

RISING NATIONALISMS AND THE FUTURE OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI) IN TURKEY

Since its official launch in 2013, the BRI has proved to be a useful framework to understand Chinese international economic engagement. One of the main objectives of this initiative is to ensure 'connectivity of infrastructure and facilities' through infrastructure networks, which in turn, deepens Chinese integration into the global economy.

Özge Söylemez

Doctoral Researcher, Lau China Institute, King's College-London, United Kingdom

The recent statement issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on China's Uyghur policy and China's prompt response have raised questions about the future of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Turkey. Considering the relationship dynamics between the two

countries, the Uyghur issue has so far been the most contentious one; however, it is still highly unlikely to pose a significant enough challenge to Sino-Turkish relations.

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to be a useful framework to understand Chinese international economic engagement. One of the main objectives of this initiative is to ensure 'connectivity of infrastructure and facilities' through infrastructure networks, which in turn, deepens Chinese integration into the global economy. As part of these infrastructure networks, 'China- Central Asia- West Asia' economic corridor is particularly significant for Turkey and Sino-Turkish relations. It runs from Western China to Turkey and provides China access to the Mediterranean region and the European Union market.

Having limited economic relations with China up until the end of the 1990s, Turkey has been eager to participate in the BRI and continues to be a vocal supporter of the initiative. In 2016, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding on aligning the BRI with Turkey's 'Trans Hazar- Middle Corridor Project'ⁱ. According to the memorandum, 'the two parties shall jointly promote cooperation on the Belt and Road Initiative whilst integrating the Turkish initiatives such as the Middle Corridor and Caravanserai projects to the Belt and Road'ⁱⁱ. The BRI's objective of securing 'connectivity', in this sense, complements Turkey's ambition to develop and improve infrastructure networks,

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providing better access to neighbouring countries and regions.

Both Turkey and China are newly industrialised countries (NICs) with upper middle income, and whereas China is the second largest economy in the world, Turkey ranks as the 17th. Despite the growth in the volume of trade, however, trade flow remains to be asymmetrical in China's favour. The government, therefore, has been keen to attract Chinese investment and capital considering the size of the Chinese economy and China's growing significance in global trade. So far, Chinese companies have invested in various sectors such as energy, transport, metals, chemicals, real estate and recently technology and finance.



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However, despite the willingness on both sides to improve political and economic relations, one particular obstacle is the mutual distrust, predominantly in relation to the Uyghur issue. The recent spat between the two countries has therefore raised question marks over the future of Sino-Turkish cooperation.

Nonetheless, Turkish- Chinese tensions over Uyghurs tend to be short-lived and carefully managed by both sides. For instance, in 2009, yet again, Xinjiang was the main source of tension between Turkey and China. Turkey expressed its discontent with Chinese response to Uyghur riots and the then Prime Minister Erdogan's remarks, calling the incident a 'genocide', were predictably followed by a strong reaction from Beijing. Both sides, however, managed to keep it under control and relations were soon on the mend.

One reason for this trajectory is undoubtedly the growing influence of China in global affairs, particularly world trade. The BRI as an initiative seeking to improve infrastructure on trade routes that are of strategic and economic importance to Turkey certainly outweighs any concerns Turkey might have of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Considering Chinese investments in Greece, the '16+1' initiative with the Central and Eastern European countries and Italy's decision to join in the BRI, the significance of the region to China is evident. Growing Chinese influence in the region will therefore have implications for Turkey. In this case, one of the main objectives of Turkey is to place itself at the centre of the BRI as a hub, which will inevitably boost the country's own trade and investment profile both regionally and globally.

Turkey's posturing is pragmatically shaped by both regional and global constraints and domestic pressures. Whilst recent political and economic upheavals have made Turkey more susceptible to Chinese economic statecraft, it has also resulted in a more nationalist domestic and foreign policy rhetoric, forcing Turkey to take a more definitive stance on the Uyghur issue.

A similar trend can also be observed in China. Growing Chinese influence in global affairs has been coupled with rising Chinese nationalism at home and the change in the direction of China's policies in Xinjiang is a symptom of this phenomenon.

In this regard, although the BRI has been and will be a strategic priority for both Turkey and China, rising



nationalisms in both countries have made the recent controversy difficult to avoid. Nevertheless, the silence in the aftermath of the political fallout suggests that it will be a short-lived war of words as expected. China's economic slowdown and increased volatility in emerging markets such as Turkey will embolden both sides to focus on deepening economic cooperation.



Endnotes

- 1 'Turkey-People's Republic of China Economic and Trade Relations' (2019), *Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-commercial-and-economic-relations-with-china.en.mfa
- 2 'Memorandum of Understanding on Aligning the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and the Middle Corridor Initiative' (2016), *The Grand National Assembly of Turkey*, <https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/sirasayi/donem26/yil01/ss378.pdf>