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Greater Autonomy through Closer Relations with China? Revisiting Turkey-China Engagement

Veyssel Tekdal*

ABSTRACT

China has evolved into an important provider of resources for developing countries, encompassing capital, know-how and expertise. China has also actively worked to strengthen diplomatic ties with developing regions since the early 2000s. Against this backdrop, the governments in many developing countries have moved to incorporate China as a significant factor in their geopolitical and geoeconomic considerations. Under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), Turkey has also sought to foster relations with China, particularly since the early 2010s. This pursuit has been further triggered by Ankara's strained relations with the United States and the European Union. Turkish political leadership envisions China as a potentially

crucial partner that could enhance the country's autonomy in relation to the West. While this expectation has not entirely materialized so far, there is an ongoing debate regarding the extent to which China can potentially be a transformative actor in Turkey's position within the international order. This paper contributes to this debate by locating Turkey-China engagement within a broader context of China's power and influence in the developing world. The paper suggests that the potential for Turkey's cooperation with China is likely to remain relatively limited for the foreseeable future. This is not only due to Turkey's deeply rooted ties with the West, but also because of the nature of China's global power, which is more partial and not as deep as commonly assumed.

Keywords: Turkey; China; autonomy; power; structural power.

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¿UNA MAYOR AUTONOMÍA A TRAVÉS DE UNAS RELACIONES MÁS ESTRECHAS CON CHINA? REVISANDO EL COMPROMISO TURQUÍA-CHINA

RESUMEN

China se ha convertido en un importante proveedor de recursos para los países en desarrollo, abarcando capital, conocimientos técnicos y experiencias. China también ha trabajado activamente para fortalecer los lazos diplomáticos con las regiones en desarrollo desde principios de la década de 2000. En este contexto, los gobiernos de muchos países en desarrollo han tomado medidas para incorporar a China como un factor importante en sus consideraciones geopolíticas y geoeconómicas. Bajo el gobierno del Partido Justicia y Desarrollo (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP), Turquía también ha buscado fomentar las relaciones con China, particularmente desde principios de la década de 2010. Esta búsqueda se ha visto impulsada aún más por las tensas relaciones de Ankara con Estados Unidos y la Unión Europea. El liderazgo político turco veía a China como un socio potencialmente crucial que podría mejorar la autonomía del país en relación con Occidente. Si bien esta expectativa no se ha materializado del todo hasta ahora, hay un debate en curso sobre hasta qué punto China puede ser potencialmente un actor transformador en la posición de Turquía dentro del orden internacional. Este artículo contribuye a este debate al ubicar la relación entre Turquía y China en un contexto más amplio del poder y la influencia de China en el mundo en desarrollo. El documento sugiere que es probable

que el potencial de cooperación de Turquía con China siga siendo relativamente limitado en el futuro previsible. Esto no se debe solo a los vínculos profundamente arraigados de Turquía con Occidente, sino también a la naturaleza del poder global de China, que es más parcial y menos profunda de lo que comúnmente se supone.

Palabras clave: Turquía; China; autonomía; poder; poder estructural.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Turkey's relationship with China has become a more interesting subject for students of international politics. This is partly related to the transformation of Turkish foreign policy towards a more autonomous and less Western-oriented foreign policy line, particularly after the Arab Spring (Altunışık, 2022, p. 172). The evolving global context and the rise of China have also contributed to stimulating closer engagement between Turkey and China. A key relevant global transformation is the relative power shift to the disadvantage of the United States (US) and the global North, as well as the changing perceptions on the (durability of) US preeminence in the international order. Many observers agree on characterizing the emerging global power distribution in multipolar terms (for a good discussion see Roberts *et al.*, 2017, Chap. 2). The rise of China is arguably the most important factor behind the power shift and transition towards multipolarity. In the early 2000s, China's share of global GDP was about 5 per cent, but it has since surged to around 18 per cent (World Bank, n.d.). China

has evolved into an important source of crucial resources for developing countries, including capital, know-how and expertise. China has also worked to strengthen political and diplomatic ties with developing regions since the early 2000s. Against this backdrop, the governments in many developing countries have moved to incorporate China as a significant factor in their geopolitical and geoeconomic considerations (Kirshner, 2014, p. 15). Turkey is not an exception. China's increasing power and influence have provided a compelling incentive for Turkey, under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), to pursue closer ties with the former, particularly since the early 2010s.

Yet, this pursuit has been further triggered by the partial withdrawal of the US, and to some extent, the European Union (EU), from regions where they are considered to be traditional security providers and/or trade partners. One such region is the Middle East, which underwent significant changes to its security complex, precisely when the US pivoted to Asia. The Arab Uprisings, the Syrian civil war and the following migration wave have dramatically altered the region, Turkey's foreign policy and even Turkey-EU relations. The relations with the United States shifted along a precarious path amid the diverging and sometimes conflicting priorities in the Middle East and beyond (Altunışık, 2023; Oğuzlu, 2020; Kutlay & Öniş, 2021). Given this context, the pursuit of greater autonomy from the Western powers on the global stage has become more pronounced during the late AKP era, which also coincided with the AKP's authoritarian shift. Ankara has seen fostering

relations with China as an opportunity to secure greater autonomy and "manoeuvring space" (Üngör, 2019, p. 73; see also Shichor, 2014; Özşahin *et al.*, 2022).

Beijing has also demonstrated an interest in deepening diplomatic engagement with Turkey. A major milestone in bilateral relations, which symbolically underscored both parties' interest in closer engagement, was the signing of a "strategic partnership" in 2010. Following this, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan showed clear support for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and joined the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). On several occasions, he called upon the Chinese government and business community to make investments in Turkey. The coup attempt in Turkey, which occurred on July 15, 2016, paved the way for even closer relations, elevating bilateral relations to a new height. Ankara welcomed China's clear diplomatic support in the aftermath of the coup attempt, and under this favourable context, the AKP government began to see China as a potentially crucial partner that could enhance the country's autonomy in relation to the West.

Several insightful papers that analyse the geopolitical and economic aspects of Turkey-China relations have been published over the last couple of years (e.g., Atlı, 2019; Eliküçük Yıldırım, 2021; Ergenç & Göçer, 2022; 2023; Güneylıoğlu, 2022; Gürel & Kozluca, 2022; Kutlay & Öniş, 2021; Öniş & Yalikhun, 2021; Özşahin *et al.*, 2022; Üngör, 2019). This literature reveals the dynamics of Turkey's increasing diplomatic and economic engagement with China. In this literature, it is widely acknowledged that while fostering economic and dip-

lomatic relations with China is a significant endeavour, it does not serve as a substitute for Turkey's deep and longstanding political-economic connections with the transatlantic world. Yet, there is an ongoing debate involving various differing perspectives regarding the extent to which China can potentially be a *transformative* actor with regards to Turkey's position within the international order. Such differences in perspective are to be expected, especially considering the uncertainty observed in the international order and Turkish politics in recent years.

One way to contribute to this debate, as this paper aims to do, is to discuss China-Turkey engagement comparatively within a broader context of China's power and influence in the developing world. The paper approaches China's power by employing analytical distinctions related to different types or dimensions of power. In International Relations (IR), and particularly within the realist tradition, power is commonly understood as capabilities. Relational power, defined as a state's ability to influence another state's preferences and behaviour, is another widely referenced type of power in IR (Roberts *et al.*, 2017, pp. 26-27). A more subtle and perhaps overlooked form of power is referred to as structural power. This concept is primarily attributed to Susan Strange, who defines it as the power to shape the underlying mechanisms and frameworks (i.e., norms and regulations) of international political-economic relations (Strange, 1994, pp. 24-25; see also, Kitchen & Cox, 2019). By employing this distinction among various forms of power, the paper suggests that China's

power in global politics is more partial and less deep than is often presumed.

To make sense of the extent and depth of Turkey's engagement with China, this paper draws on official documents, leaders' speeches, statistical data on bilateral economic ties, and extant academic work. The paper concludes that the potential for Turkey's cooperation with China is likely to remain relatively limited for the foreseeable future. One reason, as highlighted by previous research, is Turkey's deep-rooted ties with the West, which cannot be easily replaced. Another important reason, as this paper contends, is the nature of China's global power and its limited complementarity with Ankara's needs and interests.

The rest of the paper is organized into three sections, followed by a conclusion. The first section outlines China's global power profile and its implications for Turkey. Following this, the second section provides a brief overview of Turkey's closer engagement with China over the recent decade. Then, prior to the conclusion, the penultimate section discusses the potential of China's power in Turkey's search for greater autonomy.

MAPPING CHINA'S POWER AND INFLUENCE IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD: IMPLICATIONS FOR TURKEY

To provide context to the increased weight of China in Turkish foreign policy, this section aims to map out the contours of China's power and influence in the developing world. China's engagement with the developing world has dramatically expanded over the last few decades, spanning trade, investments, aid,

diplomacy, cultural exchanges, and military relationships. Jiang Zemin officially launched the “Go Out” policy in 2000, which aimed to promote the global expansion of Chinese companies. Hu Jintao, the successor of Jiang, fostered further engagement with different parts of the developing world. As Shambaugh (2020, p. 15) notes, it was during the 2000s that “China’s footprint became truly international for the first time”. In addition to the bilateral channels of engagements, Beijing initiated what is known as “forum diplomacy” with developing regions, exemplified by the establishment of the China–Africa Cooperation Forum in 2000 and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum in 2004 (Murphy, 2022, p. 6).

Beijing’s efforts to exert higher levels of influence in the developing world have increased under the leadership of Xi Jinping. As an expression of a proactive foreign policy approach, within his initial three years in office, Xi made more overseas visits than his predecessors (Markey, 2020, p. 36). He also devised new institutions and platforms to promote China’s engagement with the developing world. This included the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a global infrastructure campaign. Xi’s emphasis on being proactive in global platforms and reforming global governance has been received well by Erdoğan, who stressed the importance of less Western-centric global governance (Kutlay & Öniş, 2021, p. 1092). Similarly, China’s commitment to financing infrastructure projects aligns well with the AKP’s emphasis on infrastructure develop-

ment as a means to bolster electoral support (Güneylioğlu, 2022, p. 558).

Overall, during the 2010s, China’s influence began to grow, and its footprint extended, through loans, investments, aid, diplomatic outreach, and cultural flows in many parts of the world. Erdoğan’s rapprochement towards China can be seen as a reaction to this increasing footprint. Therefore, it is important to contextualise the debate about China’s strategies towards the developing world in order to locate the growing relations between Turkey and China.

For some, China has a deliberate strategy that aims to fundamentally reshape the international order. In a widely acclaimed and industrious book on China’s grand strategy, Rush Doshi (2021, p. 4) argues that China is “building efforts worldwide to displace the United States as the global leader”. Although this view is debated, in recent years, an increasing number of people have embraced such views, largely due to Xi’s more ambitious foreign policy vision. Xi’s foreign policy agenda, and particularly the BRI, is often regarded as a grand strategy that aims at “rewriting [the] current geopolitical landscape”, as Fallon (2015) writes in a highly cited article on the BRI. Conforming to these opinions, Nadege Rolland argues that Chinese elites harbour the intentions to exert hegemony in the global South — a partial and loose hegemony which would lead developing countries to endorse the norms that China championed as well as “respect the primacy of Beijing’s authority and interests” (2020, pp. 6-49).

When it comes to assessing the real power and influence of China on the world stage, not

everyone agrees on such portrayals. While not necessarily dismissing the aspirations of Chinese leaders that China assumes a more prominent global role, some scholars of Chinese politics emphasize the “defensive” motivations underpinning Chinese foreign policy. Accordingly, domestic concerns and challenges are as important, if not more important than global ambitions in China’s external engagement. For example, some scholars make a compelling case for understanding the BRI primarily as a response to domestic challenges, most notably overcapacity and falling profit margins in many construction-related sectors (Jones & Zeng, 2019, p. 1422; Lee, 2022, pp. 314-315). While the BRI is instrumental in expanding China’s global influence, as Min Ye (2020, p. 13) contends, “the domestic connection and priority to promote ‘internal growth’” remain as its essential goals. Also contested is to what extent China’s growing global footprint is directed solely by its central leadership. What may appear as a careful and coherent policy from the central government could have been shaped by a myriad of domestic actors and agencies. In the case of BRI, a range of actors, including ministries, state-owned companies (SOEs), banks, and local governments informed its design and implementation, often with competing interests and agendas (Jones & Zeng, 2019; Lee, 2022, p. 317). Furthermore, Chinese overseas infrastructure deals are more often than not initiated by Chinese companies, which identify potentially profitable projects and then approach Chinese banks for funding (Goodfellow & Huang, 2021). So, the view that Chinese overseas lending is primarily driven by geopolitical goals is highly contested.

Chinese power and influence in the developing world also vary significantly among different countries. For one thing, China’s relations with countries in its neighbourhood are “generally deeper and more complex” (Eisenman & Heginbotham, 2018, p. 230). Even in this region, Chinese influence varies significantly between countries. For a few Asian countries, China’s provision of key resources, such as aid, financing, arms, diplomatic support, and trade has become so crucial that it has attained significant relational power over these countries’ governments (Eisenman & Heginbotham, 2018, p. 246; Shambaugh, 2018, p. 100). As Eisenman & Heginbotham (2018, p. 246) explain, in some instances, these countries have been noted to align their behaviour with that of China, even when the stakes are high. As an example, Cambodia and Laos were criticized for acting as China’s “proxies” within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). They blocked the joint ASEAN statements that were critical of China’s actions in the South China Sea (Turton, 2020). Although it is open to debate which countries fit into this category, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Pakistan are among those that come closest (Eisenman & Heginbotham, 2018, p. 246; Shambaugh, 2020, p. 357). When it comes to “middle powers” and emerging countries in China’s neighbourhood, such as Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, they have, to varying degrees, been largely successful in balancing China’s power and influence. While benefiting from economic opportunities resulting from a closer engagement with China, they are, at the same time, willing to check China’s influence by

strengthening their ties with the US (Gilley, 2014, p. 248; Shambaugh, 2018).

China's relations with distant countries, such as Turkey, have primarily revolved around economic ties (Eisenman & Heginbotham, 2018, p. 230). The flow of foreign direct investment from China to developing countries has gained strong momentum since the 2000s, transforming China into a major investor in some developing countries (Jenkins, 2019). Similarly, Chinese loans to developing countries have expanded, making the Chinese policy banks comparable to the World Bank in terms of total lending volume (Global Development Policy Center, 2023). Yet, Chinese economic ties with the developing world are highly concentrated within some specific sectors and countries. China's exports from developing countries are dominated by raw materials (Jenkins, 2019). Most developing countries, including Turkey, do not have the chance to export billions of dollars' worth of oil, metal ores or other commodities to China each year. Chinese foreign direct investment in the developing world is also over-concentrated in energy, metals, minerals, and construction (for a nuanced analysis, see Wang & Li, 2017). Similarly, ten recipients alone account for more than half of Chinese overseas financing, indicating a significant concentration (Ray & Simmons, 2020).

These characterizations of geographical and sectoral over-concentration of Chinese outward capital flows and trade ties are not intended to downplay their significance for the developing world. The point here is that evaluating Chinese economic influence from aggregate values and indicators often leads to

misleading conclusions and an overestimation of China's relative importance for some developing countries, including Turkey. Indeed, this overestimation both politically and economically is the backbone for much of the critical literature on Turkey-China relations (e.g., Ergenç & Göçer, 2023; Güneylioğlu, 2022; Gürel & Kozluca, 2022).

Notwithstanding such overestimation, it is evident that many countries have established strong economic ties with China, be it through trade, investment, or financing channels, granting China the ability to influence the behaviour of those countries' governments. Specifically, China leverages this relational power to garner diplomatic support from developing countries (Murphy, 2022, p. 214). For instance, during the UN General Assembly session in October 2019, China managed to secure support from 54 countries through a joint statement that endorsed China's "counterterrorism" and "deradicalization" measures in Xinjiang (Rolland, 2020, p. 42).

China has also strived to reform global governance, often by joining forces with BRICS and other "major developing countries" (Eisenman & Heginbotham, 2018, pp. 218, 235-36). China's cooperation with Brazil and India regarding the reform of the global governance of development finance is a case in point (de Renzio & Seifert, 2014). As Gilley & O'Neil (2014, pp. 11-13) maintain, "middle powers", which partly overlap with "major developing powers", have a general tendency to cooperate with China when it comes to reforming global governance. Additionally, China-led initiatives and institutions, such as the AIIB, are generally welcomed by those

countries as they prefer a multipolar world over the dominance of a single power or power bloc, which provides a more suitable environment for flexible and multidirectional foreign policies (pp. 11-13). In fact, as a leader emphasising less Western-centric global governance (Kutlay & Öniş, 2021, p. 1092; Üngör, 2019, p. 70), Erdoğan welcomes both the AIIB and BRI (see below).

Considering this discussion, it is possible to argue that China undermines the structural power of the West as it emerges as a significant provider of resources (financing, aid, know-how, technical support, and market) for developing countries, and establishes parallel institutions (Breslin, 2015, p. 240; Tekdal, 2022). Yet, when it comes to exercising structural power, China's capacity is arguably more limited (Kitchen & Cox, 2019). For instance, despite operating with some differing preferences regarding favoured sectors and project management, the AIIB largely follows the World Bank's norms and practices (Wang & Sampson, 2021, pp. 13-14). To put this into perspective, China's capacity is not really comparable to the structural power wielded by the US, which is notably exemplified by the unmatched position of the US dollar as a reserve currency and its centrality in the global financial system, the Bretton Woods institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, and its military alliance systems formed around NATO and bilateral alliances in Asia (Hung 2022, p. 257; Kitchen & Cox, 2019). The EU similarly possesses significant order-making capacity through its structural power in broader Europe. By extending Hung's argument (2022, p. 57), it can be argued that the

West's structural power constrains China's geopolitical influence. This resonates well with Shambaugh's argument that "China has an increasingly broad 'footprint' across the globe, but it is not particularly deep" (2013, p.6). Thus, in comparison to the US, China still appears to be a "partial power" (Shambaugh, 2013, pp. 6-10).

The discussion in this section regarding China's global power and influence has intended to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics and potential of Turkey's engagement with China. The subsequent two sections delve further into this subject.

TURKEY-CHINA ENGAGEMENT: TRACING THE PROCESS

As discussed in the introduction, the 2010s witnessed some serious efforts to deepen and expand China-Turkey relations. An important initial step was the signing of a strategic partnership agreement between the two nations in 2010 (Eliküçük Yıldırım, 2021, p. 36). Nonetheless, China's strategic partnership agreements, by themselves, may not be special or exceptional. China has now such agreements with over 100 countries, and they often lack binding commitments for the parties (Cao, 2021; Li & Ye, 2019). That being said, this specific agreement between Turkey and China at least indicated their mutual interest in closer cooperation. In 2010 again, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) participated in the Anatolian Eagle, an aerial military exercise in Turkey, which was the PLA's first-ever participation in a military exercise of a NATO member country (Shichor, 2014, p. 205).

Turkey attained the status of “dialogue partner” within the China- and Russia-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2012. Subsequently, Erdoğan would, on multiple occasions, refer to the SCO as an alternative to the EU (Shichor, 2014, p. 200; Eliküçük Yıldırım, 2021, p. 36). In November 2016, for instance, while underlining that the EU should not be considered the only option, he asked reporters “why shouldn’t Turkey be in the Shanghai Five?” (Reuters, 2016). Around the mid-2010s, bilateral relations found new catalysts. One such catalyst was the BRI which stimulated a renewed interest in Turkey’s economic engagement with China. As one of the early participants in the BRI, Turkey signed a memorandum of understanding in November 2015 on “aligning the BRI and Middle Corridor Initiative”, Turkey’s own initiative to enhance railway connectivity with Caucasus, Central Asia, and China (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.; see also, Çolakoglu, 2019).

Another catalyst, as Üngör (2019) elaborates in detail, came as a result of the July 15th coup attempt, in which military officers affiliated with the network of Fethullah Gülen, a self-exiled cleric residing in the US and the leader of a semi-clandestine socio-political organization, are accused of playing a leading role (see also, Özşahin *et al.*, 2022, p. 228). In the aftermath of the coup attempt, Russia, and China, unlike the US and some European countries, openly showed their support for the Turkish government (Üngör, 2019, p. 65). Furthermore, the US government was accused by pro-government circles of being involved in the coup attempt (Üngör, 2019,

p. 67). In contrast, China declared its support for the Turkish government’s measures, including those that were seen as extraordinary and legally controversial in the aftermath of the coup attempt. China’s vice foreign minister Zhang Ming visited Turkey in early August 2016 to “convey the message of solidarity and support... related to the coup attempt...” (MFA, 2016). In such a context, anti-Westernism was growing more influential and some pro-government pundits were advocating closer relations with China (see Üngör, 2019, p. 65; Özşahin *et al.*, 2022). A few months later, in November of that year, the Turkish-Chinese ministers of foreign affairs consultation mechanism was established, which would facilitate several ministerial meetings between the countries in the ensuing years (Yu, 2021).

Erdoğan attended and delivered a speech at the First BRI Forum in 2017. In his speech, he announced: “I believe there is a win-win project before us which will serve peace and stability. Therefore, this initiative of the People’s Republic of China is beyond all praise” (Erdoğan, 2017). The following year, Erdoğan met Xi twice, on the sidelines of the G-20 and BRICS summits (Yu, 2021). In July 2019, Erdoğan visited Beijing once more, along with several ministers. During that visit, the *Global Times*, a prominent newspaper affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party, published an article by Erdoğan in which he “call[ed] on the Chinese business community to invest in Turkey - the crossroads of Asia and Europe, and the heart of the BRI” (Erdoğan, 2019).

With the goal of forging closer ties and future economic advantages in mind, Erdoğan has refrained from publicly criticizing China’s

Uyghur policies in recent years. This stands in contrast to his previous stance as a vocal critique of China's oppressive measures against the Uyghur minority, including comparing the policies towards the Uyghurs to genocide (Alemdaroğlu & Tepe, 2020; Üngör, 2019, p. 72).

All of these developments suggest that Turkey-China relations were reaching new heights in the late 2010s. In this context, the Turkish political leadership arguably envisioned China as a potentially important partner that could enhance the country's autonomy in relation to the West. Yet, the extent to which Turkey's expectations have been realized is contested, as is China's potential role in Ankara's quest for greater autonomy. The following section discusses these topics.

DEBATING THE POTENTIAL OF CHINA'S POWER IN TURKEY'S QUEST FOR GREATER AUTONOMY T1

China's importance to Turkey has increased over the past decade, serving both as a provider of valuable resources, such as capital, know-how, and technology, and also as a crucial trade partner. Like many other countries, the volume of Turkey's trade with China has boomed over the last two decades. China has become a leading exporter to Turkey, consistently ranking among the top three in the last few years. Turkey has also received a few sizable direct investments from Chinese investors in recent years. One example is the acquisition of a 65 per cent stake in the Kumpot container terminal in Istanbul for \$940 million by a Chinese consortium in 2016. The largest

Chinese investment in Turkey to date, with a total value of \$2.1 billion, went towards building and owning a thermal power plant, Emba Hunutlu, whose construction started in 2019 (CGIT, 2023; Atlı & Özbekli, 2023). Chinese financial support is also worth mentioning. After the currency shock that struck Turkey in August 2018, the Turkish government courted Beijing for financial support. In August 2019, the People's Bank of China, China's central bank, transferred the equivalent of \$1 billion in Chinese yuan to the Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey (CBRT) (Karakaya & Kandemir, 2019). The transfer was realized as a part of the lira-yuan swap line agreed upon in 2012, which would renew every three years (Yu, 2021). This transfer helped to slightly improve the CBRT's reserves on paper. Moreover, the China-led AIIB has also become an important source of project finance in Turkey, providing over 3 billion USD from 2018 to 2023 (AIIB, 2023; Köstem, 2019).

Know-how and technology are also valuable assets that Chinese companies can offer, particularly in sectors where these companies have globally competitive capabilities. Telecommunications is one such sector. Huawei, for instance, has long provided services and equipment for Turkish telecommunications companies. And recently, Turkish companies have also entered into agreements with Huawei to collaborate on 5G networks (Atlı & Özbekli, 2023, p. 403; Demir, 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, China acted as a key provider of another valuable resource to Turkey: vaccines. Starting from December 2020, Turkey received millions of doses of CoronaVac vaccines developed by the Chi-

nese Sinovac company. Turkey was among the countries that received much-needed vaccines relatively early, which played a pivotal role in the initial stages of its vaccination campaign. This can be attributed to the cordial relations that had developed between the two countries over the preceding years. That said, the CoronoVac experience in Turkey is not considered a complete success due to the vaccine's relatively low success rate and the controversies about its delayed shipments in 2021 (Üngör, 2023). Nevertheless, the COVID-19 episode at least showed that China's enhanced technical capabilities could make it a potentially significant partner in times of emergencies.

While China's influence in Turkey is increasing, its overall significance for the latter is still not very substantial. First, Turkey's trade with China is quite imbalanced. While China has become a leading source of exports for Turkey, Turkey's exports to China have remained below 2 per cent in recent years (WITS, n.d.). China-Turkey freight train services, sometimes referred to as the "railway silk road", commenced operations in 2019 (MFA, n.d.), only to replicate the imbalance in the bilateral trade. As of April 2021, China's exports to Turkey by means of railway reached 2,164 containers, whereas in the other direction the figure remained as low as 216 containers (Şimşek & Ayvaz, 2021). It is also worth noting that Turkish exports to China are heavily concentrated in raw materials, such as marble, metal ores, and stones (Atlı, 2019, p. 81). This aligns with the pattern of China's imports from developing economies, which primarily focus on commodities and raw materials. Second, despite recent flows of investments,

China has not yet become a significant investor in the Turkish economy, lagging noticeably behind the traditional sources of investment, such as European countries, the United States and some neighbouring nations (see also Atlı, 2019; Öniş & Yalikhun, 2021; Tekdal, 2019).

Third, the Turkish government's efforts to attract Chinese finance for some big-ticket infrastructure projects have been largely unsuccessful. Chinese funds were expected to finance the high-speed railway sections that would stretch along the Edirne-Kars axis, connecting north-western and north-eastern Turkey, as well as the construction of Çandarlı Port in the Aegean Sea (Atlı, 2019, p. 86; Çolakoğlu, 2019). As Ergenç and Göçer's (2023) field-work-based study demonstrates, the parties failed to reach an agreement for either of the projects. In the case of the railway projects, the inability to reach an agreement is partly attributed to disagreements over technical specifications as well as the high interest rates the Chinese demanded (Ergenç & Göçer, 2022, pp. 100-104). Furthermore, Chinese interest in those projects has apparently diminished due to Turkey's "volatile political and economic environment" (Ergenç & Göçer, 2023), a concern not unfounded considering Turkey's recent history which includes a coup attempt, currency shocks and enduring financial instability, and the transition to a presidential system all within a relatively short time. This uncertainty is compounded by the unpredictability stemming from Ankara's foreign policy "improvisations" and diplomatic manoeuvres in its interactions with the US, EU, Russia, and others in its own neighbourhood. What is more, these failed negotiations are in line with

our earlier suggestions that Chinese actors tend to prioritize profitability in their overseas ventures and that it is not quite accurate to view Chinese overseas financing as easy money primarily driven by geopolitical considerations, such as gaining influence.

In hindsight, this meagre outcome in terms of Chinese capital inflows is disappointing to many, with inflated expectations of the 2010s contributing to this sense of disappointment. Gürel and Kozluca (2022, p. 809) have warned against such inflated expectations: "...public discourse on the indispensability of China as an economic partner to Turkey could result in the potential exaggeration of its actual contribution...". Moreover, a widely held narrative in Turkey considers the country as an important bridge and hub between Asia and Europe. Consequently, the BRI, as an initiative focused on connectivity, resonates well with this narrative, amplifying the excitement about it. Furthermore, the Turkish government seems to have been influenced by this discourse and imagery.

On balance, it is fair to say that China's actual and *imagined* importance as a partner and resource provider to Turkey has somewhat increased over the past decade. This has enabled Beijing to exert some influence on Turkish foreign policy. Erdoğan's recent silence on the Uyghur issue is perhaps linked to the inducement of economic advantages that could result from closer relations with China. Also, the Turkish leader's diplomatic support for the BRI, which is arguably China's most important diplomatic campaign in a decade, can be seen as an outcome of the allure of Chinese power. Given these shifts and recent

economic deals with China, some characterize Turkey's position in bilateral relations as a form of dependency (e.g., Kraemer, 2021). In his analysis of Erdoğan's efforts to forge closer ties with China, David P. Goldman (2018) put forward a strong version of such a view. He argues that the "combination of mobile broadband, rail and sea logistics, e-commerce and e-finance will absorb Turkey into the greater Chinese economy", and he predicts that Turkey will become a "satrapy of China" (Goldman, 2018). In some analyses, Turkey was even referred to as a "client state" of China (Alemdaroğlu & Tepe, 2020).

The accuracy of these characterizations is questionable. As discussed earlier, the existence of some recent investments and financing from China has not really made China a major partner for the Turkish economy. Also, regarding the Uyghur issue, a core issue of concern in Beijing's diplomatic efforts in the international arena, Turkey's behaviour differs significantly from that of a client state. Turkey was among the 50 countries that issued a joint statement at the UN General Assembly's human rights committee on October 31st, 2022, condemning the human rights violations against Uyghurs (International Service for Human Rights, 2022). More recently, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, the former foreign minister, openly stated in a press meeting in December 2022 that Turkey's support for Uyghurs' rights bothers China and that Turkey has no intention of abandoning this support (Ergin, 2023). Çavuşoğlu also noted Turkey's strong support for the report of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (2022, p. 43) regarding the human rights concerns in the

Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, which found “severe and undue restrictions on a wide range of human rights”. Therefore, describing Turkey’s position in bilateral relations as that of a client state or something similar clearly overstates China’s relational power over Ankara (for a similar view see Güneylioglu 2022, pp. 562-63).

Some recent academic papers tend to suggest that China is a potentially important contributor to Turkey’s search for strategic autonomy (Kutlay & Öniş, 2021; Öniş & Yalikhun, 2021). These papers offer a nuanced view, recognizing that ties with China are still relatively nascent while also taking the potential promises of relations with the “Russia-China axis” seriously amid the changing international order. This paper, however, contends that the potential for Turkey’s cooperation with China may remain relatively limited. This is in part related to the nature of China’s global power and its limited complementarity with Ankara’s needs and interests. From a comparative perspective, and considering China’s varying influence across the developing world, Turkey may not be regarded as a particularly special partner for China. First, Turkey lacks certain features shared by countries in China’s neighbourhood, with which China tends to develop closer and deeper relationships. More specifically, Turkey lacks close inter-societal ties with China (including a significant diaspora), it is not integrated into the East Asian regional value chains (unlike countries such as Vietnam and Malaysia), and it is less likely to gain “geopolitical rents” from China due to its competition with the US and Japan in its region. Second, again from a comparative

perspective, Turkey-China economic interdependence is not particularly strong. Unlike countries like Brazil, South Africa, Chile, and Argentina, Turkey is not an important commodity exporter to China. Relatedly, both countries lack a remarkable interdependence in any of Turkey’s major industries (e.g., electrical equipment, motor vehicles, textiles, or metals), which resembles, for instance, the interdependence observed between Germany and China in the automobile industry. China is not a major market or an investor in these sectors for Turkey. Third, there is not a particularly strong ideological attraction between China and Turkey, unlike China’s stronger ideological affiliations with countries like Russia and Iran.

Turkey’s special position for China can be attributed to a concern: the Uyghur issue. As Eliküçük (2021, p. 42) notes, Turkey may be the only Turkic and Muslim-majority country whose leaders openly criticized Beijing for its oppressive policies towards the Uyghurs in China. Erdoğan’s popularity in certain segments of the Muslim world may be a cause of concern in Beijing, as “his vocal criticism... could awaken anti-Chinese sentiment in other Muslim countries” (p. 42). However, giving importance to Turkey for this reason seems to stem from a defensive motivation on China’s part. More importantly, the ongoing tension surrounding this particular issue hinders the development of closer relations between the two countries (Atlı & Özbekli, 2023, p. 404).

Another factor that gives Turkey a special position in the eyes of Chinese leadership may be its membership in NATO. China seems to value distancing Turkey from the US-led alliance system (for a similar comment, see

Shichor, 2014, p. 204). This motivation aims to undermine the US-led order. While being an important way of exercising power for Beijing, it is certainly distinct and less ambitious than structural power associated with order-making. As discussed above, China's current capacity to exercise such structural power is questionable, and this has implications for the potential development of Turkey-China relations. Institutions such as NATO and the EU, including its single market, in which Turkey has participated since 1996 through the signing of the EU-Turkey Customs Union Agreement, can be seen as concrete manifestations of structural power. They still serve as the primary mechanisms and frameworks for Ankara's long-term security and economic considerations. As Oğuzlu (2020, p. 138) contends, despite the worsening relations with the West, Ankara still much values Turkey's membership in those institutions. On the other hand, China, as a recently rising power, can only be considered as a fledgeling institution-builder. Examples such as the China-led AIIB and China- and Russia-led SCO may come to mind in this context. As previously discussed, the AIIB tends to follow the established norms in many respects. The SCO is characterized by thin institutionalization and a defensive agenda primarily focused on regime security concerns, not really comparable to the Western institutions mentioned earlier.

CONCLUSION

The rise of China has been changing the world. By emerging as a major provider of resources, such as financing, aid, know-how, technical

support, and demand creation, China has also been changing the relationships between developing countries and the global North. Thus, to some extent, it is undermining American and broader Western power and influence in global politics. Most developing country governments, including the Turkish government, have expectedly sought to establish stronger ties with China. Yet, when it comes to the question of how deep and transformative Chinese power and influence is, the above discussion has suggested that there are good reasons not to overstate it. China's influence in many developing countries does not appear to be particularly deep. The paper has argued that Turkey falls into this category. China's significance to Turkey as a resource provider and partner has been limited, partly due to the nature of China's global power. Also, as discussed above, from a comparative perspective, the factors that could substantially draw Turkey and China closer to each other do not seem particularly strong.

That being said, since we are going through a power shift and uncertainty with implications at both domestic and global levels, it is prudent to retain a degree of agnosticism. China may appear as a part of the dynamics of Turkish politics and foreign policy in surprising ways in future. Similarly, China's global power could develop into a more substantial and deeper shape, yet this would be a gradual process over the years. For instance, Chinese transnational companies are expected to expand and deepen overseas operations over time, which would potentially bring stronger ties in production and value chains with developing economies like Turkey.

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