Hoffmann and Ergenç 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Özenen 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Ergenç et al. 2023.

Future offshore wind, green hydrogen, and nuclear, which are classified as green by both Türkiye and China, are currently being discussed. Recent diplomatic statements, events like the China-Türkiye Energy Forum in Izmir, and, according to our fieldwork, the prominence of China collaborations in Türkiye in the conversations during the Turkish-German Energy Forum in Ankara indicate that China has a renewed interest in Türkiye's offshore wind and hydrogen sectors. Besides, the Energy Minister announced that Türkiye is about to sign a deal with a yet-undisclosed Chinese company to build the third nuclear plant in the northwestern region.<sup>17</sup>

## BILATERAL TRADE AND TRADE DEFICIT

In 2022, Türkiye's exports to China amounted to 3.58 billion US dollars, representing a mere 1.37% share of Türkiye's total exports.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Türkiye's exports to the European Union (EU 27) reached 103.5 billion US dollars,<sup>19</sup> with the EU 27 accounting for 39,5% and the EU 27 together with the UK (117.2 billion US dollars) constituting 44.7% of Türkiye's total exports (262 billion US dollars).<sup>20</sup> In terms of imports in 2022, Türkiye imported goods worth 38,5 billion US dollars from China, comprising an 12,9% share of Türkiye's total imports (299 billion US dollars).<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, Türkiye's imports from the EU 27 amounted to 104,4 billion US dollars,<sup>22</sup> representing a 34,9% share, with the EU 27 and the UK accounting for 37,4% of Türkiye's total imports.<sup>23</sup>

Türkiye's economic relationship with China, in terms of Turkish exports, mostly takes place in low-technology industries, raw materials, and service industries. The one constant in bilateral trade relations has been the trade deficit and its rapid increase in the last three years.<sup>24</sup> However, this imbalance is not unusual for China's bilateral economic relations, as illustrated by the trade deficits in China's economic relations with Egypt or Greece. The trade deficit in 2022 amounted to 34.9 million US dollars, where Türkiye is the net importer.<sup>25</sup> There have been repeated Turkish appeals in bilateral forums for China to facilitate more exports from Türkiye, and the size of the Chinese market for Türkiye's exporters remains very attractive. Several business association reports also underline the trade deficit as a bilateral issue that needs attention.

Another issue in bilateral trade has been Chinese exports to Türkiye that the Turkish government deems as threatening to nascent industries such as electric vehicles. Before the general elections in May 2023, Türkiye announced the production of TOGG, Türkiye's nationally-produced electric vehicle, which became one of the cornerstones of Erdoğan's presi-

dential campaign. In the same spring, Türkiye imposed a 40% additional tariff on electric vehicle imports from China, which was labeled by the mainstream media as "the Great Wall of Türkiye".<sup>26</sup>

## TOURISM: POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY

Tourism has been one of the main pillars of Türkiye's service industry and the potential volume of Chinese outward tourism is frequently discussed by sector insiders. For example, Turkish Airlines (THY) held a promotional event in Beijing to attract Chinese tourists after Türkiye was listed as one of the designated countries for tour groups.<sup>27</sup> Besides these events, THY is working on establishing codeshare flight agreements with several Chinese airlines under a Special Prorate Agreement (SPA) to expand its ability to fly to more cities in mainland China.

Similarly, IGA Istanbul Airport created a "China Friendly" concept to increase Türkiye's share in China's international travel market. Türkiye's share in the Chinese overseas tourism market has so far remained below 1% while the market as a whole is estimated to reach 500 million USD in the long term.<sup>28</sup>

Media producers are planning to export TV series to the Chinese market, and thus the number of tourists from China can increase as the number of tourists coming to Türkiye from countries where Turkish TV series are watched increases in the sector insiders' experience.<sup>29</sup>

## FINANCIAL SWAPS: BAILOUT FOR FINANCIAL CRISES

Increasingly in recent years, financial swaps, in the form of currency swaps with the Gulf and Asian countries in local currencies, have been utilized by the Turkish government as both a means to make a statement about strategic autonomy and a partial means to deal with the economic crisis in Türkiye, to stabilize the rapidly fluctuating local currency. These swaps are generally negotiated at the central bank level, exchanging currencies at the current exchange rate, which will not change under that deal. The first financial swap between Türkiye and China took place in 2016, framed as an appeal towards using "local currencies", an agenda Türkiye shares with China and Russia which can be seen as part of a larger agenda of de-dollarization. Significant swaps have occurred from 2018 onwards, the ones in 2022 from the UAE labeled by Erdoğan himself as a "relief".<sup>30</sup> Qatar and UAE deals amount to 20 billion US dollars in total, while swaps with China only to 6 billion US dollars.<sup>31</sup> This is yet another indicator that framing Türkiye-China relations as dependen-

<sup>17</sup> NTV 2023.

<sup>18</sup> OEC 2024a, OEC 2024b.

<sup>19</sup> Trading Economics 2024a.

<sup>20</sup> OEC 2024b, OEC 2024c.

<sup>21</sup> OEC 2024a, OEC 2024b.

<sup>22</sup> Trading Economics 2024b.

<sup>23</sup> OEC 2024b, OEC 2024c, Ticaret Bakanlığı 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Yılmaz 2022.

<sup>25</sup> OEC 2024a.

<sup>26</sup> Dil 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Turizm Günlüğü 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Turizm Ajansı 2023.

<sup>29</sup> Turizm Gazetesi 2023.

<sup>30</sup> T24 2023b.

<sup>31</sup> Foreks 2022.

cy is misleading. More generally, China's relations with countries under BRI partnerships have at times been depicted as debt traps. However, this depiction is an exaggeration. Even the presence of a significant financial swap does not hold that argument true for the case of Türkiye–China relations. As evidenced by Strange's research, China's logic of BRI rests a great deal on "profit" and is cautious on taking extra financial risks.<sup>32</sup> As for infrastructural investments, according to our fieldwork, the two sides are cautious about debt repayment, and at times that is the reason for the stalled negotiation process in these investments.

## TÜRKIYE AND CHINA ON GLOBAL ORDER

### MULTILATERAL LEVEL

China and Türkiye seem to pursue comparable discursive practices in international forums and organizations such as the UNGA regarding global leadership. Turkish President Erdoğan's "world is bigger than five" motto criticizes the hierarchical superiority of the five permanent members of the UNSC.<sup>33</sup> This campaign is in line with China's support for extended participation of the Global South countries in the UNSC. Similarly, Chinese President Xi's "a community with a shared future for mankind" proposes global governance reform to make the international order more inclusive.<sup>34</sup> However, the two countries do not cooperate on their shared multilateral vision on an equal footing. Türkiye's revisionism towards international organizations as well as the international order has been distracted by economic and political difficulties especially since 2013, as well as by Türkiye's fading soft power in its own neighborhood. China's multilateral vision however perseveres with developments such as the expansion of BRICS, which Iran and Saudi Arabia, major actors in the Middle East, have joined. As in the case of Türkiye's 100<sup>th</sup> National Day celebrations, China invited Türkiye to join the Global South countries to support China's quest for a new international order, while the Turkish side's emphasis was on the improvement of bilateral economic relations.<sup>35</sup>

### NON-WESTERN REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Similar to the multilateral level, Türkiye and China have an unequal relationship with regard to regional organizations. Regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS are currently turned into platforms for China to promote its policies such as the Global Security Initiative, aimed at consolidating a Global South network under China's leadership. The most recent membership expansion process of BRICS that included the China-friendly countries, in the Middle East in particular, was a case in point for such intentions.<sup>36</sup> Türkiye has been voicing

its willingness to be a full member of SCO, and BRICS to a lesser extent, but has been kept at arms' length by China from joining both so far. The BRICS group has been viewed increasingly positively in Türkiye, while antipathy towards the West has been growing.<sup>37</sup> Turkish president expressed a willingness to join during the 2018 BRICS summit that he was invited to.<sup>38</sup> However, no concrete steps has been taken by China or Russia to officially start the process. SCO membership for Türkiye is a particularly complicated one as the two countries' regional strategies in Central Asia often appear incompatible due to overlapping interests in logistics corridors and influence over regional allies.<sup>39</sup> However, given that Türkiye has considered purchasing military systems from China,<sup>40</sup> and is still a dialogue partner of the SCO,<sup>41</sup> this is a realm worth watching for future prospects.

### CHINA IN TÜRKIYE'S MIDDLE EASTERN NEIGHBORHOOD

Diverging and converging approaches towards the Middle East will prove to be an important issue in the future of Turkish foreign policy as well as bilateral relations.

One of the most pressing issues for Türkiye in regional affairs is the Syrian civil war. Türkiye's priority at the current stage is fighting off any threat that it deems is against its territorial integrity from the Kurdish-dominated, YPG. This is the sore spot in Türkiye–US relations. The Syrian civil war is also a point of divergence in Türkiye–China relations. Türkiye conducted several military operations in northern Syria in a bid to weaken YPG as well as to build links with several oppositional groups against the Assad regime. However, China is committed to a position of non-interference in the civil war and in September 2023 it hosted Assad in a rare visit of the Syrian leader on the global stage. "China supports Syria's opposition to foreign interference and unilateral bullying and is willing to continue to work with Syria in the interests of friendly cooperation and safeguarding international fairness and justice," Xi told Assad.<sup>42</sup> This position of non-interference clashes with Türkiye's position that they have a stake in the way Syria will be managed in a post-war setting, especially regarding the potential autonomy of the Kurdish-dominated North East. In the fall of 2019, China voiced concerns regarding Türkiye's military operations in northern Syria and received a rather harsh note from Türkiye's ambassador to China, Emin Önen, inviting China to stand with Türkiye against terrorism.<sup>43</sup> China's depiction of its own activities regarding Uyghurs as anti-terrorism links

<sup>32</sup> Strange 2023.

<sup>33</sup> Presidency of the Republic of Turkey 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Qin Gang 2023.

<sup>35</sup> Koca 2023.

<sup>36</sup> Alhasan, Hammad, and Alajlouni 2023.

<sup>37</sup> Ayan 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Xinhua 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Whereas a stronger relationship with BRICS might be considered to rival Western-led economic groups such as G7 (and potentially the EU), stronger cooperation (or even membership) with SCO would substantially complicate Türkiye's relationship with NATO members and its membership therein, cf. Cotterill et al. 2023, Gaspers 2024.

<sup>40</sup> Onuş 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Reuters 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Nikkei 2023.

<sup>43</sup> Dorsey 2019.



the two issues, where each side warns the other to not be vocal about what they perceive as terrorist threats to national sovereignty. Türkiye's potential normalization process with Syria does not soften this divergence because Türkiye will insist on certain points regarding the Kurds that may easily be interpreted as 'interference' by Syria and hence by China.

The 2020 Caesar Act will make it difficult for China to rebuild Syria anytime in the near future since it targets sectors of the economy such as construction and outside financing of these sectors. Investing in these sanctioned sectors may cause problems for Chinese firms in their interactions with the US.<sup>44</sup>

Iran is another party to the civil war, firmly supporting Assad, militarily and financially. Iran–Türkiye relations are a crucial part of Türkiye's policy towards the Middle East, and they are even more complex and historical than Türkiye–China relations. Iran has been heavily relying on China discursively and economically since former US president Trump withdrew from the JCPOA, and it joined BRICS in 2024.<sup>45</sup> Iran also represents China's recent ambitions to be not just an economic power but also a diplomatic power in the region as China facilitated the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Long-standing sanctions on Iran prevent both China and Türkiye from engaging with the country in a deeper economic capacity. Türkiye's most recent economic corridor project, Development Road, bypasses Iran and connects Türkiye and the Gulf ports through Iraq, which is partially controlled by Iran-backed militias. Such bypassing shows, as Türkiye tries to stay relevant in maritime connectivity for Chinese and Asian goods, it will create further tensions with Iran.

The Gulf sub-region is a common point of convergence for Türkiye and China as both countries have increased their engagement with the region immensely in the last 10 years. For China, the Gulf is a region that is crucial for maritime connectivity. In terms of Chinese investments, it is also a crucial region for China's renewable energy interests, a rising pillar of the Chinese economy and BRI in the context of the Gulf's increasing efforts in decarbonization and energy transition.<sup>46</sup> This aligns with the Gulf interests of economic diversification from oil, political diversification from the US, and the discursive rise of nationalism and independence. For Türkiye, the Gulf also represents political and economic opportunities, especially in the form of providing liquidity to the Turkish economy as well as financing prestigious projects in Türkiye, that may boost Erdoğan's legitimacy. Such mega-projects used to be pitched to China under BRI but they are increasingly pitched to the Gulf, as negotiations with China stalled.

As for the recent Gaza War that started in October 2023, both China and Türkiye expressed criticism of Israel, but their approaches differed. China seemed caught off guard by the situation, while Türkiye was notably vocal in asserting that Hamas should not be labeled as a terrorist organization.<sup>47</sup> Despite differing stances, Israel remains a regional economic partner for Türkiye, for example, maritime trade between the two nations continues. For China, mediating the Gaza War would consolidate its regional and global power status. Therefore Zhao Jun, China's special representative to the Middle East, convinced the members of the Islamic Cooperation Organization to act together.<sup>48</sup> China approached Türkiye only in this capacity.

<sup>44</sup> Ramani 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Sariolghalam 2023.

<sup>46</sup> Al-Sulayman and Alterman 2023.

<sup>47</sup> Gumrukcu and Hayatsever 2023.

<sup>48</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2023.

# DOMINANT NARRATIVES

## NARRATIVES FROM THE POLITICAL ELITES

The political elites in Türkiye have a complex narrative of China and what China represents for Türkiye's position in the world and the global political order. Firstly, there is the symbol of China in the narratives, mostly substantiated by economic growth. The economy is an increasingly prime subject in Turkish politics, and growth has been a cornerstone of the government's discourse and practice. Erdoğan pushed the economic bureaucracy and the Central Bank to lower the interest rates in 2021, a policy labeled as "mad" by *The Economist*.<sup>49</sup> He had two main justifications. First were the religious imperatives of Islam that he perceived to disallow profit-making from interest rates. Second was the belief that lower interest rates would bolster economic growth, which was tightly connected to his electoral success, specifically the increase in employment and a growing working class that accompanied the economic growth.<sup>50</sup> In the critical winter of 2021, when interest rates were lowered to the point of triggering an exchange rate crisis in Türkiye, the president used the Chinese case as he justified this unorthodox economic move. Erdoğan spoke about the "Chinese model" where a state with a young population made choices to stimulate local production: "China also achieved growth in this way," he said.<sup>51</sup>

However, in the very same statement, there was another dynamic besides the "China as a growth model". Erdoğan continued to say, "We are closer to the market, we are more advantageous than them."<sup>52</sup> The market here refers to the West and the EU zone in particular. So, China is a model but also a competitor. Our fieldwork also reveals a comparable perception among the Turkish bureaucratic elite. Technical experts in the ministries are quick to point towards the potential for collaboration between the two countries but also to competition, especially in trade. So, model, partner, and competitor are three dimensions of the narrative.

A fourth dimension, arguably, is the fact that Türkiye finds itself in alignment with China regarding the revision of international institutions and the overall contours of the global

order. The aspiration to speak on behalf of the "oppressed of the Global South" is in both countries' narratives albeit in different tones and volumes. Also, this alignment is about Türkiye's positioning in the world. Erdoğan's messages on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are excellent examples in this regard. On several occasions he expressed his desire for Türkiye to be a full member of SCO, accusing the EU of stalling Türkiye for 52 years and that Türkiye is neither East nor West but a part of the globe.<sup>53</sup> China's position in global affairs emphasizing economic growth and development, and non-interference in domestic affairs aligns well with Erdoğan's positioning of Türkiye – how pragmatic that may be in practice. Therefore, China's global power status gives an arsenal to Erdoğan's discourse on global politics.

## NARRATIVES FROM THE BUSINESS ELITE

The business elite in Türkiye is composed of different capital groups which, for this paper, can be classified as SMEs and larger industrial capital. These groups have formal associations and publish reports on industrial relations, trade, and foreign investments. When our fieldwork traces the narrative in these reports that span the period since the pandemic, we see clearly that there is a great deal of complexity in these narratives as well. The same elements of the political elite apply here, except for the alignment of the global order. There is competition and collaboration with China in the business elite's narrative on China. On logistics, the business elite seems to agree on the need to invest in logistics infrastructure in Türkiye but there are different opinions as to whether these investments need to transform Türkiye into a transit hub for Chinese goods or whether Türkiye's infrastructure should be enhanced in a way to increase the export-import transfers from and into Türkiye. On trade, there are also differing opinions on the competitive capacity of Türkiye's production sectors.

Türkiye's location near the European market proved to be invaluable in the pandemic conditions when the maritime logistics route suffered from a container crisis and port closures in China. However, in the last year with the deepening of the economic crisis, the hype about Türkiye being a 'near-shore' alternative to China has been diminishing.

<sup>49</sup> The Economist 2022.

<sup>50</sup> Balaban 2021.

<sup>51</sup> Karakiş 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Karakiş 2021.

<sup>53</sup> Anadolu Ajansı 2022.

On foreign direct investments, based on our fieldwork, business associations place a significant emphasis on the need to attract more high-technology and value-added investments from China in most sectors, which will contribute to capacity building in Türkiye, such as having research and development centers in Chinese investments in Türkiye. They cite the Gulf countries' examples in attracting such Chinese investments and increasingly there are Turkish–Gulf business forums. They also wish for more access to the Chinese market and, in that, they converge with the discourse of the Ministry of Trade in Türkiye which presses this issue in bilateral forums.

## NARRATIVES FROM THE OPPOSITION

The Uyghur issue is one of the biggest potential challenges in bilateral relations. Uyghurs are a Turkic and predominantly Sunni Muslim community, concentrated in the Xinjiang region in Northwest China, with diasporas abroad, the largest one outside of Central Asia being in Türkiye. It is a complex issue because it is at once a bilateral and also a domestic issue in Türkiye, based on strong bonds of language, religion and ethnicity.<sup>54</sup> The government is vulnerable to discursive attacks from the nationalist opposition for not being vocal on the Uyghur issue. Part of the opposition (most notably CHP) treats this as an international human rights issue. Still, another part of the opposition (most notably the İYİ Party) treats this issue from an ethnic angle, where they feel strongly that solidarity has to be shown towards ethnic brothers.

Besides the religious and nationalist opposition as the traditional supporters of the Uyghur cause, even if solely at the rhetorical level at times, the secular main opposition also recently stood by the Uyghurs, framing Beijing's recent policies towards Xinjiang and the Uyghur issue as a matter of human rights.<sup>55</sup> However, requests from the MPs of the main opposition CHP and secularist-nationalist İYİ Party (Good Party) for a human rights commission investigation are continuously rejected in parliament due to votes from the ruling AKP and government ally, ultranationalist MHP (Nationalist Movement Party). China views such parliamentary commission investigations as interference in its internal affairs. During his latest meeting with Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan once again reaffirmed that Türkiye would not interfere in China's internal affairs.<sup>56</sup> The spokesperson of the MHP warned the opposition parties that the government coalition is "pursuing a delicate balance" between China and the Uyghurs.<sup>57</sup> A recent assessment by a Uyghur diaspora leader in Türkiye confirms this balancing act of dual pressures on the government regarding the Uyghur issue. Erkin Ekrem, an academic of Uyghur origin at Hacettepe University, said that he does not foresee any significant changes in Türkiye's attitude towards "the Eastern Turkistan

and Uyghur issue" after Wang Yi's visit on July 26, 2023.<sup>58</sup> According to Ekrem, if bilateral relations "deepen" in the future, China might have "requests" from Türkiye regarding keeping the Uyghur issue as low key as possible, to which Türkiye might respond positively.

Based on our fieldwork, the Uyghur issue comes up occasionally in the negotiations with the Turkish bureaucratic elite over potential credits and investments from China to Türkiye. It is safe to assume that with upcoming municipal elections in March 2024 and the rise of Turkish nationalism in the last couple of years in electoral and day-to-day politics, Chinese investments in Türkiye will be questioned by the nationalist opposition from this angle. The government will likely feel obliged to prioritize electoral concerns, such as pleasing its voter base on the Uyghur issue, prior to the March 2024 local elections. It may also intensify its rhetoric regarding the Uyghur issue despite warnings from China.

The opposition, when triggering nationalist sentiments on the Uyghur issue, is also taking advantage of anti-Chinese sentiments in society. This sentiment "develops solely based on cultural prejudices, stereotypes, and discriminatory categories, independent of the concrete problems between the two countries."<sup>59</sup>

## MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF CHINA IN TÜRKİYE

Even though there was a sizable Maoist influence on the leftist movements in the 1970s, Turkish public opinion towards China remains largely negative due to the substantial Uyghur diaspora in the country. The absence of a historical diaspora Chinese community in Türkiye also leaves cultural communication solely in the hands of the official actors. To avoid protests, Chinese diplomatic missions and official media representatives keep a low profile in their cultural and social activities that could otherwise contribute to Chinese soft power in Türkiye.

In the last decade, thanks to the Turkish government's softened approach to the Uyghur issue to foster better economic relations with China, China has launched a modest 'media pivot' using pro-government and pro-China outlets.<sup>60</sup> Journalists and columnists from pro-government outlets are frequently invited on official trips to Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and the industrially developed parts of China. These outlets emphasize the development level of China as a role model. The pro-China leftist media outlets emphasize China's anti-imperialist foreign policy rhetoric besides its growth and development. There are no empirical studies inquiring about the causal link between this media pivot and the changes in the public perception of China in Türkiye but some recent opinion surveys observe a gradual increase in seeing China as a potential partner.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Tavsan 2021.

<sup>55</sup> However, support for the Uyghur issue has been shown e.g. by the AKP in the past as well, such as in 2009, when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan denounced China's treatment of the Uyghur population as genocide, cf. Genç 2021, 53.

<sup>56</sup> Gazete Duvar 2023.

<sup>57</sup> Benguturk 2023.

<sup>58</sup> Crimean News Agency 2023.

<sup>59</sup> Üngör 2017, 2.

<sup>60</sup> Üngör 2022.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

## CHALLENGES AND CHANCES

A comparison of China's relations with other countries in Türkiye's neighborhood is useful to provide context to the challenges and chances in bilateral relations. Unlike the other countries in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf region, Türkiye does not receive value-added industrial investment. The primary reason for this is the absence of industrial macroplanning in Türkiye to support its relationship with China's industrial upgrading and the lack of coordination among state agencies in Türkiye to have a comprehensive "China strategy". Since the transition to the presidential system in Türkiye, there has been an increased informality in the way policy is made and that is reflected in the bilateral negotiations with China. Our fieldwork in relevant ministries suggests that in deals that require a multi-ministerial approach combined with presidential coordination, Turkish institutions may require more time and effort to talk to one another, whereas the Chinese counterparts are more organized.<sup>62</sup> The frequent changes to trade and investment-related regulations in Türkiye, projecting an image of instability as well as protective practices in raising the tariffs of certain Chinese imports to Türkiye, such as electric vehicles, are also among the challenges in bilateral relations.<sup>63</sup> Defense cooperation is a domain that is difficult yet there might be room for new chances. Türkiye being anchored in NATO means that Türkiye–China military coordination as well as Türkiye's purchase of, for example, standing missiles from China is difficult. However, smaller private Chinese companies have "flocked" to a defense industry fair in Türkiye in "record numbers" as purchasing smaller equipment does not cause the same problems with Türkiye's NATO status.<sup>64</sup>

In the same logic, opportunities for deepening ties exist in areas such as energy. Chinese SOEs have lost bids in renewable energy sectors in Türkiye to European competitors but gain better reception when private Chinese companies enter smaller bids. There is also potential for collaborating with China for a nuclear power plant in İğneada, Türkiye.<sup>65</sup>

Besides bureaucratic clashes, China's lack of diplomatic depth and soft power in Türkiye and the fractured attitude within

the Turkish government and opposition blocs towards the Uyghur issue create an environment not conducive to the improvement of bilateral relations in the hands of domestic actors. An example of the bilateral challenges where economic cooperation is hindered by the Uyghur issue is the credit and investment for the Konya inter-city light rail system. Despite significant preparations, the finalization has been stalled by the Chinese side. This has been frustrating for local and state bureaucrats in Türkiye. Based on our fieldwork, some signals stalling may be related to the Uyghur issue, whereby Chinese counterparts may want further guarantees regarding the non-interference of Türkiye in that issue and use this investment as leverage.

<sup>62</sup> Ergenç and Göçer 2022, Göçer and Ergenç 2023.

<sup>63</sup> Bilgic and Kozok, 2023.

<sup>64</sup> Tavsan 2023.

<sup>65</sup> Kozok 2023.

## CONCLUSION

The ups and downs of Türkiye–China bilateral relations reflect the scope and limits of Türkiye’s balancing act in global politics. After a long period of Western-centricism as part of the North Atlantic alliance and a European Union member candidate, Türkiye has initiated a series of “Asia pivots” since the 2000s.

The “Strategic Depth” framework of Ahmet Davutoğlu,<sup>66</sup> a former foreign minister of the current government, and the current Asia Anew policy are cases in point. However, Türkiye’s Asia pivot faces limitations. The political and business elite show reluctance to fully engage with their Asian counterparts, the bureaucracy lacks the capacity for a complete orientation shift, and external factors, such as the regional balance of power in multiple neighborhoods, play a role.

Türkiye’s relations with China exemplify the delicate balance between eagerness to align with the emerging superpower and challenges on various policy grounds, such as the Uyghur issue and competition for industrial markets. While Türkiye–China relations are worth following in the near future, expecting them to lay the foundations of a non-Western alliance in global politics would be unrealistic.

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<sup>66</sup> Davutoğlu 2001.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AKP	Justice and Development Party
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
CHP	Republican People's Party
ETS	Emission trading system
IYI Party	Good Party
MHP	Nationalist Movement Party
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SME	Small and medium enterprises
SOE	State-owned enterprise
SPA	Special Prorate Agreement
THY	Turkish Airlines



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# COOPERATION, COMPETITION AND STRATEGIC BALANCING

## The Complexity of Türkiye–China Relations



Türkiye demonstrated a notable shift towards proactive engagement in its foreign policy, with a focus on strategic autonomy, and its relations with China is an intricate balancing act that is fraught with tensions and impasses, collaboration and competition.



The context of these relations is predominantly centered around economic cooperation, regional and global orders, and the Uyghur issue. Chinese investors consider Türkiye to be less predictable after its transition to a presidential regime. Further challenges include Türkiye's technical integration with the European Union and its NATO membership. Additionally, China seems to be distracted by other regional alternatives (Greece for logistics connections and the Gulf for renewable energy interests).



Opportunities for deepening ties exist in areas such as Chinese private investments in sectors like energy. The Gaza conflict also aligns Türkiye and China in a shared critique of Israel's actions and a mutual call for peace. Nonetheless, the complexity inherent in this relationship is unlikely to diminish significantly soon. Observers should therefore treat claims of Türkiye's "dependency" on China or its being "pulled" towards the Chinese political model with skepticism.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

<https://mena.fes.de/index.html>