

TURKEY AND CHINA: AN EMERGING PARTNERSHIP?

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To what extent do deepening Sino-Turkish relations presage a new strategic partnership as Ankara looks for a more independent posture vis-à-vis Western powers? This policy brief assesses the significance of developments in bilateral relations between Ankara and Beijing.

Sino-Turkish relations have risen in significance in recent years with deepening economic ties and cooperation in nuclear and military fields. Some observers have seen in the bilateral relationship a sign of Turkey's increasing estrangement from the Western bloc as it seeks to diversify relations. Notwithstanding, there exist important divergences between Ankara and Beijing that dampen any prospect of an emerging "axis." Rather, as this policy brief argues, relations between the two countries are primarily driven by China's increasing emergence as an economic actor in the region and Ankara's desire to benefit from Chinese capital and technology, as well as affording it a certain degree of leverage vis-à-vis the West.

Ankara Looking East

Sino-Turkish relations began to attract significant attention when a Chinese company won a tender to build the Ankara-Istanbul high speed railway line in 2005. Chinese capital investments have since rapidly increased: according to the Turkish Ministry of Customs and Trade, China was the largest source of foreign capital in Turkey during the second quarter of 2014. Furthermore, since the AKP's coming to power in 2002, the trade volume between the two countries has increased from just \$1.6 billion to \$28.3 billion in the space of 12 years. Ankara and Beijing have affirmed a joint endeavour to raise this amount to \$100 billion by 2020. China is also currently Turkey's largest source country for imports after Germany.

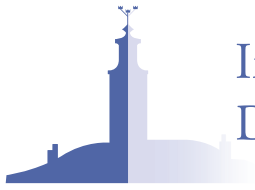
Outside of the economic sphere, military relations were bolstered with the allocation of Konya tactical air warfare center for conducting joint Turkey-Chinese military exercises which took place in September–October 2010. The move became the object of cynicism regarding Turkey's ongoing commitment to its traditional partners as the

center was initially founded for joint exercises with Israel and the United States. Moreover, two nuclear cooperation agreements were signed in 2012, which were aimed at the transfer of Chinese technology for Turkey's energy investments in nuclear plants. The agreements induced new claims over Turkey's "shift of axis," with the AKP government hence excluding cooperation with more established Western nuclear countries like France and Germany.

The most controversial development in relations has been the AKP's preference for the Chinese missile-defense system HQ-9 in a tender involving also NATO-affiliated Franco-Italian and American offers. This was the first time a NATO member had conferred a large-scale defense contract to a Chinese supplier. Moreover, the AKP decision provoked annoyance within the Western alliance because the awarded bid belonged to the China Precision Machinery Import-Export Corporation (CPMIEC), a company under U.S. sanctions for its alleged violation of the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Non-proliferation Act of 2000. An additional drawback concerned more technical aspects: the U.S. defined the Chinese system as incompatible with the NATO control network and refused financial support to Turkey for integrating the missiles into existing defense infrastructures. A decision on the missile system is still pending. During the last year, the AKP and CPMIEC have been negotiating over the terms of the technology transfer and have not yet signed a contract. Through initiating talks with the Franco-Italian Eurosam consortium, the AKP government now seems to be turning towards the NATO system.

Promise and Pitfalls

The Turkish government considers relations with China as essential for two reasons. Firstly, they provide the opportunity to acquire a stronger position vis-à-vis its traditional



Western partners through delivering a message about their alterability and Turkey's readiness to engage in novel paths as evidenced by the military exercises. Further, in the negotiations over the missile contact with Eurosam, the Chinese offer affords leverage in persuading the European bidders to sign a more opportune agreement. Secondly, relations with China provide valuable opportunities in terms of domestic "low politics," meaning economic sectors where Chinese capital and technology enlarge the government's public policy choices. Military self-sufficiency and the transfer of know-how, furthermore, are crucial prerequisites for a government willing to become an autonomous regional game-setter. In this regard the Chinese involvement was expected to contribute to the realization of a longer term security goal.

However, it would be wrong to term the Sino-Turkish rapprochement as presaging an emerging axis. Especially in economic terms, with trade volumes skewed in terms of Chinese imports, the relations are clearly asymmetrical. Turkey assumes a more peripheral role as the destination of China-issued movements and is becoming gradually incorporated in the expanding Chinese sphere of economic influence—a trend in line with Beijing's "Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative" connecting Europe through Turkey and Central Asia to China. The joint attempts and undertakings within the transport, energy, and military sectors should be considered as reflections of this trend.

China and Turkey also belong to distinctive security communities, not perceiving collective threats or integrating their politico-military structures within a unique security framework. They lack a tradition of strategic cooperation in national security issues excepting the one-off military exercises in 2010. Turkey has engagements within the NATO framework and its Chinese opening may prove incompatible with its duties vis-à-vis its traditional allies, as indicated during the missile affair.

What is more, bilateral relations contain "fault-lines" hindering the building of deeper mutual trust or which have the potential to exert negative side-effects on the present and prospective cooperation: namely, Turkey and China have considerably diverging interests regarding the Syrian crisis and the Uighur issue. Tensions emerged in 2009 when former Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan branded Beijing's handling of Uighur riots in Xinjiang as "nearly genocide" and China accused Turkey of interfering in its internal affairs. Ankara subsequently backed down on the statement. In regard to Syria, the Turkish government's rigid anti-Assad posture and China's contrasting support for the Baas re-

gime reveal other significant incompatibilities. Ankara sees in Assad's hold of power an obstacle to build a pro-AKP regional bloc while Beijing aims to secure its economic and military interests in the Eastern Mediterranean in coordination with Damascus. The Chinese government is now also concerned with Islamic armed extremism fighting the Assad regime and seeks to circumvent the risk of its spill over towards Central Asia and the Muslim Xinjiang region.

Conclusion

The Sino-Turkish "rapprochement" is a gradual process stemming from both the AKP's search for international partners and China's emergence as a global economic player. However it is very unlikely that the two sides would become "strategic partners" in the foreseeable future. The Chinese government's interest towards Turkey concerns mainly economic dividends. It already enjoys enlarged cooperation with other governments around Turkey and would not see any obligation to align with Ankara's regional foreign policy. Furthermore, the AKP does not seem to adopt a pro-Beijing posture in international affairs. Above all, China has the potential to offer economic benefits and technology transfers as well as an attractive alternative for the Turkish government, which has been seeking to adopt a more independent posture vis-à-vis Western powers in its policy choices.

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