

CHAPTER III

TURKEY' S INCONSISTENCY IN DEALING WITH UYGHUR ISSUE

Besides its involvement as a mediator in resolution and conflict, Turkey also embraces the bilateral relations that considered beneficial for their foreign policy. One of the countries that Turkey has been actively engaging with is China. Their relations actually began since the entry of China into United Nation Security Council (UNSC) in 1971, but then their cooperation in the aspect of economic and military were remarkably elevating in 2000s. However, right after the Uyghur Incident that happened in 2009, the relations between Turkey and China were starting to have turbulence. This chapter will specifically analyze the Turkey's inconsistency including the lengthy historical background that comprises of the entry of Uyghur ethnic into China and the beginning of tensions between them.

A. The Historical Background of Turkey and China Relations

Right after China decided to join into United Nation Security Council (UNSC) in 1971, the relations between Turkey and China were officially started. Even though they slowly began their bilateral relations from the very lowest point, where China, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping has just changed their economic system from socialism into liberal economic policy in 1978. At the same time, Turkey was being excluded from the European Economic Community and was looking for a new strong alliance in order to build new beneficial relations. That was actually the time where Turkey eventually considered

China as their new ideal partner to build bilateral relationship (Tarihi M. G., 2017).

In the early 2000s, Turkey and China were restructuring their relations. It was proven by fact that they were committed to signing an agreement on countering the transnational crimes, which can be assumed as the Turkish commitment to not supporting any form of East Turkestan movement. During that year, the visit of Jiang Zemin, Chinese president, to Turkey has resulted in the improvement of their bilateral relations as an “enhanced partnership”. This allegiance then has significantly stepped up their cooperation in many aspects (Söylemez, Turkey and China: An Account of a Bilateral Relations Evolution, 2017).

In 2002 as well, following the victory of AKP (Justice and Development Party) in the general election, Erdogan as the new prime minister, has generally promoted the multi-dimensional foreign policy. This foreign policy comprises the concept of “zero problems with neighbors”, includes better relations with China, Africa, Russia, and the Middle East countries. This foreign policy is actually summarizing Turkey’s ambition with regards to their relations with neighboring countries. Turkey wants to minimize all of the problems concerned with their neighboring countries (Söylemez, Turkey and China: An Account of a Bilateral Relations Evolution, 2017). This also means that during the management of Erdogan, Turkey is cautious from any discourse that could possibly damage the intensive relations that have been built with China.

As a matter of fact, their relations were significantly elevated in 2004. Huang Ju, Chinese Vice

Premier of the State Council, said that Erdogan's visit to China had promoted the development of friendly cooperation between the two countries. China appreciated the response of the Turkish government in respecting China's one policy, supporting the reasons for China's reunification, understanding China's good intentions in safeguarding national sovereignty and territorial integrity (Tarihi Y. K., 2017). As a matter of fact, both Turkey and China have also witnessed the political of mutual trust and equal economic interests.

In the last decade, China's existence has become really crucial for Turkey. In term of economic, China has become Turkey's key trade partner. These both countries are really enjoying the significant economic development and the bilateral partnership. China actually sees Turkey as its new market. Many Chinese investors have strongly expressed their interest in the term of infrastructure, tourism, logistic, and real estate in Turkey (Tarihi M. G., 2017).

There is a trading volume that reached up to 27.2 billion dollars between both Turkey and China. However, in this commercial partnership, China's exports to Turkey has reached \$ 24.8 billion, while Turkey gained sales of \$ 2.4 billion to China. From this trade, we can literally see that China gained more benefits than Turkey did in the last decade. However, Turkey keeps considering China as a new global powerhouse, and its existence is vital for Turkey's foreign policy and economic sustainability (Tarihi M. G., 2017).

Since then, the bilateral relations between Turkey and China have made another step forward. Besides its involvement in the economic aspect, in 2009, Turkey also

signed another agreement on the military cooperation in Beijing. That agreement comprised the military training and a defense industry cooperation. This is actually why the Chinese aircraft were involved in the annual military training in Turkey (Shichor, 2014).

Also, in the same year of 2009, both PM Wen Jiabao and PM Erdogan stated that between Turkey and China have built the strategic alliance and signed at least eight frameworks of agreements. The efforts made by Turkey also proved how Erdogan had tried many times to be part of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Turkey's ambition on joining the member of this cooperation is being hampered by the Turkish influence in the Middle East and Xinjiang, as well as its Western alliance (Söylemez, Turkey and China: An Account of a Bilateral Relations Evolution, 2017).

Besides its ambition in the SCO, Turkey is also looking forward to the OBOR (One Belt One Road) project initiated by China. Turkey can be considered as the main gateway for China to engage the relations with the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa. Furthermore, China and Turkey have signed for several agreements regarding the infrastructure related with the OBOR project, as one of China's national interests. This will absolutely give China benefits in placing the central position of OBOR in terms of land, sea, and air transportation. Some experts also analyze that China is trying to dominate in Central Asia and in the Middle East both politically and economically with these projects (Tarihi Y. K., 2017).

B. The Beginning Tension Between Uyghurs and the Chinese Government

Since the People's Republic of China proclaimed its independence on October 1st, 1949, asking for the birth of a new country, China put their concern to devote its attention on the territorial integrity, military-strategy, and national interest. According to the ideal world order of Modern China, Xinjiang, Taiwan, and Tibet are the regions that considered as a vital and vital area to achieve national interest. That is why Chinese government stated that those areas must be fought for in any way (Ridwan, 2007).

Historically, Chinese Muslims often had difficulty in dealing with the ruling government. It was getting worse especially after the death of Mao Zedong and the change in Chinese politics under Deng Xiaoping. The communist government started to govern the state through the cultural revolution and resulted in religious restraint in China. Since then, Chinese Muslims had to struggle way harder only to gain the same amount of rights as the other ethnics. Furthermore, the Chinese government has been trying to move the Islamic culture by sending the Han tribes to Islamic jurisdiction in 1940s. At first, the government stated that the Han tribes were sent to Xinjiang in order to elevate the economic condition, while in fact, Han ethnic was sent to Xinjiang solely to propagate the Chinese Government (Gardner, 2004).

Uyghurs itself are one of the ethnic Turkish groups who inhabited in East Asia and the Middle East. Ethnic Uyghurs originally came from one of the Proto-Turkish ethnic groups. They are one of the minority tribes in People's Republic of China who are also widely spread in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Since 1940s, the Uyghurs are 45% mainly concentrated in their own

autonomous region, known as East Turkistan, while by the Qing Manchu Dynasty in the 18th century specifically called it 'Xinjiang' that means a new block (Ethno, 2011).

Figure 3.2.1
The Geographical Location of Xinjiang



Source: businessinsider.sg

For China, the Xinjiang region is often called as *Western Countries* or *Western Region* due to its geographic place that is located in Western China. One of the main reasons why the Chinese government resolutely opposes the separatism of Uyghurs is because Xinjiang has become a very strategic area and beneficial in all aspects. In the geographical aspect, Xinjiang is a buffer zone from the terrorism threats coming from Middle East. Economically, Xinjiang has excellent potential for agriculture, livestock, and also the most essential oil field for the Chinese government (Ethno, 2011).

The tension of the Uyghur issue actually began since 1990s. China at that time was really sensitive towards the separatist movement did by the Uyghurs as a part of their East Turkestan nationalism. The hard attitude of the Chinese government in resolving the issue in Xinjiang was actually worsening the situation. At the end of 1996, the

separatist Uyghur movements emerged. The Chinese President, Jiang Zemin stated that any form of organization or individual that supported the separatist movement of Uyghur Muslims would not be tolerated. The situation was getting really worse right after the military forces shot hundreds of innocent Muslims and detain thousands of Uyghurs because of their rebellion movement (International Kompas, 2016).

The situation between Uyghurs and Chinese government was getting really intense right after the tragedy of 11th September that happened in 2001. Muslims Reputation was deteriorated in the eyes of the international community. China immediately took this momentum to label the Uyghur nationalist movement as a part of terrorism. Chinese government statement regarding the "East Turkestan Terrorist" was officially declared in 2002. This action then also triggered into Urumqi riots in 2009. The rebellion did by Uyghurs towards the Chinese government was making the situation really worse (Hidayat, 2013).

In 2017, 228,000 people were arrested in Xinjiang on criminal charges according to the China Human Rights Defenders (CHRD). China also being reported to detain over a million Uyghurs into concentration camps. In the detention, they are locked up in small overcrowded rooms, provided with insufficient amounts of food and water. When the media raised about this news, China vehemently denied it. However, a year later, China admitted about this existence of concentration camp in UN meeting 2018. The Chinese Government itself are claiming that the detention is actually a 're-education camp' that was made since 2014 as an attempt to fight extremism and terrorism ideology

which have been embraced by the Uyghurs (Business Insider, n.d.).

C. Turkey's Priority to China Rather than The Uyghurs

The problem of Uyghur sure has impacts on the bilateral relations between Turkey and China. Their relations were starting to have turbulence and many international media claims about the inconsistency of Erdogan in dealing with this issue. Muslim countries started questioning on Turkish Islamic political direction and its ambition in resolving Muslim world's conflict. On the other hand, China wants Turkey to take a prudent step as a response towards this sensitive object, namely the case of Uyghur itself.

Long before the international raised up the dynamic of Turkey and China relations, when the 2009 Urumqi incident happened in Xinjiang, Erdogan also expressed his support for an anti-Chinese demonstration in front of the Chinese Embassy in Ankara. This action was solely conducted as a form of protest towards the treatment did by the Chinese government to the Uyghurs. Subconsciously, Erdogan declared to bring this issue to the UN Security Council if China did not stop the persecution. Through a message sent to Chinese Prime Minister, Wen Jiabao, Erdogan stated his sharp criticism of measures taken by the Chinese government in resolving the problems in Xinjiang. This has clearly made the relations between both countries heated up at that time (Uyghur Crisis, 2014).

However, the heated situation between China and Turkey did not last long. The diplomatic relation between these two countries has returned to normal in September

and October 2010. Turkey needs China to develop sustainable economic cooperation rather than focus on political issues. On the other hand, many other criticisms were coming from the Turkish Islamist NGO, IHH (Humanitarian Relief Foundation). IHH invited all of the Turkish Muslims to unite as demonstrators in order to show their protests against Chinese Government regarding Uyghur's case. Other protests were also carried out by AKP's opposition party, Turkey's Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) which specifically criticized the Turkish government's slow response towards this critical issue (Uyghur Crisis, 2014).

In July 2015, the relations between Turkey and China deteriorated again. The anger was flared again in China right after one of the Turkish demonstrations burnt some Chinese flags in front of China Embassy in Istanbul. The situation was getting really worse when Grey Wolves, a wing of MHP attacked some tourists whom they believed were Chinese but were actually Koreans (Bal, 2004). The other demonstrators also attacked the Thailand embassy after knowing that the authorities in Bangkok were supporting the Chinese government in returning 100 Uyghur refugees to their home country (Cafiero, 2015).

Since 2017, the Uyghur refugee crisis has been involving some of the Southeast Asia countries such as Malaysia and Thailand. Hundreds of Uyghurs tried to escape from Xinjiang by secretly travelling over South East Asia to Turkey. The majority of Uyghur refugees arrived in Turkey and settled temporarily. There is real pressure from Turkish society towards the government due to the constant flow of refugees. Meanwhile, some of the Uyghurs who have caught crossing border in Malaysia would be directly handed over to Thailand and China.

However, Chinese government claimed that the Uyghurs seeking shelter from Turkey should be considered as illegal immigrants rather than refugees (China seeks return of Uighur Muslims detained in Malaysia after escaping from Thai jail: Sources, 2018).

China is also declaring their concern towards Turkey and Uyghur communities who frequently use the term “East Turkistan” instead of Xinjiang. In this case, China considered that action as one of the separatist movements’ tendencies. A possibility of territorial fragmentation in the term of separatism is primarily perceived by the Beijing regime. Beijing itself sees the reason of Uyghurs’ action to escape from Xinjiang is because of their jealousy with the majority of other ethnics, the cultural matter, and religious restriction (Contemporary Turkish-Chinese relations and Uyghur factor , 2018).

However, Turkey risks endangering economic relations with China if it continues to condemn Chinese government treatment towards the Uyghur Muslims. Even when the deadlock in US-Turkish relations eased, Erdogan keeps pursuing China as long-term protection from the West. It can be concluded that Turkey needs China as its future economic partner. In some extent, Turkey has also become one of the countries that are optimistic in seeking the benefits on the China Belt and Road Initiative and build a new bridge connecting Turkey on the Bosphorus to the South China Sea.

The friction between both Turkey and China over Uyghur factor seems to linger further. There are two prominent issues restraining their bilateral relationship, which are the Uyghur refugee crisis and the imbalance of trade. However, there are so many criticisms coming from

the Muslim countries regarding Turkey's inconsistency in its ambition to resolve the conflicts when it comes to Muslim. They also condemned the Erdogan's action in carrying out many various international agendas on the party's platform related to Uyghur issue, yet there was no meaningful action conducted. Erdogan is considered remains silent about this issue (Chislett, 2011).

Turkey tends to refuse the claims by the international community regarding the domestic conditions of Xinjiang, namely the case in the Uyghur itself (Chislett, 2011). In July 2019, Turkey remains committed to having a good relationship with China. This is proven by the statement stated by PM Erdogan to the media after meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, "Turkey keeps engaging on One China Policy and stressing that the people, who live in Xinjiang, including Uyghurs are 'living happily'. It is tough for them (Uyghurs) to admit that the main reason behind their prosperity is because of the Chinese Government. Turkey would not let any of this issue that happened in Xinjiang spoils the bilateral relationships with China." (Westcott, 2019).