

Turkey and China: An Account of a Bilateral Relations Evolution

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Introduction

Despite being rather far from each other, Turkey-China bilateral relations have an interesting story to tell. Although their past was far from cemented with intense relations, somehow, both countries came from time to time across each other. This article aims to give a comprehensive analysis of this relationship, and especially its evolution in the last decade or so.

Turkey-China relations have long been hampered by the fact that both countries were at the two opposing sides of the Cold War, Turkey being a key member of NATO. They have also been complicated by the long-standing Uyghur issue, Turkey having close cultural and linguistic links with Xinjiang's main ethnic minority. Nonetheless, since the late 1990s, both countries have overcome these issues and in the 2010s, have elevated their relationship to a much more significant level. They even became strategic partners in 2010. Without claiming that this relationship has really reached a strategic level, there is no doubt that it has become quite significant in terms of diplomatic, economic and security cooperation. Today, China is Turkey's second trade partner and Turkey has become the first NATO country to hold substantial military exercises with China. Turkey has also declared its willingness to participate in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and has joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as a founding member.

In order to better understand this relationship and how it has changed in the last decade or so, it is important to briefly present its historical background. Then, we will focus on its evolution since the 1990s. And in a third section, we will present in greater details the major features of the current political, economic and security relations between both countries.



A Young Relationship between Two Old Empires

Turkey and China have in common to have been large, glorious and expanding empires, an imperial past that is often referred to when both countries' representatives meet and that has been to some degree instrumentalized since the 1990s to boost their bilateral relationship.

Given the distance that separates them, the Ottoman and the Chinese empires did not have much contact before the second part of the 19th century. Nevertheless, if we go back before the Turks moved to Anatolia, it is noteworthy to indicate that Turks and Chinese were neighbors in China itself. Back then, Turks were called Tujue (突厥), in other words, Göktürk.¹ This two thousand year-old legacy has had in fact its own impact

1 - Xue Zongzheng (薛宗正), 突厥史 [History of Tujue] (中国社会科学出版社, 1992), 791.

on both peoples' encounters. The Turkish roots from the Göktürk era have left relatives to Turkey in and around China, namely other Turkic tribes including the Uyghurs. And the famous Silk Road allowed both people to develop, mostly indirect, trade relations as the Ottoman and Chinese Empires were located at the two ends of this ancient trade route.² However, until the very end of the Ottoman era, both empires did not have direct relations: they dealt with each other via their embassies in Europe.³ One eye-catching event though was the Ottoman Empire's support in the 1870s for the creation of an independent Kashgar Khanate in today's Xinjiang, the home of Uyghurs. This was the first case of Turkish support for an independent East Turkistan, but not the last one.⁴

Then, the "sick man of Europe" and the "sick man of Asia" started to work on their own modernization and revolution. As Turkey entered the revolution phase a bit earlier than China, there was an intellectual interest among Chinese scholars and politicians for Turkey's political movements. These Chinese individuals include various figures such as Kang Youwei, who visited Istanbul during the Young Turk revolution in 1908;⁵ Sun Yat-sen, who proposed in the same year to solve China's problems in organizing a revolution on the Young Turks' model;⁶ Liu Keshu and Dai Wangshu, who were attracted by the nationalism dimension of the Turkish revolution;⁷ Hu Hanmin, a key member of the Kuomintang, who highlighted the role of the military in Atatürk's revolution;⁸ and Cai Hesen, an early communist leader who compared Turkey and China's experiences at the time.⁹

2 - William Atwell, "Ming China and the Emerging World Economy, C. 1470-1650," in *The Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644, Part 2*, ed. John King Fairbank and Frederick W. Mote, vol. 8, The Cambridge History of China (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 379.

3 - Selda Altan, "Sighting the Ottomans from the East: Chinese Intellectual Transition from Imperial to National Imagination through the Ottomans at the Turn of the Twentieth Century" (Boğaziçi University, 2009), 5.

4 - Uluğ Kuzuoğlu, "Osmanlı'nın Şinçan'ı 'Türkistan-I Çini': Karşılıklı Algı ve Tesir [Ottoman's Xinjiang 'Chinese Turkestan': Reciprocal Perceptions and Influence]," in *Türkiye'de Çin'i Düşünmek Ekonomik, Siyasi ve Kültürel İlişkilere Yeni Yaklaşımlar*, ed. Selçuk Esenbel, İsenbike Togan, and Altay Atlı, Politika Dizisi (İstanbul: Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2013), 123-24.

5 - Giray Fidan, "Rethinking Sino-Turkish Relations in a Historical Perspective," in *Sino - Turkey Relations: Concept Policies and Prospects*, ed. R. Kutay Karaca and Wang Li (İstanbul: İstanbul Gelişim University Press, 2015), 309.

6 - Sun Yat-sen (孙中山), "论惧革命召瓜分者乃不识时务者也," in 孙中山全集 [Collection of Sun Yat-Sen's Works], vol. 第1卷 (北京: 中华书局, 1981), 382.

7 - Liu Keshu (柳克述), 新土耳其 [New Turkey] (上海: 商务印书馆, 1927), 1; Dai Wangshu (戴望舒), trans., 现代土耳其政治 [Politics of Modern Turkey] (上海: 商务印书馆, 1937).

8 - Ma Jilian (马积廉), "到麦加去: 民国时期到中东去的旅行记述研究 (1911-1949) [Going to Mecca: Chinese Travel Accounts of the Middle East From the Republican Period (1911-1949)]" (National University of Singapore, 2012), 64.

9 - Huang Zhigao (黄志高), "1921 - 1925 年中国共产党对土耳其凯末尔革命的观察与反应 [Observation and Reaction of Communist Party of China to Turkish Revolution During 1921-1925]," 北京科技大学学报 (社会科学版) [Journal of University of Science and Technology Beijing (Social Science Edition)] 26, no. 2 (June 2010): 119.

Right after the establishment of a new republic in Turkey (1923), Ankara tried to open a diplomatic mission in China but it did not materialize. Eventually, the Republic of China (ROC) opened a mission in Ankara in 1934 and Turkey sent a diplomatic representative to Nanking in 1937.¹⁰ Besides, stimulated by Atatürk's order to study Turkey's history also from Chinese sources, Turkey opened a Sinology department as early as 1935.¹¹ But before 1949, the relationship did not really take off ground.

The communist revolution and the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 had a direct influence on Turkey-China relations. Then, after China's People's Liberation Army took control of Xinjiang, the leaders of the last East Turkestan Republic (1944-1949), namely İsa Yusuf Alptekin (1901-1995) and Mehmet Emin Buğra (1901-1965), had to flee to Turkey.¹² Tens of hundreds of Uyghurs also moved from China to Turkey in the 1950s and 1960s.¹³ Then, in 1950, the Korean War broke out in which Chinese and Turkish soldiers fought on opposite sides. This episode has left some negative perceptions of China in the Turkish society.¹⁴ Conversely, the PRC had then unfavorable views of Turkey, given this country, a US ally and already a NATO member, leaning towards the "capitalist West". For example, in 1960 Mao Zedong called Turkish Prime Minister Menderes a "running dog" of the imperialists.¹⁵ As a matter of fact, until the early 1970s, Turkey kept official links with the ROC authorities which had taken refuge in Taiwan in 1949.

Things changed in Turkey-China (PRC) relations when the United States decided to modify its policy towards Mao's regime. As a result, in 1971 Turkey established diplomatic relations with the PRC and severed its relations with Taiwan. It should be indicated here that the Turkish government that recognized the PRC as "one China" is a product of a military intervention into domestic politics. This point is particularly important for understanding the evolution of this bilateral relationship.

10 - Mehmet Söylemez, "Turkey-China Relations in the 21st Century: From Enhanced to Strategic Partnership" (Hong Kong Baptist University, 2017), 78.

11 - Seriyi Sezen, "China in Turkish Academic Literature," *Sociology of Islam* 4, no. 1-2 (April 15, 2016): 129-48, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22131418-00402006>; Geng Pingping (耿萍萍), "以《申报》为视角探究1935-1936年的中土关系 [Exploring the China-Turkey Relations in Years 1935-6 from the Perspective of Paper 'Shenbao']," *前沿* 14, no. 340 (2013): 159.

12 - Ömer Kul, "Osman Batur ve Doğu Türkistan Milli Mücadelesi (1941-1951) [Osman Batur and (His) East Turkestan National Struggle (1941-1951)]" (İstanbul Üniversitesi, 2009), 206, 386.

13 - Mine Akman, "Uyghur Immigrants in Turkey: A Home Away from Home" (Boğaziçi University, 2010), 52-53; Mehmet Güldeş, "Doğu Türkistanlı Uyghur Türklerinin Türkiye'de Kurdukları Dernekler ve Yayın Faaliyetleri [The Associations and Publication Activities of Uyghur Turks from East Turkestan in Turkey]" (Kırıkkale Üniversitesi, 2008), 9; Hongyi Harry Lai, "China's Western Development Program: Its Rationale, Implementation, and Prospects," *Modern China* 28, no. 4 (October 2002): 446.

14 - Çağdaş Üngör, "Perceptions of China in the Turkish Korean War Narratives," *Turkish Studies* 7, no. 3 (September 2006): 405-6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683840600891075>.

15 - Zan Tao, "Sino-Turkish Relationship: Centering on Turkey's Perception About the Rise of China," in *Sino - Turkey Relations : Concept Policies and Prospects*, ed. R. Kutay Karaca and Wang Li (Istanbul: Istanbul Gelişim University Press, 2015), 84.

Since then, the Turkish military has always played an important role in their country's relations with China, regularly pushing for a closer partnership. For instance, the first Turkish Foreign Minister and President who visited China in 1981 and 1982, respectively, were part of a government that was formed after the military coup d'état that had taken place in 1980. However, in the 1980s, Turkey-China relations remained rather low-key, consisting mainly of exchanges of governmental visits and a few military delegations.

The end of the Cold War complicated for some time Turkey-China relations. Then, Turkey lost in the eyes of its Western allies the strategic importance it had before. At the same time, the dissolution of the Soviet Union gave birth to independent Turkic states in Central Asia, convincing Turkey to use its leadership position in the "Turkic world" to expand its diplomatic influence eastward. These changes could only affect Turkey's policy towards the Uyghurs and Xinjiang. In 1994, in a transparent reference to Xinjiang, the then Turkish President Turgut Özal told Uyghur leader İsa Yusuf Alptekin (who had taken refuge in Turkey in 1949) that his desire was "to see the ancient homeland of Turkic people as a free country".¹⁶ This pro-Uyghur policy went on for some time. For example, in 1995, just before the death of Alptekin, a park in Istanbul was named after him. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then mayor of Istanbul, praised Alptekin at the opening ceremony, ignoring China's protests.¹⁷ When asked by China to change the park's name, Erdoğan then said: "We...believe that to change the name of the park would insult not only Turkey but all Turkic people around the world."¹⁸

Enhancing Relations to the Strategic Partnership Level?

Turkey-China relations only took off ground in the late 1990s. The context had changed: Turkey's "Turkic dream" had evaporated as well as Uyghur's dream of becoming independent; and after the Tiananmen massacre, China was rapidly developing and becoming a major actor of the international community. For these reasons, the Turkish authorities reassessed their China policy. The military who then controlled the government played again a key role: in 1995 Turkish Air Force Commander Halis Burhan visited China; and, in 1996, Turkey decided to sign some secret agreements on co-producing missiles.¹⁹ As a result, the following year, Turkey purchased for the first time from China weapons

16 - Eastern Turkestan Union in Europe, "İsa Yusuf Alptekin Honors Özal," *East Turkestan Information Bulletin*, June 1994.

17 - Fatma Özge Atay, "Impact of the Xinjiang Problem on the China's External Relations: 1990-2010" (Middle East Technical University, 2010), 115.

18 - Eastern Turkestan Union in Europe, "China Pressures Turkey on İsa Yusuf Alptekin Park," *East Turkestan Information Bulletin*, February 1995.

19 - Erkin Ekrem, "Türkiye-Çin İlişkilerinin 40 Yılı (1971-2011) [40 years of Turkey-China Relations (1971-2011)]" (Stratejik Düşünce Enstitüsü, Nisan 2012), 22.

and technologies which would later enable Turkey to manufacture some of its short-range missiles.²⁰ The transaction amounted to 43 million US dollars.

In the meantime, the Turkish government modified its stance on the Uyghur issue, reassuring China about its intentions. Following the death of Alptekin, Turkey convinced some asylum-seeker Uyghur intellectuals to leave Turkey. In 1998, a secret decree to all government departments banned officials from attending any Uyghur-leading events and limited pro-East Turkestan activities in Turkey. A year later, the Turkish police arrested some alleged Uyghur militants belonging to the “East Turkestan Liberation Organization”.²¹ And at the beginning of 2000, Turkey and China signed a Cooperation Agreement on Countering Transnational Crimes, which can be understood as a Turkish declaration not to support East Turkestan movements.

Apparently, Turkey’s efforts had convinced China, and it was time to give a name to this rapprochement. During his visit to Turkey in 2000, the Chinese President Jiang Zemin signed with his counterpart President Süleyman Demirel a joint communiqué that elevated the status of their country’s bilateral relationship to an “*enhanced partnership*”. In the aftermath of this official visit, relations improved substantially.

For example, in 2002, China allowed for the first time Nationalist Movement Party’s (MHP) leader and Vice Premier Devlet Bahçeli to visit Urumqi and Kashgar.

In 2002 as well, Turkish politics entered a new era. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) won a big electoral victory and started to lead Turkish politics with Erdoğan as Prime Minister. In general, since then Erdoğan’s AKP has advocated a multi-directional foreign policy. This project includes better relations with the Middle East, Africa, Russia and China. However, to a large extent, the AKP has not changed Turkey’s China policy. Then, the most important evolution was related to bilateral trade which volume started to rapidly increase, reaching 20 billion USD in 2010 against 1.5 billion USD in 2002 with a large surplus in favor of China. Although in the early 2000s China appeared more often on the map and in the news in Turkey, political relations remained modest.

Nonetheless, a few years later, bilateral relations made another step forward. As before, the Turkish military played a central role. A Turkish general visited Beijing in 2009 and signed there an agreement with the Chinese government that included the organization of joint military exercises and a deepening of defense industry cooperation.²² As a result, in 2010 several Chinese aircrafts took part in Turkey’s annual military training. It was the first time that a NATO country was conducting a joint exercise with the PLA Air Force. There was no coincidence that in the same year the two countries,

20 - Richard Weitz, “Turkey and China Establish Strategic Partnership,” *Turkey Analyst*, October 25, 2010, <http://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/230-turkey-and-china-establish-strategic-partnership.html>.

21 - Yitzhak Shichor, “Turkey and China in the Post-Cold War World: Great Expectations,” in *Middle Powers and the Rise of China*, ed. Bruce Gilley and Andrew O’Neil (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), 198.

22 - Shichor, 202.

again, wanted to give a name to this closer relationship. During Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao’s visit to the then-PM Erdoğan, the two leaders declared that China and Turkey had established a *strategic partnership* and signed not less than eight framework agreements. Surfing on this new wave, Erdoğan tried on several occasions to join Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).²³ However, wary of Turkey’s influence in Central Asia and Xinjiang, as well as its Western ally status, both Russia and China politely refused, allowing Turkey to become only a dialog partner of the organization.

In any event, after 2010, Turkey-China partnership clearly reached a higher level, forgetting about the short-term tensions that the 2009 Urumqi riots has momentarily caused to the relationship (see below).



Major Features of the Current “Strategic Partnership”

Since 2010, Turkey and China have concluded many agreements, successfully completing a large number of joint projects. Both countries continue to face some hurdles, as the Uyghur issue. Nevertheless, by and large, China has in recent years become one of the most important and eye-catching partners of Turkey in terms of trade, security and international relations.

The Uyghur Issue

This issue remains important for the Turkish society but it has been managed with much more caution by the Turkish government. In recent years, the issue came up twice and provoked each time (however less so the second time) a short-term crisis in the Turkey-China relationship. The first crisis was caused in July 2009 by the Urumqi riots. Turkey’s reaction was immediate and strong. Then-PM Erdoğan likened China’s repression to a “genocide”, which in turn triggered an outburst in China.²⁴ Later on, Turkish diplomats worked hard to mend their country’s relation with the PRC and eventually succeeded. More recently, in 2015, due to some false reports accusing the Chinese authorities of killing fasting Muslim Uyghurs, the Turkish society held large protests against China, some conservative and/or pro-government media leading the events.²⁵ However, this time, Erdoğan, who had become President of Turkey in 2014, and his team were well prepared and distanced themselves from the protest and the media. As a result, this crisis did not cause major tensions at the state level between the two countries. And just a month later,

23 - Raffaello Pantucci and Alexandros Petersen, “Turkey: Abandoning the EU for the SCO?,” *The Diplomat* (blog), February 17, 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/02/turkey-abandoning-the-eu-for-the-sco/>.

24 - Raphael Israeli, “China’s Uyghur Problem,” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* IV, no. 1 (2010): 93.

25 - Mehmet Söylemez, “Uygurlar ve ‘Çin Zulmü’ [Uyghurs and ‘China’s Slaughter’],” News, *VivaHiba* (blog), June 29, 2015, <http://vivahiba.com/article/show/uygurlar-ve-cin-zulmu/>.

in 2015, Erdoğan visited China and met with President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang, underscoring the importance that this relationship has acquired for both countries.

Since the early 2000s, the Turkish leaders have clearly toned down their rhetoric about the Uyghur and Xinjiang, adopting in general a friendly and constructive language towards China on the issue. In 2002, during Zhu Rongji's visit to Turkey, PM Bülent Ecevit referred to Xinjiang as a "bridge" between the two countries, term also used by vice PM Devlet Bahçeli when the same year he visited the autonomous region.²⁶ And in 2009, President Abdullah Gül also described the Uyghurs as a bridge between the two countries. A few years later in 2011 Chinese airline companies started to operate direct flights between Istanbul and Urumqi and a Turkish Industrial Park was opened in Xinjiang, contributing to fleshing out this new bridge through connection and cooperation projects.

In that sense, both governments have managed to minimize if not sideline the Uyghur issue. Nonetheless, it is far from having totally disappeared and can in the future become an irritant again. Firstly, the Turkish society is still very sensitive about the Uyghur and Xinjiang, a sensitivity which the Chinese society is well aware of. For example, 86% of the Chinese Internet users surveyed in 2015 believe that Turkey supports the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which was declared a terrorist group by China as early as 2002.²⁷ Another problem in the backstage has been the Uyghur jihadists going into Syria. 2,000 to 2,500 Uyghur jihadists under the Al-Nusra front and another 500 to 1,000 under the Islamic State have been reported to be fighting on the ground in 2016.²⁸ A third issue is that Turkey and China have been on opposite sides in the Syrian civil war. Turkey's aggressive opposition to Bashar al-Assad and China's strong support of his regime have clouded the relationship between Ankara and Beijing. However, in order to keep a good relationship with China, Turkey has worked hard to minimize its differences with this country on Syria, mostly in ignoring them.

The Jihadists in Syria is a more problematic issue because not only the Chinese authorities believe that these fighters have been going there through Turkey but also at some point Turkey has also acknowledged this fact.²⁹ Chinese media have also published reports about Uyghur militants confessing how they had entered Syria from Turkey with Turkish officials' help, the latter turning

26 - Yitzhak Shichor, "Ethno-Diplomacy: The Uyghur Hitch in Sino-Turkish Relations," Analysis and Publications, Policy Studies (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2009), 47-48, <http://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/ethno-diplomacy-uyghur-hitch-sino-turkish-relations>.

27 - Guo Pengfei (郭鹏飞), "超六成网民对土耳其持负面印象 认为土为东突提供实质支持 [Over 60% Netizen Held Negative Impression of Turkey, Believe Turkey Substantially Supports ETIM]," News, 环球网, July 8, 2015, 6, <http://world.huanqiu.com/exclusive/2015-07/6945094.html>.

28 - Haytham Mouzahem, "Uighur 'Jihadis' Role In Syria War," News, The Levant News, April 19, 2016, <http://the-levant.com/chinese-uyghur-jihadis-play-a-significant-role-in-syria-war/>.

29 - "Türkiye, Radikalilerin Türkiye Üzerinden Suriye'ye Gittiğini Doğruladı [Turkey Confirmed Extremist Go to Syria via Turkey]," Official, Embassy of the PRC in the Republic of Turkey, July 28, 2015, <http://tr.china-embassy.org/tur/xwdt/t1284561.htm>.

a blind eye on them.³⁰ With the dismantlement of the Islamic State in 2017, the problem has now concentrated on the management of the Uyghur militants who are stranded in Turkey, and more generally in the Middle East, or who are trying to go back to China.³¹ This has put Turkey, as a possible channel of returning route to China, in a sensitive position. In addition, Uyghur militants staying in Turkey are posing a potential threat to China's overseas interests.³² Nevertheless, it is highly likely that Ankara will give a close attention to this issue so that it does not disrupt its close partnership with Beijing.

All in all, while since the late 1990s, the Uyghur issue has been better managed by the Turkish government, it has still the potential to negatively affect Turkey-China relations, particularly in times of crisis in Xinjiang.

Economic relations

In the last decade or so, China has become for Turkey a key trade partner. Today, China is Turkey's second trade partner behind Germany, and first supplier, overtaking Russia in 2015 (Cf. Table 1). And in the last few years, Chinese foreign direct investments (FDIs) in Turkey have also started to surge.

Although bilateral trade started to increase before the AKP came to power as a majority government in late 2002, this party has directly encouraged Turkey to do more business with China. However, it is China rather than Turkey which has mostly benefited from these booming trade relations. China is only Turkey's 19th export destination. This situation has created a huge trade deficit that Turkey is struggling to solve, up to now without much success.

Apparently, the reasons for this trade imbalance can be found in Turkey's production capacity. In other words, Turkey has not much to sell to China apart from some raw materials which Turkey is rich of like marble and travertine, chromium, copper, lead, iron, natural borate ores, boric oxide, boric acid, etc. On its side, China is mainly providing Turkey automatic data processing machines, mobile phones, toys, audio-visual devices, cruise and merchant ships, etc.³³ Yet, on both sides, there is a willingness to push trade forward. In 2010, when Wen visited Turkey he set with his counterpart a new target: 50 billion USD trade volume by 2015. Although this objective was far from being achieved, during Erdoğan's 2016 visit to China, both countries set an even more ambitious target--100 billion USD by 2020, underscoring both governments' rather voluntarist approach to their relationship.

30 - Xinhua News, "Video: A Former Undergraduate at a #Xinjiang University, Now under Custody in Urumqi, Had Wanted to Join #Jihad," microblog, *Twitter* (blog), July 18, 2015, <https://twitter.com/XHNews/status/622382187959091200>.

31 - Jack Moore, "ISIS Video Shows Radicalized Militants from China's Uyghur Minority Threatening to Shed Blood on Home Turf," *Newsweek*, March 2, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/isis-fighters-chinas-uyghur-minority-vow-shed-blood-home-562948>.

32 - Nodirbek Soliev, "How Serious Is the Islamic State Threat to China?," *The Diplomat* (blog), accessed December 23, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/how-serious-is-the-islamic-state-threat-to-china/>.

33 - "Turkey-People's Republic of China Economic and Trade Relations," Official, Rep. of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-commercial-and-economic-relations-with-china.en.mfa.

Table 1: Turkey's Bilateral Trade with China³⁴

| Table 1 (\$ millions) | | | | | |
|-----------------------|--------|--------|--------|---------|---------------------|
| Years | Export | Import | Volume | Deficit | Export/Import Ratio |
| 2000 | 96 | 1,345 | 1,441 | 1,249 | 7.1 |
| 2001 | 199 | 926 | 1,125 | 727 | 21.5 |
| 2002 | 268 | 1,368 | 1,636 | 1,100 | 19.6 |
| 2003 | 505 | 2,610 | 3,115 | 2,105 | 19.3 |
| 2004 | 392 | 4,476 | 4,868 | 4,084 | 8.8 |
| 2005 | 550 | 6,885 | 7,435 | 6,335 | 8 |
| 2006 | 693 | 9,669 | 10,362 | 8,976 | 7.2 |
| 2007 | 1,040 | 13,234 | 14,274 | 12,194 | 7.9 |
| 2008 | 1,437 | 15,658 | 17,095 | 14,221 | 9.2 |
| 2009 | 1,599 | 12,677 | 14,276 | 11,078 | 12.6 |
| 2010 | 2,260 | 17,180 | 19,440 | 14,920 | 13.2 |
| 2011 | 2,467 | 21,692 | 24,159 | 19,225 | 11.4 |
| 2012 | 2,833 | 21,295 | 24,128 | 18,462 | 13.3 |
| 2013 | 3,601 | 24,685 | 28,286 | 21,084 | 14.6 |
| 2014 | 2,862 | 24,918 | 27,780 | 22,056 | 11.5 |
| 2015 | 2,415 | 24,874 | 27,289 | 22,459 | 9.7 |
| 2016 | 2,328 | 25,441 | 27,769 | 23,113 | 9.2 |

More recently, Chinese FDIs to Turkey have also rapidly increased. Their cumulative amount has overtaken two billion US dollars as of 2017.³⁵ Chinese FDIs are concentrated in logistics, telecommunications and manufacturing. Chinese companies have also opened trading representative offices in Turkey, especially for machinery sales. In addition, Turkey has concluded a deal with China Development Bank to fund big scale projects including railway projects (see below).³⁶

For its part, Turkish FDIs to China have remained weak. Having registered a total of three to seven billion dollars outward FDIs in the last few years, Turkey has only invested less than a hundred million dollars in China.³⁷ In order to improve this highly imbalanced situation, both countries have taken some initiatives. They have for instance set up an already mentioned Industrial Park in Xinjiang and a Turkish Commerce Center in Xining, Qinghai as well as agreed to open a Chinese Free Trade Zone, possibly in Izmir.³⁸

34 - TurkStat, "Foreign Trade by Countries," Official, Turkish Statistical Institute, December 2017, <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/UstMenu.do?metod=temelist>.

35 - "Turkey-People's Republic of China Economic and Trade Relations."

36 - Mehmet Ali Berber, "Turkish-Chinese Trade to Grow Free from Exchange Rate Pressure," *Daily Sabah*, July 31, 2015, sec. Economy, <http://www.dailysabah.com/economy/2015/07/31/turkish-chinese-trade-to-grow-free-from-exchange-rate-pressure>.

37 - Altay Atlı, «ICBC Brings Chinese Money to Turkey,' *Asia Times* (blog), June 7, 2015, <http://atimes.com/2015/06/icbc-brings-chinese-money-to-turkey/>; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, "Country Fact Sheets: China," Investment and the Digital Economy, World Investment Report 2017 (Geneva: UN, 2017); United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, "Country Fact Sheets: Turkey," Investment and the Digital Economy, World Investment Report 2017 (Geneva: UN, 2017).

38 - Söylemez, "Turkey-China Relations in the 21st Century," 288–89.

In the same period of time, banking and financial relations between Turkey and China have developed.

In the early 2000s, the Turkish banks Garanti and Isbank opened representative offices in China. Chinese banks as the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) and the Bank of China did the same in Turkey after 2010. In 2015, the ICBC has also bought a Turkish bank and, as a result, become an operational bank registered in Turkey.³⁹ Turkey and China also signed a 10 billion and a 12 billion currency swap deal in 2010 and 2015, respectively. In addition, it has been reported that some Turkish state banks have received Chinese loans for more than half a billion USD and that the Turkey Wealth Fund is inquiring a five billion USD loan from China. Last but not least, in 2015 Turkey also joined China-initiated AIIB as founding member with a 2.66% share and a 2.52% voting share.⁴⁰

Belt and Road Initiative

Turkey's decision to join the AIIB was political. It came two years after Xi Jinping had launched its One Belt One Road (OBOR) strategy, renamed in 2017 the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a sum of China-funded infrastructure projects that Turkey, strategically located between Asia and Europe, wants to benefit from.

Being part of these initiatives means that Turkey can use its historical position to become a hub between Asia and Europe in terms of trade routes, transportation and energy transfer.⁴¹ For instance, the third Eurasian Continental Bridge is expected to link China with Europe through Turkey with a railway route.⁴² Actually, this route is one of the six major corridors of the whole BRI. Another one is the locally (mainly Azerbaijan)-financed Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) Central Corridor railway project that has opened in 2017. Chinese purchase of the 65% of Kumport container terminal in Istanbul in 2015 can be seen as a concrete step made by China to build this corridor. There is also a plan to connect Turkey's east and west ends with a Chinese made high-speed railway as a continuation of the BTK project.

In order to institutionalize this cooperation, on the sideline of the 2015 G20 Antalya Summit, China and Turkey signed a MoU on the "Harmonization of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road with the Middle Corridor Initiative" as well as a "Railroad Cooperation Agreement between Turkey and China." And in 2016 just before the G20 Hangzhou Summit, both countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) "Belt and Road" Initiative that included Turkey's

39 - Atlı, "ICBC Brings Chinese Money to Turkey."

40 - Zhang Aihua and Guo Jiayan, "Graphics: AIIB Voting Stakes," News, Caixin, July 3, 2015, <http://english.caixin.com/2015-07-03/100825189.html>.

41 - Gan Junxian and Mao Yan, "China's New Silk Road: Where Does It Lead?," *Asian Perspective*, no. 40 (2016): 105–30.

42 - Liu Zuokui, "The Role of Central and Eastern Europe in the Building of Silk Road Economic Belt" (China-CEEC Think Tanks Network, January 11, 2016).

“Middle Corridor” Project.⁴³ Overall, the existing 45 to 62 day China-Europe route is expected to be cut to 15 days with the realization of Turkey’s Middle Corridor project.⁴⁴ Moreover, Turkey has also declared an interest to join the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in order to benefit as well from the projects that are relevant to the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region.⁴⁵

All this activity around the new Silk Roads shows that Turkey has great expectations from China-led development and initiatives. President Erdoğan attended the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in China in May 2017. He was warmly welcomed by Xi Jinping, giving there one of the two guest keynote speeches along with Russian President Vladimir Putin. This is a clear sign of Turkey-China current honeymoon.⁴⁶ At the airport, speaking of Turkey’s roles in the BRI and China’s role in his country’s infrastructure projects, Erdoğan mentioned Turkey’s Marmaray rail line, the Yavuz Sultan Selim and Çanakkale bridges, the Eurasia Tunnel and Istanbul’s Third Airport. He also claimed that Turkey would build a Trans-Caspian Central Corridor to link China and Europe through Turkey.⁴⁷ During the forum, Erdoğan declared that he welcomed China’s “investment, transportation network and infrastructure construction”. And in a one-to-one meeting, Xi underlined that cooperation should be kept on the “Online Silk Road, facility construction and industrial cooperation” as well as on “policy coordination and trade balance”.⁴⁸

Military cooperation

Since a major agreement was signed in 2009, military cooperation has continued to deepen. A few weeks after Turkish and Chinese air forces held their first joint exercise, both countries’ land forces worked on counterterrorism missions on the Turkish land. This latter drill was also unprecedented as the Chinese army was operating in a NATO country for the first time

for that purpose.⁴⁹ These developments were quite telling about the future mutual vision of the relationship.

Indeed, Turkey wanted to go further than the symbolic move it had made when in the late 1990s it purchased from China multi-launch rocket systems and short-range missiles. It was eager to conclude a real transaction with geostrategic implications.

After six years of inquiry, in 2013 the Turkish Under Secretariat for Defense Industries announced that the Chinese Precision Machinery Import-Export Corporation (CPMIEC) won the Turkish Long Range Air and Missile Defense System (T-LORAMIDS) project bid. The Turkish side gave two reasons to its decision: the price and the availability of technology sharing. Obviously, the decision was a big one, and the USA and NATO opposition to it came immediately due to the interoperability problems, making NATO systems in Turkey vulnerable to Chinese systems. Moreover, the above-mentioned Chinese company was under US sanctions.⁵⁰

As a result, Turkey was forced to postpone the bid for five times and, eventually, had to cancel the whole project in late 2015. The official reason given for scraping the deal was Turkey’s dissatisfaction with China’s technology sharing plan.⁵¹ Another rumor at the time was that Turkey was going to use a Chinese company to produce its national F-X aircrafts.⁵² Yet, a British company was chosen later instead. Though these big projects were not realized at the time, it sent an important signal regarding both countries’ partnership. For Turkey, it was a message to its traditional allies that Turkey was in search of independent capabilities, if not looking for other “options”. China’s intention was to demonstrate that its weapons industry was already able to compete with the West and to pull even NATO members away from their traditional allies, in giving them attractive offers.⁵³

Finally, it should be also noted that there have been several naval visits between Turkey and China. The Turkish frigate Gemlik made port calls in Shanghai and Hong Kong in 2011 for the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between both countries.⁵⁴ And in 2015,

43 - Francesco Saverio Montesano, “The Role of Turkey and Cyprus in OBOR,” Clingendael Report, The Geopolitical Relevance of Piraeus and China’s New Silk Road for Southeast Europe and Turkey (Hague: Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations, December 2016), 41–42.

44 - Filippo Fasulo and Valeria Talbot, “The MENA Region: Where the Belt Joins the Road,” in *China’s Belt and Road: A Game Changer?*, ed. Alessia Amighini, 1st ed. (Milano: The Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), 2017), 90.

45 - Christina Lin, “The Repercussions of Turkey-China Relations on Turkey’s Transatlantic Relations: The American Perspective,” in *Turkey and Transatlantic Relations*, ed. Sasha Toperich and Aylin Ünver (Washington, D.C: Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2017), 250.

46 - Altay Athi, “Turkey’s Relations with China and Its Repercussions on Transatlantic Relations: The Turkish Perspective,” in *Turkey and Transatlantic Relations*, ed. Sasha Toperich and Aylin Ünver (Washington, D.C: Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2017), 232–33.

47 - “Presidency Of The Republic Of Turkey : President Erdoğan Goes to China,” Official, Turkish Presidency, December 5, 2017, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/75165/president-erdogan-goes-to-china.html>.

48 - Hou Qiang, “China, Turkey to Strengthen Cooperation under Belt and Road Initiative,” News, Xinhua, May 13, 2017, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/13/c_136279883.htm.

49 - Chris Zambelis, “Sino-Turkish Strategic Partnership: Implications of Anatolian Eagle 2010,” *The Jamestown Foundation China Brief*, January 14, 2011, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=37369.

50 - Ethan Meick, “China’s Potential Air Defense System Sale to Turkey and Implications for the United States,” Staff Report (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, December 18, 2013).

51 - “Turkey Cancels \$3.4bn Missile Deal with China: Official,” News, The Times of India, November 15, 2015, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/europe/Turkey-cancels-3-4bn-missile-deal-with-China-Official/articleshow/49793385.cms>.

52 - “Chinese Shenyang Responds to Turkish RFI for F-X Fighter Contest,” News, *Asian Defence News* (blog), June 7, 2015, <http://asian-defence-news.blogspot.hk/2015/06/chinese-shenyang-responds-to-turkish.html>.

53 - David Lague, “For China, Turkey Missile Deal a Victory Even If It Doesn’t Happen,” News, Reuters, October 2, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/02/us-china-turkey-idUSBRE9910GN20131002>.

54 - Ekrem, “Türkiye-Çin İlişkilerinin 40 Yılı (1971-2011) [40 years of Turkey-China Relations (1971-2011)],” 24.

the Turkish frigate Gediz visited Hong Kong and Qingdao on a commemoration mission,⁵⁵ while the Chinese Weifang, Linyi, and Weishanhu warships visited Istanbul on a friendly mission.⁵⁶



Conclusion

The paradoxical conclusion of this short presentation is that the relationship between Turkey and China, two countries that are the heirs of two old Empires, is rather young.

Their relationship in the modern era has started slowly and kept for a long time a low profile. Although Turkey-China (PRC) relations started officially in 1971, we had to wait until the late 1990s and early 2000s to witness a rapprochement between them. Since then, the development of their bilateral relationship has accelerated. Just a decade after both countries launched in 2000 their “enhanced partnership”, in 2010 they concluded a “strategic partnership”.

It is clear that the Turkish military has constantly occupied a special place in the background of Turkey-China relations. But this has not been the only factor stimulating this relationship. The other one is the AKP and Erdoğan himself. Erdoğan as other AKP politicians like former President Abdullah Gül and former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu have always advocated an independent and a multi-directional foreign policy. Hence, AKP leaders’ willingness to develop closer relations with China also contributed to the Turkish military and state’s will to develop the relations.

It is therefore safe to conclude that Turkey-China relations are likely to remain on the same track and further develop. The frequent exchanges between Erdoğan and Xi in the recent few years indicate on both sides a strong will to move forward.⁵⁷ In late 2017, Erdoğan appointed one of his close advisers Abdulkadir Emin Önen, who is also a former AKP deputy with business interest in China, ambassador to China. Önen was received by President Xi in his first week in Beijing, confirming China’s strong interest in Erdoğan’s Turkey.

The failed coup attempt in 2016 may also contribute to boost Turkey-China relations. The majority of the generals purged in the coup are reported of being

pro-NATO.⁵⁸ As a result, the Turkish military is now dominated by pro-Eurasian generals.⁵⁹ Since the Turkish government itself has strong pro-Eurasian inclinations, Turkey’s relations with China have a good chance of getting closer in the coming years.

Having said that, we can still debate whether the Turkey-China partnership is really a “strategic” one. It is true that Turkey’s commitment to NATO seems to have eroded.⁶⁰ However, Turkey is still part of NATO as well as a US ally. On the Syrian crisis, Turkey and China sat on opposite side of the fence. And more importantly, China remains far away from the Middle East, an environment that will continue to dominate Turkey’s foreign policy agenda. Turkey-China diplomatic and trade relations as well as Xi’s BRI are important for Turkey’s development strategy. China’s growing diplomatic role in the Middle East cannot be ignored either. But can China really help Turkey mitigate the threats and the political challenges that it faces on a daily basis?

55 - It was a mission commemorating the sinking of the Ertuğrul Frigate in a typhoon near Japan 125 years ago. The Gediz frigate followed the same route and stopped in the same ports as the Ertuğrul.

56 - “19th Chinese Naval Escort Taskforce Visits Turkey,” Ministry of National Defense PRC, May 25, 2015, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/TopNews/2015-05/25/content_4586556.htm.

57 - Atlı, “Turkey’s Relations with China and Its Repercussions on Transatlantic Relations: The Turkish Perspective,” 233.

58 - Mustafa Taha Dağlı, “NATO Mu FETÖ Mü? [Is It NATO or FETO?],” *Aktüel*, August 1, 2016, <http://www.aktuel.com.tr/yazar/mustafa-taha-dagli/2016/08/01/nato-mu-feto-mu>.

59 - Metin Gürçan, “After Massive Purge, What’s next for Turkish Armed Forces?,” *Al-Monitor* (blog), August 1, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/08/turkey-coup-attempt-major-purge-of-armed-force.html>.

60 - Tarık Oğuzlu, “Turkey’s Eroding Commitment to NATO: From Identity to Interests,” *The Washington Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2012): 153–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2012.706578>.