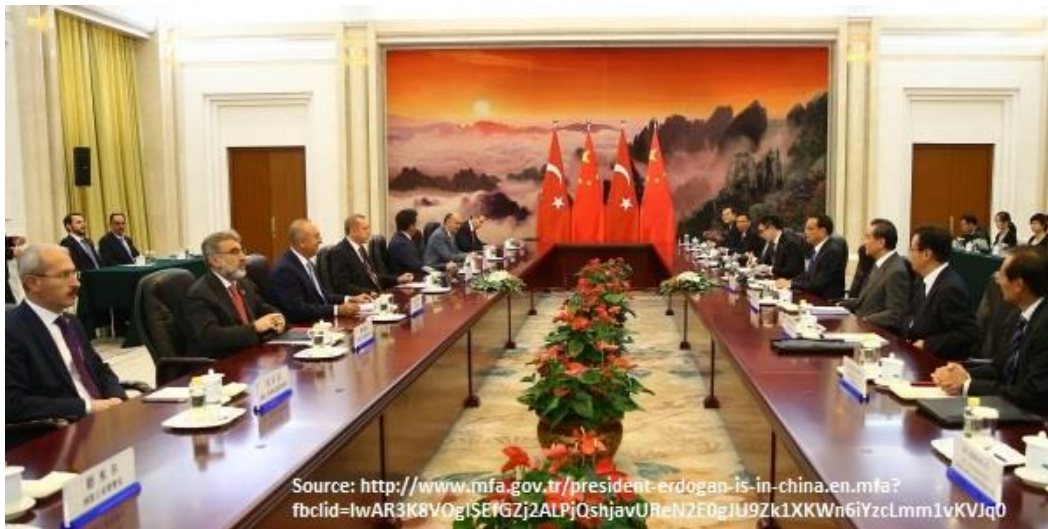


Contemporary China-Turkey Relations

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Main points

- Diplomatic relations between Turkey and China were established in 1971.
- Turkey plays a strategically important role in the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.
- Ankara sees Beijing as an alternative partner in technological, military and economic fields.
- Ankara's criticism of China's policy towards the Uyghurs has been silenced during the economic crisis in Turkey which cannot afford to lose Chinese investments in its strategic infrastructure.

The history of China-Turkey diplomatic relations

Despite the fact that the relations between the countries in question were established in 1971, they only warmed in the 1990s, partly as a result of the West's refusal to sell individual sets of weapons to Turkey due to Ankara's conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Ankara turned to Beijing for help and received the necessary know-how which allowed Turkey to develop ballistic missiles with the range of 100-150 kilometers.¹ **According to the Turkish Bureau of Statistics, China-Turkey trade was estimated at \$23 billion in 2018, making China Turkey's third-largest trading partner.**² Turkey's exchange profit is only four billion, for which the government in Ankara has been trying to make up by expanding its exports and attracting Chinese investors at this difficult time for the Turkish economy.³

Economic partnership

Turkey-China relations go back thousands of years, but, as mentioned above, they were formally established in 1971 when China became a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Due to the issue of mistreating a Muslim minority (the Uyghurs) by the Chinese state, diplomatic and economic relations between the countries were suspended from 1999 to 2000. Gradual rebuilding of relations since 2000 has resulted in the establishment of a "strategic

¹ Lavi, G., Lindenstrauss, G., 'China and Turkey: Closer Relations Mixed with Suspicion', *Strategic Assessment*, 19 (2016), pp. 119-126.

² DW, Turkey, *China seek to expand economic ties despite political differences*. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-china-seek-to-expand-economic-ties-despite-political-differences/a-49425011> [accessed on December 14, 2020]

³ DW, Turkey, *China seek to expand economic ties despite political differences*, Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-china-seek-to-expand-economic-ties-despite-political-differences/a-49425011> [accessed on November 20, 2020]

partnership” between Turkey and China in economic and cultural terms. In both countries 2012 and 2013 were celebrated as the “years of Turkey and China”. The breakthrough in relations was due to the Belt and Road Initiative which expanded economic and military cooperation as part of a more developed “strategic partnership.” Turkey’s rapid economic growth after the global economic crisis was halted by sanctions imposed by Russia in 2015 due to the fact that Turkey shot down a Russian aircraft over the Turkey-Syria border.⁴ **The failed coup which was allegedly initiated by Fethullah Gülen,⁵ leader of the influential religious group Hizmet (Service) in 2016, marked the beginning of an economic crisis that Turkey still faces till this day.** Accession talks with the European Union, which began in 2005, currently do not satisfy either party. This has forced Turkey to balance and seek partners outside the Union — including in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. **As a result, Turkey sees a huge opportunity to rebuild unstable economy with the help of Chinese capital from the Belt and Road Initiative.** Trade between China and Turkey amounted to \$21.08 billion in 2019, majorly skewed in Beijing’s favor. Chinese exports to Turkey amounted to \$18.49 billion while Turkish exports to China — just to \$2.58 billion.⁶

The precarious state of Turkish economy needs to see improvement in the country’s infrastructure and technology capacity. Turkey wants to benefit from multilateral policies with both the Americans and Europe, as well as with China and Russia.⁷ **The controversial in Europe and the United States Chinese company Huawei is investing large sums in Turkey’s technological development, thus creating jobs in Turkey and providing room for cooperation between Chinese and Turkish scientists. Responsibility for the development of 5G networks in Turkey was taken by the Turkish telecommunication**

⁴ The Guardian, *Shooting down of Russian jet – how the day unfolded*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/24/shooting-down-of-russian-jet-how-the-day-unfolded> [accessed on November 20, 2020]

⁵ BBC, *Turkey Coup: Who was behind Turkey coup attempt?*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36815476> [accessed on December 15, 2020]

⁶ Kulaksiz, S., ‘Financial Integration via Belt and Road Initiative: China-Turkey Cooperation’, *Global Journal of Emerging Market Economies*, 11 (2019), pp.48-64.

⁷ Daily News, *Silk road train ‘first step towards a game changer’*. Available at: <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/silk-road-train-first-step-towards-a-game-changer-148533> [accessed on November 20, 2020]

company Turkcell in cooperation with Huawei. Companies made a commitment to provide 5G for users across Turkey over the next two years.⁸

The Belt and Road Initiative

Turkey, as a regional force connecting Europe and Asia, plays a very important role in the Belt and Road Initiative. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan met with the President of China Xi Jinping in June 2019, shortly before the G20 summit where the two expressed their desire to strengthen strategic cooperation and build new development strategies.⁹ The Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank are to be used to look for innovative ways of cooperating to achieve economic growth for both countries. **Erdoğan emphasized the importance of China and Turkey's willingness to cooperate even closer in other fields and reaffirmed Turkey's active participation in the Belt and Road Initiative, encouraging Chinese entrepreneurs to invest money in Turkish infrastructure and other strategic facilities.**¹⁰ This is the opposite of the European Union's policy, exemplified by the emphasis on the importance of imposing rules and restrictions on Chinese investment in European strategic infrastructure made by the Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Linas Linkevičius.¹¹ In June 2020, Turkish Minister of Trade Ruhsar Pekcan made a profession of Turkey being ready to work closely with China on many levels as part of the Initiative after defeating the COVID-19 pandemic. **During a phone call with her Chinese counterpart, Zhong Shan, Pekcan encouraged Chinese businessmen to invest in Turkey. Both sides expressed their willingness to continue cooperation in the areas of air transport and visa agreements for their citizens.**¹²

⁸ CNBC, *4.5G, 5G and beyond: Turkey's digital transformation*. Available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/04/08/photos-inside-12-billion-istanbul-new-airport-biggest-in-the-world.html> [accessed on December 14, 2020]

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Xi Jinping Meets with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey*. Available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1673155.shtml [accessed on December 14, 2020]

¹⁰ Zan, T., "Turkey Dream" and the China-Turkish Cooperation under "One Belt and One Road" Initiative', *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)* 10 (2016), pp.50-72.

¹¹ Institute of New Europe, *Przyszłość sojuszu transatlantyckiego: nowe możliwości dla Europy i Stanów Zjednoczonych — podsumowanie spotkania w ramach Warsaw Security Forum*. Available at: <http://ine.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Przyszłość-sojuszu-transatlantyckiego-nowe-możliwości-dla-Europy-i-Stanów-Zjednoczonych---podsumowanie-spotkania-w-ramach-Warsaw-Security-Forum.pdf> [accessed on December 14, 2020]

¹² Belt & Road News, *Turkey Ready to expand Belt & Road Cooperation*. Available at: <https://www.beltandroad.news/2020/06/14/turkey-ready-to-expand-belt-road-cooperation/> [accessed on November 20, 2020]

In November 2019, a freight train from China's Shaanxi Province passed through the Istanbul railway tunnel underneath the Bosphorus Strait for the first time.¹³ The Middle Corridor plays a very important part in the Chinese Initiative for Turkey and other members. The corridor is intended to connect Asia, Africa and Europe in the future. **The railway will reduce the transport time between China and Turkey from one month to 12 days, while the entire route between China and Western Europe will take 18 days using the Marmaray Tunnel in Istanbul.**¹⁴ Turkey is to benefit from this project primarily because of its geographical location.

The meaning of the Belt and Road Initiative for Turkey

The economic partnership with China is of a special strategic significance to Turkey for a number of important long-term reasons. Turkish railways, built or upgraded with the Chinese money, will improve the direct connection between the Middle East, Turkey, Russia and Europe. **Turkey will benefit from this by improving its trade, as commercial deliveries by freight trains are an alternative to deliveries by sea.** The use of railways will reduce delivery time and provide a safer way of transporting goods from China to Turkey and Europe. Trains are also a more economical form of supply, their use reduce costs and bureaucracy.

One of the biggest complaints against China is that it uses the huge investments from the Belt and Road Initiative Fund to put its partners into debt and then take over their collaterals, often in the form of strategic assets such as natural resources, ports, airports or highways.¹⁵ **An example of this is Chinese investment in Istanbul's newest and largest airport in Turkey, put into use in 2018.** According to the agreement, Turkey must repay China more than €22 billion or €1.1 billion every year for the next 25 years.¹⁶ Turkey, on the other hand, is not afraid of this phenomenon because of its multilateral policy. A complete change in priorities and

¹³ Doing Business in Turkey, *Turkey as Middle Corridor in One Belt, One Road*. Available at: <https://doingbusinessinturkey.com/turkey-as-middle-corridor-in-one-belt-one-road/> [accessed on November 20, 2020]

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ The Japan Times, *'Debt trap' diplomacy is a card China seldom plays in Belt and Road initiative*. Available at: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2020/09/01/commentary/debt-trap-diplomacy-bri-china/> [accessed on November 20, 2020]

¹⁶ Bloomberg, *China's ICBC, Turkey's Largest Airport In Talks for Refinancing*. Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-02-10/istanbul-airport-in-talks-with-chinese-banks-on-6-billion-loans> [accessed on December 14, 2020]

making China a leading economic partner would otherwise have deeply affected Turkey's already weakened economy.

Turkish multilateral policy means that China has not explicitly declared its so-called "Grand Strategy" for Turkey. China's bitter experience with the Sinop nuclear power plant tender in 2013 and air defense system in 2015 has also fuelled Beijing's hesitation to engage in strategic infrastructure in Turkey. **Furthermore, global policy trends such as the U.S.-China trade war, turbulent U.S.-Russia relations, the reintroduction of the U.S. sanctions against Iran, and the ongoing civil war in Syria seem to have made the prospect of further development of Turkey-China relations even more unclear.**¹⁷

Military cooperation

In September 2010, Turkish and Chinese air forces conducted joint military exercises at Konya Airbase in Turkey. This was the first time that any NATO state had cooperated militarily with the Chinese on its own territory. **Turkey assured NATO partners that none of NATO's F-16s took part in the exercises.**¹⁸

China Precision Machinery Import-Export Corporation won a \$4 billion tender for the co-production of long-range missiles in 2013. Turkey rejected competing offers from the American, European and Russian companies and chose a partner that was on the U.S. sanctions list.¹⁹ **Ankara made this decision for two main reasons: prices and the ability to share Chinese technology.** The decision sparked outrage among NATO states. **Chinese systems would be able to "learn" how NATO's defense technology operates and study its details.** Strong opposition from NATO member states forced Turkey to postpone the project's start date five times and eventually to withdraw from the agreement with the Chinese in 2015.²⁰ Although the project failed, it was an important lesson for the Alliance. Firstly, Chinese

¹⁷ Colakoglu, S., *China's Belt and Road Initiative and Turkey's Middle Corridor: A Question of Compatibility*. Available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-and-turkeys-middle-corridor-question-compatibility> [accessed on November 20, 2020]

¹⁸ Reuters, *China mounts air exercise with Turkey, U.S. says*. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-turkey-usa-idUSTRE6975HC20101008> [accessed on November 20, 2020]

¹⁹ Soylemez, M., *Turkey and China: An Account of a Bilateral Relations Evolution* (Hong Kong, Asia Centre, 2017).

²⁰ Reuters, *Chinese firm under U.S. sanctions wins Turkish missile deal*. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-china-defence-idUSBRE98Q0SC20130927> [accessed on November 20, 2020]

systems are at a technological level high enough to enable them competing with the West. Secondly, the situation has shown that Turkey is not afraid to seek partners outside its traditional NATO allies.

Currently, Turkey and China continue to conduct military consultations and cooperate on cybersecurity and intelligence. **The Turkish ballistic missile Bora, based on the Chinese B-611 missile, was used in Turkish clashes with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in 2019.**²¹ The production of the missile together with the presence of officers of the Chinese army at the "Ephesus" military exercises in 2016 constitute evidence of the continuation of good military and diplomatic relations.

Despite the fact that China-Turkey cooperation seems good on many levels, opinions between the two differ sometimes. **This difference was evident during the Turkish military intervention in northern Syria in September 2019.** While Turkey launched an offensive in Syria, a spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, Geng Shuang, called for a diplomatic solution to the dispute and supported the independence and sovereignty of the Syrian Arab Republic.²²

Turkey also remains China's main competitor in the production of armed UAVs.²³ The quality and effectiveness of Turkish drones were tested during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The battle-tested Turkish drones were one of the weapons that gave Azerbaijan an advantage and victory in the conflict.²⁴

²¹ Foreign Policy, *Erdogan is Turning Turkey Into a Chinese Client State*. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/16/erdogan-is-turning-turkey-into-a-chinese-client-state/> [accessed on November 20, 2020]

²² China Daily, *Turkish troops push deeper into Syria*. Available at: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201910/11/WS5d9fc34aa310cf3e3556fcdd.html> [accessed on November 20, 2020]

²³ Nikkei Asia, *Turkey begins to rival China in military drones*. Available at: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Turkey-begins-to-rival-China-in-military-drones> [accessed on November 20, 2020]

²⁴ VOA, *Turkish Drone Power Displayed in Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/turkish-drone-power-displayed-nagorno-karabakh-conflict> [accessed on November 20, 2020]

The Uyghurs Matter

Turkey has sharply criticized China's policy towards the Uyghurs (a Muslim ethnic group living in the Xinjiang autonomous region in the northwest of China). According to the Reuters reports, members of this group have been persecuted by the Chinese Communist Party and sent to "re-education camps" where they have no contact with the outside world and are monitored by guards 24 hours a day.²⁵ **In his statement in 2009, then Prime Minister Erdoğan explicitly called discriminating the Uyghurs a "genocide" and asked China to show some "sensitivity".**²⁶ In July 2019, Erdoğan said that a solution to the problem could be found "taking into account the sensitivities of both sides."²⁷ **Since then, however, the Uyghurs matter became a taboo for the politician and he hardly spoke about it anymore. Turkey arrested hundreds of Uyghurs and sent them to detention centers.**²⁸ Ankara does not admit to direct deportation of the Uyghurs to China but activists accuse it of taking prisoners to countries such as Tajikistan, which makes it easier for Beijing to carry out the arrests.²⁹ The Uyghurs who were interviewed by the British *Sunday Telegraph* fear that their loved ones have been transferred from Turkey to Tajikistan where Beijing used its influence to deport them to labor camps in China.³⁰

Conclusion

In the face of the current economic crisis, Turkey cannot afford to lose a serious investor like China. **When it comes to the relations with Beijing, Erdoğan's diplomacy must balance the complicated issue of the Uyghurs and saving its economy, and relations with Muslim**

²⁵ Reuters, *Turkish leader calls Xinjiang killings "genocide"* Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-china-sb-idUSTRE56957D20090710> [accessed on November 20, 2020]

²⁶ Polityka, *Bez litości — tak Chiny traktują Ujgurów i inne muzułmańskie mniejszości*. Available at: <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/swiat/1933318.1.bez-litosci--tak-chiny-traktuja-ujgurow-i-inne-muzulmanskie-mniejszosci.read> [accessed on November 20, 2020]

²⁷ al-Jazeera, *Turkey's Erdogan says solution possible for China's Muslims*. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/7/4/turkeys-erdogan-says-solution-possible-for-chinas-muslims> [accessed on December 14, 2020]

²⁸ Middle East Eye, *Turkey accused of deporting Uighurs back to China via third countries*. Available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uighurs-china-turkey-accused-deporting-third-countries> [accessed on November 20, 2020]

²⁹ Foreign Policy, *Erdogan Is Turning Turkey Into a Chinese Client State*. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/16/erdogan-is-turning-turkey-into-a-chinese-client-state/> [accessed on November 20, 2020]

³⁰ Middle East Eye, *Turkey accused of deporting Uighurs back to China via third countries*. Available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uighurs-china-turkey-accused-deporting-third-countries> [accessed on December 21, 2020]

countries and the West. Chinese investments in Turkish infrastructure are crucial for President Erdoğan's current government in the face of a weakening economy. **Turkey's involvement in conflicts in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, among others, has not only burdened the Turkish budget, but has also undermined the perception of Turkey by investors from Western countries.** Economic and military cooperation with Turkey expands Chinese influence in Asia and is a gateway to Europe. **The strategic location of Turkey is crucial for China in the development of the Belt and Road Initiative.**

Recommendations

By offering Turkey economic alternatives, the European Union may reduce China's influence in Europe and resume talks on Turkey's accession to the EU. The openness of European countries to Turkey and even closer economic cooperation may help to stabilize the Turkish economy faster and lead to the continuation of talks on Turkey's accession to the European Union in the future. Thanks to the dialogue between the EU and Turkey, a common strategy concerning China may be established, from which both sides may gain: Chinese influence in Eurasia will decrease and Turkey will be closer to joining the Union.

NATO member states should look for even closer military cooperation with Turkey which has the second-largest army in the Alliance. Turkey is a strategically located member of NATO and a very important military partner who takes part in many peacekeeping missions. Tighter military cooperation and joint development of new technologies, e.g. drones, may increase Turkey's confidence and trust in NATO partners and stabilize relations, enabling the Alliance to focus on threats from the outside.

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