

Is Turkey Pivoting to China?

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Oct 24, 2016

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/hl-twjwh-trkya-anzarha-nhw-alsyn\)](/ar/policy-analysis/hl-twjwh-trkya-anzarha-nhw-alsyn)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

As Turkey looks for alternative partners, it is not Russia or Iran but China that offers the most promise, so the United States should shore up its own ties with Ankara in response.

U.S.-Turkish relations were strained before the July coup attempt against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and they have only worsened since. Turkish officials have made the extradition of Fethullah Gulen, who leads the global organization "Hizmet" from his home in Pennsylvania, a test of American commitment to Turkey, while suggesting that the U.S. government itself may have had a hand in the coup. The United States, for its part, has voiced mounting concern about civil liberties in Turkey and Ankara's viability as an American ally in the coup's wake. Turkey's relations with the EU -- already marred by Europe's de facto rejection of Turkey's accession bid and, more recently, by the Syrian refugee crisis -- have suffered as well.

Unsurprisingly, as its relations with the West sour, Ankara is reaching out to other powers. Turkey and Iran -- whose foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, was notably supportive of Erdogan as the coup attempt unfolded -- have seen their relations warm in recent months. Turkey and Russia, whose relations cratered in late 2015 after a Russian fighter jet was shot down by Turkish forces, have restored relatively normal ties in the wake of reciprocal visits by Erdogan and President Vladimir Putin to St. Petersburg and Istanbul, respectively, in the coup's aftermath.

Yet both of these relationships are limited by history and geography. An insecure and revanchist Moscow, fresh off annexing territory on the Black Sea littoral, makes an uncomfortable ally for Ankara. And Iran, while an important trading partner, is more often opposed to than aligned with Ankara on regional issues ranging from Syria to Iraq to the role of the United States.

More promising for Erdogan than an alliance with Moscow or Tehran is one with Beijing. While they are already close trading partners, they may be poised to deepen their relationship as Ankara looks to hedge against

overdependence on the United States, and as Beijing aims to increase its economic, diplomatic, and military engagement in a region that is increasingly vital to its interests.

BACKGROUND

Relations between modern China and Turkey did not begin to blossom until the 1970s, as a result of rapprochement between Washington (Ankara's closely aligned NATO ally) and Beijing. The relationship deepened in the 1990s when the United States and Europe limited arms sales to Turkey over the Kurdish issue, prompting Ankara to look for alternative suppliers.

Ties have continued to grow since. Former Chinese premier Wen Jiabao visited Turkey in October 2010, and President Xi Jinping visited in 2012; Erdogan made a reciprocal trip to China the following year. Also in 2012, Turkey became a "dialogue partner" of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a multilateral group dominated by Russia and China and sometimes seen in the West as aspiring to compete with or supplant U.S.-led institutions. Meanwhile, the two states' air forces have conducted multiple joint exercises, including a 2009 drill in which Chinese fighters refueled in Iran en route to Turkey.

The relationship's strongest element by far has been trade. In 2000, their total bilateral trade volume stood at approximately \$1.4 billion; in 2015, it stood at \$27.3 billion. Over that time, China surpassed Germany as Turkey's top source of imports.

BUMPS IN THE SILK ROAD

Despite these warming ties, the expansion of the Sino-Turkish relationship has been far from smooth. Beijing considers political Islam a threat, and Turkey is one of its foremost state champions -- among other difficulties, this has resulted in considerable friction between Ankara and Egypt, another Middle Eastern state China is wooing. It thus comes as little surprise that Beijing waited until the result of the coup attempt was clear before issuing an anodyne statement by a low-level Foreign Ministry official backing Turkey's efforts to safeguard "national security and stability." Several weeks later, China dispatched a vice foreign minister, Zhang Ming, to visit Ankara.

The two governments have also clashed over China's Uyghur minority, which has historical and ethnic ties to Turkey. Beijing accuses the primarily Muslim Uyghurs not only of separatism but also of involvement in terrorism -- whether within China, in other parts of Southeast and Central Asia, or in the Middle East as foreign fighters. Turkey, for its part, maintains a welcoming policy toward Uyghur migrants and has criticized Beijing's treatment of the group. The friction reached an apex in 2009 following riots in China's Xinjiang province, prompting a harsh reaction from Erdogan that was later walked back by his foreign minister at the time, Ahmet Davutoglu. Those tensions have subsided, and Xi and Erdogan have pledged to deepen their counterterrorism cooperation, yet the Uyghur issue is likely to remain a sticking point.

Bumps have surfaced on the military front as well. Sino-Turkish strategic ties looked ready to move forward in 2013 when Turkey announced plans to purchase a missile defense system from China -- and from a firm under U.S. sanctions to boot. While it was a bold step for a NATO ally, it was ultimately for naught; the purchase was canceled in 2015 due to Western protests and contractual issues. Ultimately, it underscored the obstacles to increased military cooperation between China and Turkey as much as the growth potential.

Even the expansion in trade has not been without controversy -- while the total volume has increased twenty-fold, it has also become increasingly lopsided as the growth of Turkish imports from China vastly outpaces that of exports. Of the \$27.3 billion in total trade last year, only \$2.4 billion consisted of Turkish exports to China.

LOOKING AHEAD

These problems aside, the time may be ripe for Sino-Turkish ties to grow further. Turkey, as already noted, is

T dissatisfied with its existing alliances. Tensions with the West are unlikely to abate if Erdogan moves Turkey in a more authoritarian direction. And even if those differences can be overcome, Turkey -- like other American allies in the region -- is worried about Washington's continued commitment to the Middle East, especially given U.S. equivocation on the Syria war and Russia's intervention there.

China, for its part, is becoming increasingly involved in the Middle East. The region, and especially Turkey and Iran, play a leading role in Xi Jinping's "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) plan, which envisions a new infrastructure and transportation network connecting China with Europe and points in between. Even before Xi unveiled OBOR, Beijing's economic interests in the region were increasing, both as a source of energy (for which China's thirst has been inexorably increasing) and as a destination for capital and workers.

In the wake of that economic involvement, diplomatic and military involvement has inevitably followed. China was an uncharacteristically active participant in the Iran nuclear talks, and as it has sought to bolster its regional relationships, it has also become more diplomatically engaged in the region's conflicts, primarily but not limited to Syria. Beijing has even stepped up its military involvement in the region, building its first overseas naval base in Djibouti and providing modest military aid to Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria.

Beside the Uyghur issue, three major factors will likely determine the extent to which Sino-Turkish ties develop. First is China's own fortunes -- if its economic growth continues to stagnate, it may lack the resources to carry out its OBOR plans or offer attractive export opportunities that could right the imbalance in its trade with Turkey.

Second is China's attitude toward regional issues. Turkey and other regional states have thus far imposed little cost on Beijing for supporting Tehran and Assad in various ways, such as buying time for and diluting sanctions on Iran during the nuclear negotiations, and joining with Moscow to veto multiple UN Security Council resolutions on Syria. Yet as China becomes a more important player in the Middle East, their forbearance may diminish.

Third is American policy in the Middle East. Turkey may hold a special allure for Beijing as a NATO ally that is vulnerable to external enticements. This is not to say that China seeks to supplant the American role in the Middle East; indeed, the two countries arguably share extensive interests in the region, and U.S. leadership thus accrues to China's benefit at little cost to Beijing. Nevertheless, in a broader sense China is a revisionist power that views itself as a rival of the United States and seeks to undermine American global primacy.

Yet the United States should not see the expansion of Sino-Turkish ties as a threat per se. Indeed, Washington has reason to welcome this, if doing so diminishes Turkey's ability to play U.S. and Chinese officials against one another and contributes to Turkish economic prosperity. The United States and China may even have room to cooperate in this regard, to the extent they can deliver common messages to Ankara about, for example, the need to avoid supporting extremist groups and prevent the movement of foreign fighters.

At the same time, Washington should not be complacent, lest Turkey and China receive the message that U.S. commitment to the region is wavering. Because Turkey is vital to numerous American objectives -- stabilizing Syria and Iraq, countering Iran, defeating the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, ensuring security in Europe, and others -- U.S. officials cannot afford to throw up their hands and walk away from Erdogan, whatever their frustrations with him. American influence in Ankara -- and in Beijing, to the extent China's interests are affected by events in the Middle East -- will be greatest if the United States and Turkey are allies, and are clearly perceived as such.

Michael Singh is the managing director and Lane-Swig Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Energy & Economics (/policy-analysis/energy-economics)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Turkey (/policy-analysis/turkey)