

# China and Turkey: Closer Relations Mixed with Suspicion

**Galia Lavi and Gallia Lindenstrauss**

“Anti-terrorism and security cooperation are important components of China-Turkey political trust,” Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said in a meeting with his Turkish counterpart, Mevlut Cavusoglu, at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in late April 2016. The two ministers pledged to cooperate on security matters and to combat the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) terrorist group. This movement contains members from the Uyghur minority in China (a minority of Turkic origin) who advocate secession from China.<sup>1</sup> Yet while Turkey shares China’s concern about terrorism, there is tension between the two countries on the subject of China’s treatment of the Uyghurs and the aid given to them by Turkey. This pattern of common interests on the one hand and suspicion on the other is typical of China-Turkey relations.

This article explores the factors that influence relations between China and Turkey, and considers how the relations affect, and are affected by, relations between Turkey and its NATO allies and by Turkey-Russia relations. Beyond the significance of the Uyghur issue, both China and Turkey have an interest in security cooperation, although Turkey’s membership in NATO complicates cultivating this cooperation. In addition, the two countries have a common interest in economic cooperation. For China, this involves a more comprehensive policy of the Silk Roads initiative, while Turkey needs to increase foreign investment, and also wants to redress, even if only slightly, its negative trade balance with China. In the Israeli context, the improvement in Turkey-China relations in recent years was perceived as part of Turkey’s distancing itself from the West. At the same time, the growing Chinese interest in investments in both Israel and Turkey, particularly in

Galia Lavi is a research assistant in the China research program at INSS.  
Dr. Gallia Lindenstrauss is a research fellow at INSS.

transportation, could contain potential for regional cooperation and include a significant role for both Israel and Turkey.

## Background

China and Turkey forged diplomatic relations only in 1971. The two countries were estranged for many years prior, because Turkey was part of the coalition that fought against China in the Korean War, and Turkey's participation in that war paved the way for its accession to NATO. Even after diplomatic relations began, relations between the two countries stagnated during the last two decades of the Cold War. Some improvement in relations occurred in the 1990s with limited military cooperation, in part due to the West's refusal to sell certain weapon systems to Turkey in the context of its conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). As a result of this cooperation, the Turks obtained from China the knowledge necessary to develop artillery and ballistic missiles with a range of 100-150 kilometers. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the volume of bilateral trade grew substantially, rising from \$1 billion in 2000 to \$28.6 billion in 2014.<sup>2</sup> Most of this trade was based on Turkish imports from China; Turkey has been striving for many years to increase its exports to China.

## Political and Security Considerations

The stance of the Western powers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries toward the Ottoman Empire and China, and their ability to weaken both Turkey and China, still affects these countries' suspicion of the West, and is manifest in the political systems and among large sections of the respective populations. In the framework of the Turkish attempt in the early twenty-first century to design an independent foreign policy and reduce its dependence on the West, efforts were made to attain warmer relations with China. In 2010, in part as a result of the termination of aerial cooperation between Turkey and Israel following the deterioration of relations between those two countries, Turkey and China conducted joint maneuvers at the Konya airbase.<sup>3</sup> Turkey is also a "dialogue partner" in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization led by Russia and China (India too is expected to join as a full partner in 2016). Before the crisis in Russia-Turkey relations following the downing of a Russian plane in November 2015, from time to time Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan toyed with the idea of Turkey becoming a full member of this organization, despite Turkish

ambitions to join the European Union (EU). He even presented this idea, only partly in jest, as an alternative to joining the EU.

While NATO membership constitutes a significant anchor in Turkish foreign policy and security, it does not prevent the Turks from considering the expansion of their security cooperation with China. In September 2013, the Chinese corporation CPMIEC won a Turkish tender for the purchase of anti-missile defense systems. The Turks selected the Chinese bid because it was the cheapest and promised the earliest delivery date, and the Chinese corporation was generous in the option of technological cooperation. For Turkey, which emphasizes development of its own military industry, the option of cooperation with the Chinese corporation in the production process was a key consideration. For China, the fact that a NATO member was interested in buying advanced systems from it made it possible to portray itself as a supplier of advanced weapons, and constituted a certificate of quality of sorts on advances in Chinese military technology.<sup>4</sup> The possibility of Turkey progressing in the deal with the Chinese aroused hard feelings in NATO, and was portrayed by Turkey's Western allies as a potential Trojan horse. The United States in particular strongly opposed the impending transaction. After many delays, the Turks announced the complete cancellation of the tender in November 2015, and claimed that Turkey would move toward independent production of the systems. In response, a spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry said, "The relevant issue will be handled by the two sides' relevant departments and companies through consultations,"<sup>5</sup> but apart from this official statement, the Chinese press completely ignored the affair. The reticence was particularly notable given that the Chinese perceived the timing of the cancellation as an insult, because the announcement was made during the G-20 conference in Antalya, where Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Turkish President Erdogan.

In addition, the crisis in Turkey-Russia relations posed another challenge to China-Turkey relations, as it potentially could have developed into a head-on clash between Russia and NATO, leading to global instability. As an editorial in the *Global Times*, considered the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, said, "Ankara must be well aware of what it means to shoot down a Russian warplane. Next it will be careful enough not to give Russia a chance to down one of its warplanes in retaliation."<sup>6</sup> A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman likewise noted, "China is deeply concerned about this issue."<sup>7</sup> Turkey and China are not of like mind about the crisis in Syria; while Turkey seeks the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, China,

like Russia, wants his rule to continue. At the same time, even though the crisis with Russia highlighted Turkey's dependence on NATO, it also revealed Turkish fears that NATO will not stand by its side when the chips are down. In this respect, the crisis has encouraged Turkey to continue its drive toward independent defense procurement and self-reliance, and cooperation with the Chinese is likely to be an option for consideration with respect to both of these aims.

### The Uyghur Minority

A major weak point in China-Turkey relations concerns the Uyghur minority, Muslims living in the Xinjiang region in northwestern China who aspire to reestablish "East Turkestan." The Uyghurs constitute a majority of the Muslim population in this region; according to a 2010 Chinese census, they are an estimated population of 10 million.<sup>8</sup> In a longstanding dispute, China accuses the Uyghurs of various terrorist actions, and harasses them with frequent arrests and various restrictions. For their part, the Uyghurs accuse the government of sinicization efforts. Over the years, Uyghur activists have found shelter in Turkey, to which they have a strong ethnic and historical affinity. This connection is a source of ongoing tension between the two countries.

In July 2009, when 184 people were killed and about 1,000 wounded in riots in the Xinjiang area, then-Prime Minister Erdogan said that the events there were "a kind of genocide."<sup>9</sup> In response, it was reported in China that

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most of those killed in the riots were Chinese of Han origin, and it was demanded that Erdogan retract his comments, which were perceived as interference in China's internal affairs. And indeed, despite this criticism and as part of the efforts to improve economic relations between the two countries, Erdogan visited China in 2012, accompanied by 300 Turkish businessmen. During his visit, he also visited the Xinjiang region, and declared his intention of investing in the region's developing industrial zone.<sup>10</sup>

This plan suits the Chinese policy of attempting to ease the tensions with the Uyghur minority through economic development of the region.

In July 2015, violent riots broke out in front of the Chinese embassy in Turkey, following rumors that China was preventing the Uyghurs from

observing Ramadan fasting. The demonstrations and disturbances, which included attacks on Chinese restaurants and Korean tourists (mistakenly identified as Chinese) and the burning of Chinese flags, continued for ten days, and Chinese denial of the rumors and assertions that China respected freedom of religion were of no avail.<sup>11</sup> Demonstrations also took place following Thailand's decision to expel 100 Uyghurs to China, and demonstrators attacked the Thai consulate in Istanbul.<sup>12</sup> Before and during the Turkish President's visit to China that month, following progress in talks between the countries on a tender for the purchase of anti-missile defense systems, Erdogan took a milder position, stating that many of the pictures of the riots shown by the social media and news reports were "exaggerated and false," and that the Xinjiang region is an inseparable part of China.<sup>13</sup>

Previously, however, in late 2014, China had expressed anger about an "ambiguous Turkish policy" in helping Uyghur Chinese cross the border and leave China easily on their way to join terrorist groups.<sup>14</sup> China is very concerned about terrorism, particularly in view of many indications in recent months that Uyghurs are leaving China by way of Turkey and joining the Islamic State organization in Syria.<sup>15</sup> Although it is unclear how many Chinese Uyghurs have already joined the Islamic State, estimates range from several hundred to several thousand, and China fears that these terrorists will return to its territory and escalate the Uyghur struggle in Xinjiang, as well as create a negative image of the country. China has repeatedly asked the international community to unite in the war against terrorism.<sup>16</sup> In view of the close ties between the Chinese Uyghurs and the Turks, China is interested in strengthening cooperation with Turkey, thereby, making the passage of extremist Uyghurs to the Islamic State more difficult. In July 2015, the Presidents of China and Turkey agreed that Ankara would "not allow anyone to use Turkey's territory to do anything to harm China's national interests and security."<sup>17</sup> It may be that as a result of these agreements Turkey increased its efforts to detect Uyghurs infiltrating into its territory. In May 2016, the Turkish police announced the arrest in Istanbul Airport of approximately 100 Chinese Uyghurs with forged passports on their way to Saudi Arabia.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Silk Roads Initiative and Economic Cooperation**

In contrast to the disputes concerning the Uyghur minority, economic cooperation is a factor in the strengthening of the relations between the two countries. One important venture in this context is the Silk Roads



initiative (the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road – One Belt, One Road, or OBOR), an initiative President Xi Jinping announced in late 2013,<sup>19</sup> aimed at connecting China to Europe by way of a land route through Central Asia and a maritime route through the Indian Ocean and the Suez Canal. The OBOR initiative is expected to involve more than 60 countries, comprising 63 percent of the world's population (4.4 billion people) and 29 percent (\$21 trillion) of its total GDP.<sup>20</sup> China wants to achieve four main goals through its initiative: infrastructure development and acceleration of Chinese economic growth; a guaranteed supply of energy, principally from the Middle East, with expanded and developed Chinese export routes to the entire world; narrower economic gaps in China through large scale infrastructure development and employment for the population of western China; and eased tensions with the Uyghurs in northwest China through economic development in the region.

Cooperation between China and Turkey in infrastructure is underway. In October 2015 a high-speed railway between Ankara and Istanbul was launched, constructed by the Chinese state-owned railway company and a private Turkish company.<sup>21</sup> In addition, as a follow-up project to construction of the railway line between Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan (Kars-Tbilisi-Baku), Turkey is interested in Chinese aid for building a high-speed internal railway connecting eastern and western Turkey (Kars-Edirne).<sup>22</sup> China is eager to extend its cooperation with Turkey in the framework of the OBOR initiative, and the Chinese vice premier discussed the subject with his Turkish counterpart at a meeting in Shanghai in February 2016.<sup>23</sup> That same month, Chinese companies acquired 65 percent of the ownership of Kumport Terminal, which is part of Ambarli Port in Istanbul.<sup>24</sup> In addition, Turkey is one of the 50 founding members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) launched by China, and one of AIIB's goals is to finance infrastructure on the new Silk Roads initiative route.<sup>25</sup>

China also sees potential in the Silk Road Economic Belt for building nuclear reactors in cooperation with countries along the route. The president of the China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) declared that by 2030, China plans to build 30 nuclear reactors, and has already signed agreements with various countries on this matter, including Egypt and Jordan.<sup>26</sup> Turkey, which like China is very dependent on energy imports, is interested in promoting development aimed at the construction of nuclear reactors for electricity production, and is holding talks with China about the construction of its third nuclear power plant. Reports stated that Chinese

government-owned State Nuclear Power Technology Corporation (SNPTC), in cooperation with American company Westinghouse (most of which is owned by the Japanese corporation Toshiba), entered exclusive negotiations with Turkey for the construction of four reactors in the framework of this power plant.<sup>27</sup> However, it was also reported that Turkey was interested in making as much independent progress as possible in the construction of this power plant, and it therefore remains to be seen whether the parties will succeed in signing an agreement that will satisfy Turkey's desire for independent development.

## Conclusion

Relations between China and Turkey fluctuate, given the concomitant desire for economic cooperation, lack of political trust, and anxiety about conflicting security interests. Together with the obvious advantages of promoting joint economic projects, the absence of sufficient history of joint cooperation is an obstacle, especially where current disputes about the actions needed to combat terrorist groups are concerned. The crisis with Russia also makes it difficult for Turkey to achieve progress in its relations with China, because it makes Turkey even more dependent on the United States and NATO. On the other hand, the factors that have encouraged the two countries to develop their relations in the twenty-first century remain strong. The frustration with the West and even the basic hostility to what is sometimes perceived as neo-imperialism are to a large degree shared by China and Turkey. Furthermore, the Turkish need for Chinese technology and foreign investments, and the Chinese desire to move its OBOR initiative forward, provide potential for a connection between the countries.

The fact that some members of the Uyghur minority have chosen to volunteer for the Islamic State, along with the fear that these volunteers number in the thousands, has increased China's concern about events in Syria, beyond its interest in the continued rule of the Assad regime. The ongoing civil war has prolonged China's interest in events in Syria, which will continue to constitute a source of suspicion between the two sides.

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In the Middle East, the question arises whether the growing Chinese interest in investments in Turkey and Israel can also be utilized for broader

cooperation at the regional level. For example, can the Jezreel Valley Railway line, scheduled for opening in 2016, also be used to transport cargo from Turkey by sea to Haifa Port, and from there on the Jezreel Valley Railway to Jordan – and in the reverse direction as well?<sup>28</sup> In this context, the fact that a Chinese company won a tender to operate the new Haifa Port for 25 years, which will make it easier for China to ship goods from Turkey to Jordan, and perhaps from this port further east, is significant.

## Notes

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