



A CHINA-TURKEY REBOOT? ERDOĞAN AND XI MEET IN BEIJING

Main Points:

- On a state visit to meet with President Xi Jinping, Turkish President Erdoğan discussed ways to deepen cooperation between the two countries.
- This exchange comes immediately after two meetings in Osaka and Dushanbe, part of an effort to smooth relationships after a falling out in February over the treatment of Turkic minority groups in Western China.
- Erdoğan is contending with a sluggish economy, domestic political challenges and deteriorating relations with Washington. China can potentially provide Turkey with economic support and provide an attractive alternative to the partnership with the U.S.
- Xi is seeking to publicly win over a historically vocal critic of the treatment of Uyghurs on the eve of the politically sensitive ten-year anniversary of the 2009 Urumqi riots and push forward the Middle Corridor component of the Belt and Road Initiative.
- This Issue Brief analyzes the two governments priorities and asks where a recalibrated Sino-Turkish relationship might head.

Talking Turkey

Following this week's G20 summit in Osaka, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan traveled to Beijing to meet with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. This is not at all unusual, world leaders often take advantage of such high level gathering to foster bilateral relations, send messages, and set precedents. For China and Turkey, the presidential meeting comes at a time when both are seeking to improve ties and overhaul their policy positions: Ankara must contend with a growing economic crisis and domestic political challenges, while Beijing is always on the lookout for partners to advance the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and is facing a year of sensitive anniversaries. The two countries can help each other out with these issues, and the meeting between the two presidents reflected some of the two sides priorities, especially when one reads between the lines.

Sharing a Vision for the Future?

Just before arriving in Beijing on July 02, Erdoğan published an opinion piece in the Global Times, no doubt with a view to publicly state his objectives in the meeting.¹ In it Erdoğan, who served as Prime Minister for eleven years before restructuring the constitution to concentrate more power in the office of president which he was quick to win in a subsequent election, argues that a new world order is taking shape in which both China and Turkey have important roles to play. The article goes on to argue that both countries have a long historical relationship as custodian of the historical Silk Road and calls for intensified cooperation "in all areas." It makes special mention of the BRI and that it presents a way to transform both countries into "welfare societies."

The language employed by Erdoğan in the opinion piece is strikingly similar to the rhetoric of Socialism with



Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, which has become a prominent feature of the public face of Xi's tenure.² Both Turkey and China are characterized as "late developers" who are seeking to close a development gap with the West, both governments are cast as pursuing a unitary and long-running popular "Dream," and both share a vision of a multipolar world order. More concretely, Erdoğan commits himself to doubling bilateral trade to 50 billion USD, as well as meeting a goal of Turkey hosting 1 million Chinese tourists annually.³ Tellingly, these targets are not matched with direct timelines, although he makes reference to the 2023 centennial of the founding of the Turkish Republic which coincides with the expiration of his current term of office yielding some indication of a possible schedule.

Aside from the convergence of the language of leadership employed by China and Turkey, the piece is notable for what is left out. Security is hardly mentioned except to point out that both countries have "proved their technological and manufacturing capabilities." No mention is made in this shared vision outlined by Erdoğan of counterterrorism policy, nor does the op-ed feature Ankara's earlier criticisms of Beijing's treatment of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang,⁴ or for that matter reflect the realities of the flagging Turkish economy.⁵

However, both the English language services of the *Global Times*⁶ and *Xinhua*⁷ were quick to report that Erdoğan had committed himself to respecting the One China Policy, which in the context of Sino-Turkish relations refers to separatism in China's northwest, and to cooperating with China on counterterrorism issues. Erdoğan is cited as saying that he will not allow "anti-China separatist activities instigated by any force in Turkey" and that "various ethnic groups in Northwest China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region are living happily under China's development and prosperity." A further opinion piece concurrently published in the *Global Times* points to Turkey's deteriorating relationship with the U.S. and economic woes as the driving force behind the new agreement.⁸

Nevertheless, there seems to remain some incongruence in the position of Turkey and China which may say more about Turkey's domestic politics and stumbling blocks to China's BRI than the relationship between Xi and Erdoğan.

Differences of Opinion

It is notable that the strong language on counterterrorism cooperation that is attributed to Erdoğan by Chinese state media is carefully absent from the Turkish President's own words. China's treatment of its Turkic speaking majority Muslim minorities, the largest of which are the Uyghurs, has long driven an exodus from Xinjiang. While many Uyghurs wound up in the USSR, pre-war Afghanistan and Europe, it was in Turkey where linguistic and religious affinity, as well as a strong nationalist sentiment that embraced the Turkic peoples of Central Asia, made for the most attractive destination for much of the émigré community.⁹ A steady trickle of Uyghurs would continue to emigrate from China to Turkey, especially following violent clashes almost exactly ten years ago in 2009.¹⁰

Chinese policies in Xinjiang have drawn criticism from the international community, with allegations that the government is pursuing a policy of large-scale, arbitrary and indefinite detentions in response to a perceived threat of terrorist or separatist violence.¹¹ Not until October 2018 did Chinese authorities comment on the existence of detention sites in Xinjiang, but argued that these were in fact "vocational training centers" aimed at consolidating economic growth and ensuring the welfare of the population while combatting what China calls the "three evil forces" of terrorism, extremism and separatism.¹² Shortly before, Chinese legislators had hastily laid the legal groundwork for just such educational detentions.¹³ Soon after in November 2018, a consortium of United Nations officials with human rights portfolios penned an open letter to the Chinese leadership in which they contended that the legal basis for the internments is incongruent with China's obligations to international law as it too broadly defines the odd term "extremification" and presents an overly coercive approach to vocational training.¹⁴ Accurate information on the conditions of people in the detention centers and the numbers of detainees is difficult to come by, but most estimates put the figure at 1.5 million people in the camps.¹⁵

Since then, criticism of Beijing's policies in Xinjiang has continued. Most recently U.S. and German diplomats engaged in a heated exchange over Xinjiang with Chinese officials behind closed doors at a meeting at the UN,¹⁶ almost at the same time as Erdoğan was in Beijing meeting



with Xi. While Western countries have been critical of the treatment of minorities in Xinjiang, most Muslim majority countries have been reluctant to criticize the Chinese state. King Salman of Saudi Arabia, for instance, has continued to signal a desire to deepen strategic engagement with Beijing.¹⁷

For their part, Turkish officials remained remarkably reluctant to comment as the issue of detention centers in Xinjiang made international headlines. When Ankara finally broke its silence on the subject on February 09, with its harshly worded statement¹⁸ put out by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs it quickly drew the attention of the international media.¹⁹

Trouble at Home and Erdoğan's Isolation

It would be a mistake to assume that this condemning statement was the first of its kind by Erdoğan's administration. Ten years ago in 2009 the then Prime Minister publicly referred to Beijing's heavy-handed response to clashes in Xinjiang as amounting to "genocide."²⁰ Just days earlier the then Turkish President Abdullah Gül had visited both Beijing and Urumqi in an effort to strengthen Sino-Turkish relations and deepen the bilateral ties.²¹ Despite Erdoğan's harsh words, by 2010 Ankara and Beijing were deepening cooperation in defense matters and signed a strategic partnership agreement, at a time when Turkey's stance on Israel had driven a wedge in the U.S.-Turkish partnership.²² In 2013, Turkey would enthusiastically embrace the newly announced BRI, and following the foiled coup attempt in 2016, Erdoğan continued to deepen ties with Beijing. The rapid reversal of stance in 2009 and now ten years later in 2019, speaks to the importance that both Turkey and China give to their bilateral ties, but also to Erdoğan's recurring need to accommodate, if only temporarily, an important constituency in his country.

The statement issued by the Turkish MFA is interesting on several accounts. It makes reference to efforts by Turkish officials to raise the treatment of Uyghurs at all levels of the Chinese administration, presumably in closed-door settings.²³ Ankara has good reason not to be too vocal about raising issues like the treatment of minorities, considering its treatment of the Kurdish population,²⁴ or the rights of detainees, following mass arrests of suspected political opponents and other allegations of abuse of state power in public settings.²⁵ Through these points of contact

Turkish diplomats had become aware of the alleged death in detention of Abdurehim Heyit, a prominent Uyghur folk singer well-known in Turkey.²⁶ The foreign Ministry cites this as its reason for voicing its concern in such a public setting, characterizing China's "policy of systemic assimilation against the Uighur Turks [as] a great shame to humanity."²⁷ Chinese authorities issued a strongly worded statement in response, referring to a video published through China International radio in which Heyit can apparently be seen denying any kind of ill-treatment.²⁸

It seems however, that rumors of the Heyit's death circulating in early February provided a pretext for the Turkish government to issue a rebuke over the Xinjiang detentions at a time when unprecedented focus was being paid to the region. Largely overlooked in international media was the fact that Ankara's statement on February 09 coincided with the 50th anniversary of the right-wing Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP).²⁹

Translated into English as the "Nationalist Action Party" the MHP has been an influential (if often extreme) force in Turkish republican politics that has driven hostility to non-Turkish minorities, contributed to paramilitary violence in the country, and a quasi-racial version of an ideology known as "pan-Turkism." Since the end of military rule in the 1990's the party has sought to become anchored in Turkey's parliamentary politics and has since formed an electoral and legislative alliance with Erdoğan's dominant Justice and Development (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP). For the MHP, the Turkic-speaking peoples of Central Asia are co-ethnics who feature in the aspirations of a "Greater Turkish Nation" and consequently the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang is a hot button issue. A 2015 attack on South Korean tourists who were mistaken for Chinese by protestors with close links to the MHP hints at the levels of anti-China sentiment among Turkish nationalists.³⁰

The timing of the MFA's statement as well as its wording, which at one point refers to the "Uyghur Turks," can therefore be read as an effort to respond to public opinion. Erdoğan has in recent years come under pressure domestically following the loss of support from the Gülenists, followers of the influential religious scholar Fethullah Gülen whom the Turkish government accuses of having orchestrated a foiled coup in summer 2016,³¹ and criticism over Turkey's economic



slowdown.³² By courting or at least appeasing the MHP, he might have sought to win additional support in parliament as well as the powerful bureaucracy. It is difficult to say just how precarious Erdoğan's position really is, but there have been signs of dissent from within his party³³ and the stinging defeat of the AKP in the Istanbul mayoral elections, not once but twice, may be an indication that the Turkish President is not as secure in his post as he would like to be.³⁴ The result of this may well have been an effort by the veteran president to fall back on tried and true tactics, which may explain parallels in the Xinjiang reversal between 2009 and 2019.

The Middle Corridor to the Middle Kingdom

It is not only domestically that Erdoğan is feeling the pressure, although of course the need to keep supporters at home happy affects his options on the global stage. His gradual shift towards authoritarianism, which has accelerated following the army's failed coup in 2016, has done little credit to his standing with Europe or the U.S. This has been accelerated by clashing objectives in the Syrian civil war, where Ankara fears the establishment of a Kurdish quasi state and has clashed with Syrian Democratic Forces which enjoy the support of the Pentagon.³⁵ More generally Erdoğan's adventurism in the Middle East, sometimes characterized as a reflection of "Neo-Ottoman aspirations," and his willingness to cultivate political Islam in countries like Egypt and Libya, has contributed to a regional isolation of Turkey.³⁶

The apparent rift with Washington over defense issues has led Ankara, which has long been a NATO member, to seek out Russian military hardware. The purchase of the S-400 missile Defense System by Turkey, which the Pentagon claims would allow Moscow access to sensitive American military information, has further strained relations and prompted the possibility of American sanctions on a fellow NATO member.³⁷ Should these sanctions materialize it could severely impact Erdoğan's position. Nevertheless, Turkish hostility towards U.S. support of Kurdish groups in Syria, which are viewed as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), is rooted in the same nationalist camp that Turkey's President has been courting.

China, for its part, has been wary of becoming entangled in intractable conflicts in the Middle East, stressing its commitment to a policy of non-interference in the domestic

affairs of other states. The trans-national BRI, however, has done much to root Chinese interests throughout the world in a wider foreign policy agenda. The lines between commercial interests and geostrategic objectives have in many places become blurred, and in recent years Beijing has worked to establish military bases abroad in places such as Djibouti³⁸ and Tajikistan.³⁹ Because the interwoven mosaic of projects and development program that make up the BRI have become closely associated with the tenure of Xi Jinping, the project has domestic political ramifications for China and slow progress can be deeply embarrassing to the Chinese leadership.⁴⁰ Beijing has in several instances sought to court leaders with an antagonistic relationship with "strategic or systemic rivals" such as the U.S.⁴¹ or the EU,⁴² as has been the case with Thailand, Venezuela and Italy. This lays the foundation for the kind of hedging by third party states between great power backers reminiscent of the Cold War, albeit in a setting which is fundamentally different from the bipolar order of the latter half of the 20th century.

The rapprochement between Ankara and Beijing comes at a time of strategic convergence of interests for both country's presidents. Tellingly Erdoğan's opinion piece, which almost certainly was subject to some kind of editorial influence by Beijing and heavily emphasizes the BRI, repeatedly makes reference to the "Middle Corridor."⁴³ It lists a number of major infrastructure projects in Turkey which are designed to facilitate the process of connecting Beijing and London. In general terms the Middle Corridor describes a push to integrate infrastructure and trade across Eurasia by connecting China, via Xinjiang and the former Soviet Republic of Central Asia, to the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey connection and Europe beyond. Incidentally this corridor would also allow the flow of goods to bypass both Russia and Iran, whose strategic position and often unpredictable behavior might prove an obstacle for the BRI.

From Beijing's perspective there is also a strategic incentive to direct its efforts and partnerships towards countries with which it either has good-relations or can easily be induced not to clash with Chinese priorities. The deep-sea port of Anaklia along Georgia's Black Sea coast lies right along a commercially and strategically important section of the Middle Corridor⁴⁴ and has attracted the interest of not only China but also the U.S. and Russia. There has been some speculation that



Chinese state-owned companies are seeking to pressure Tbilisi in order to muscle in on the Georgian-American development consortium currently developing the port.⁴⁵

In light of this, Erdoğan may well be trying to position himself as a potential broker for China in Georgia and Azerbaijan, where Ankara enjoys some degree of influence, in exchange for Chinese help in jump-starting the economy. At the same time, it is not inconceivable that Turkey's veteran president might be trying to use closer relations with Beijing in the wake of the G20, where he spoke extensively with U.S. President Trump, to induce the American leadership to soften its stance towards Ankara. Considering Washington's effort to reassure allies of its commitment and block Chinese strategic initiatives this may prove to be the most effective way for Turkey to reengage with the West and score points domestically, a hint of which was given by the surprising announcement in December last year by the White House that it was considering suspending support for Kurdish allies in Syria.⁴⁶ Had Erdoğan been able to convince the Trump administration to abandon the Kurds to the Turkish army and its proxies this would have proved a major victory for Ankara and won him the support of the nationalist flank.

Win-Win or Marriage of Convenience

Ankara and Beijing both have pragmatic reasons to move towards deepening their cooperation beyond their past amity as custodians of the historical Silk Road. An isolated Turkey can capitalize on the BRI to secure investment and demonstrate that it can cooperate with China as a potential alternative to traditional allies.

For China, Turkey presents an attractive partner in its effort to connect East Asia and Europe, and Turkish endorsement of what it has characterized as a counterterrorism project goes a long way to refuting criticism over the treatment of Uyghurs and other minorities in Xinjiang. This is all the more sensitive given how sensitive Beijing is to the ten year anniversary of the Urumqi riots at a time when criticism is mounting.⁴⁷ At almost the same exact time as Xi and Erdoğan were discussing mutually beneficial cooperation in Beijing, a panel of Chinese experts held a side event on Xinjiang's "remarkable achievements in social development and human rights protection" at the 41st Session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva.⁴⁸

It remains to be seen, however, what a rebooted Sino-Turkish relationship will look like. Erdoğan's domestic political problems are many and he may well have to continue to adjust to improve his situation. Beijing's efforts to advance the BRI and the China model have also been met with more resistance than state media seems to suggest. Just how committed either end of the Silk Road will be to such a marriage of convenience will remain an important question for those wishing to buy into the New World Order that Erdoğan describes.

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