

# **THE DYNAMIC OF TURKEY – CHINA RELATIONS IN UYGHUR ISSUE**

## **(IN THE ERA OF ERDOGAN 2009-2019)**

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### **Abstract**

*Turkey's silence towards the Uyghur issue remain to be questioned by international communities and media. The Uyghur tragedy has become an embarrassment for Turkey to show his ambitions in resolving conflicts especially in the Muslim world. This thesis is aimed to explain the factors behind Turkey's inconsistency in dealing with Uyghur Issue during Recep Tayyip Erdoğan era in 2009-2019. In understanding the change of state behaviour, the author was using the Foreign Policy Decision-Making theory by William D. Coplin. By using this theoretical framework, this research proved that there are three prominent reasons behind Turkey's preference in engaging partnership with China rather than supporting the Uyghurs, which are: The pragmatic considerations took by AKP towards China, Turkey's economic crisis and the need of military cooperation with China, China is the world's new economic powerhouse who provides more beneficial offers to Turkey. Erdogan clearly stated that Turkey will not let any of the Uyghur issue to spoil the bilateral relations with China. It is really prominent for Turkey to strengthen the cooperation with China in many aspects.*

**Keyword(s) : Uyghur Issue, Turkey and China Relations, Foreign Policy**

## **A. BACKGROUND**

Turkey has become one of the countries with a strong defense system in the world that has also managed to have good relations with Muslim countries. The birth of the new millennium in 2003 has led Turkey to choose an Islamic party to form their government. This has also resulted on the good values and practices of their democratic system. The Turkish government has had significant impacts on the lives of their people. In its framework and development, Turkey also emerged as a model for many countries in the Arab world (Baharcicek, 2011).

Even though the idea of Islamic democracy is a very controversial concept, especially in the early of 2000s, Turkey has proven it wrong by becoming one of the successful models for an Islamic

religion of democracy. In a substantive level, the Islamic movements in Tunisia and Egypt have referred to Turkey as a model for their future democracy. Turkey is respected for being a brave country and having policies to maintain its main role as a mediator in resolving conflicts in the Muslim world (Gursel, 2011).

There is no easy way for Turkey to separate Islam from their governance. Islamic signs have established the critical identity redefining what it means to be a truly Turk. Indeed, by becoming a Turkish nation today means being progressively defined by Islamic practices and identity. This means that Turkey has slowly changed their political direction from

secularism to Islamic principles (Yavuz & Öztürk, 2018).

Besides its involvement on the resolutions and conflict, Turkey also embraces the bilateral relations that are considered beneficial for their national interests. One of the countries that Turkey has been actively engaging with is China. The relations between Turkey and China was actually began since the entry of China into the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in 1971, even though there was no significant activity (Selcuk, 2013). In 1980s, their diplomatic relations started to grow, it was proven by the fact that the number of visits between them has been increased in the early of 2000s. Turkey started to see their partnership as a good opportunity to

engage a bigger scale of economic cooperation (Selcuk, 2013).

Furthermore, their relations were remarkably elevating 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, China's reunification, and China's good intentions in safeguarding national sovereignty and territorial integrity (Tarihi Y. K., 2017). In the following year, the cooperation between Turkey and China in the aspect of politics, economic, and military kept elevating. In November 2004, Huang Ju revisited President Ahmed Necdet Sezer to discuss more about the

partnership that could happen between them especially in the trade and security matter (China Embassy, 2004).

The second visit occurred when Hua Jianmin, the Chinese State Adviser, visited on April 21<sup>st</sup> 2006 to Turkey and met Mehmet Ali Sahin, the Turkish Minister of State and Deputy Prime Minister. During the visit, the two representatives have vowed to further strengthen cooperative relations in various fields between the two countries. Hua stated that the relations between Turkey and China had been developed since they established the diplomatic relations for more than 30 years ago. Both parties have witnessed the politics of mutual trust and equal economic interests (Xinhua News Agency, 2006).

However, the relations between them seems to deteriorate in 2009, right after the big riot between Uyghurs and Chinese government, known as Urumqi accident, happened in Xinjiang, China. The pressure made by the Chinese government against Uyghurs ethnic and the number of victims who fell in riots have triggered into big demonstrations did by Turkish society. The media in Turkey also put their extra attention to highlight the tragedy that has been happening in Xinjiang (China - Turkey and Xinjiang , 2015).

Turkey actually has a long history of sympathy for the Uyghurs, who share linguistic and cultural similarities with the other Turkic ethnic groups who are widely spread in West and Central Asian regions.

Turkish society is totally against the prosecution did by Chinese government towards the Uyghurs. The media reported the fully incident and gave special articles about the historical relationship between Turkish Uyghur ethnicity and Turkish nationalism (Turkey Stands Up for Uighur Brethren in Wake of China's Brutality, 2009).

Meanwhile, as a response towards the discriminations that happened to Uyghurs, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkish Prime Minister, also expressed his support for an anti-Chinese demonstration in front of the Chinese Embassy in Ankara. 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 strong 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 Turkey and China did not last long. The diplomatic relations between these two countries has returned to normal on September and October 2010. Turkey needed China to develop a 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) (Cafiero, 2015).

On July 2015, the relations

between Turkey and China became worse 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 Turkey's right-wing nationalist party (MHP), attacked some tourists whom they believed were Chinese, but were actually Koreans. To be known, the MHP party is an ultranationalist right-wing Turkish political party that embraces Turkish nationalism in its interaction with the international world (Bal, 2004).

The majority of Uyghur refugees arrived in Turkey and settle temporarily in the following year of 2017. There is a real pressure from Turkish society towards the

government due to the frequent flow of refugees. Meanwhile, some of the Uyghurs who have caught crossing border in Malaysia would be directly handed over to Thailand. However, China claimed that the Uyghurs seeking shelter from Turkey should be considered as illegal immigrants rather than the refugees (China seeks return of Uighur Muslims detained in Malaysia after escaping from Thai jail: Sources, 2018).

The friction between both Turkey and China over Uyghur factor seems to linger further. The Islamic countries keep criticizing the inconsistency of Turkish ambition in resolving conflict especially when it comes to Muslims, that supposed to be their concern in Islamic democracy values. In the meantime, the political parties condemned the

Erdogan's action in carrying out many various international agendas on the party's platform related to Uyghur issue, but there was no meaningful action conducted. 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).

On July 2019, Turkey remains committed to have 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 very hard for them 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).

## **A. ANALYSIS**

In the analysis of foreign policy decision making, the domestic politics of a country have been frequently neglected. Many experts only focused on the international system as the main explanation, while actually the internal factor also become dominant to actively influence the decision maker of a country. By referring to the fundamental basis of realism and liberalism, Turkish government under the Erdogan's leadership is apparently facing the growing of

domestic pressure in formulating its foreign policy.

### **THE PRAGMATIC CONSIDERATIONS OF AKP TOWARDS CHINA RATHER THAN UYGHURS**

In the domestic politics context, Partisan influencers is actually the right type to describe AKP as one of the main influencers of the decision maker in arranging the foreign policy. To be known, partisan influencers in here means those individuals that committed to be the members in a political party. As a matter of fact, partisan influencers are not only focusing on the domestic policy matters, but also on Turkish foreign policy. That is why AKP as a ruling party in Turkey keeps actively influencing Erdogan to conduct Turkish multidimensional

foreign policy (Yılmaz & Özdemir, 2017).

Since Turkey has been developing its country under the governance of Erdogan in the last decade. The ruling party, AKP puts forth ambitious visions, objectives and plans, comprising the centennial political vision of 2023, sexcentenary viewpoint of 2053, and millenarian objective of 2071. All of these projects are summarized as a “Turkey dream”. Turkey Dream is the proposing agenda from the Turkish politicians in increasing their popularity and trust among their people. Specifically, this ambition also came as a form of Turks’ self-confidence right after a decade of development (ZAN, “Turkey Dream” and the China-Turkish



Cooperation under “One Belt and One Road” Initiative, 2018).

In the matter of economic growth, the AKP’s centennial political vision of 2023 comprises the Turkish national GDP volume to be at the Top 10 in the world. In achieving this goal, AKP keeps emphasizing to not only focusing on the European Union (EU), but also exploring another opportunities from Middle East and Central Asia relations, including China. Meanwhile, the “2071 Objective” was described by Erdogan as a general terms in which Turkey would be able to return to the “Osman Glory”. Unlike the 2023 vision, Erdogan did not specifically explain about this objective. On the sexcentenary outlook of 2053, AKP and Erdogan put their concern on the

current political condition in Turkey. There is a wider scope Turkey could get from its multidimensional foreign policy. However, AKP pursues a rapid development of Turkey by arranging this “Turkey Dream” in a positive direction (ZAN, “Turkey Dream” and the China-Turkish Cooperation under “One Belt and One Road” Initiative, 2018).

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## **TURKEY'S ECONOMIC CRISIS AND THE NEED OF MILITARY COOPERATION WITH CHINA**

Meanwhile in the economic aspect, the similar problem of Lira exchange rates also struck Turkey in 2001. At that time, Turkey asked the IMF (International Monetary Fund) for some financial assistance. Turkey finally borrowed some money and conducted a very strict austerity condition to get the fund. Diversifying Turkey's financing has apparently become an urgent task for Erdogan, but it seems that Erdogan will not ask for IMF assistance this time. In 2018, Erdogan stated during his speech that Turkey is currently exploring the new possibilities with China, Russia, and Iran. In fact, Erdogan said, Turkish government would issue a "Panda Bond" debt on China's local financial markets. To be known, "Panda Bonds" is a type of bond in yuan for non-Chinese

issuers. This also means that China has become Turkey's comfort in fixing the economic problem (Hardoko, 2018).

This cooperation could be very beneficial for China. This statement also supported by the statement by Emre Alkin, Turkish economic expert. Alkin stated, "The stability of the Turkish lira will be resulted from the economic partnership with some of important countries including China. It is very impossible for our central bank (Turkey) to fix this economic problem alone, we need resources,". He also added, "It does not matter if these resources are coming from China, the most important thing is on how we use these resources wisely. It is very obvious that Turkey needs economic advices, ideas, and

suggestions from superpower country like China," (Hardoko, 2018).

In a substantive level, Turkey also has a similar and comparable economic structure as China. These both countries rely on the labor intensive industries, export-driven enhancement, and they have been competing in the aspect of fabrics export since a long time ago. Indeed, both Turkey and China are having the same interests to become influential in the Middle East region. This is actually why Turkish government sees China as a perfect partner to conduct their foreign policy with (ZAN, "Turkey Dream" and the China-Turkish Cooperation under "One Belt and One Road" Initiative, 2018).

As a matter of fact, Turkey is now has been expanding their military cooperation with China after Russia. Since a big agreement was signed in 2009, the military cooperation between Turkey and China has been increasing significantly. Both these countries then held their first air forces exercise a few weeks later. Meanwhile, the land forces were working on the counterterrorism mission. These major development were quite telling about the future prospect of their mutual relations (Söylemez, Turkey and China: An Account of a Bilateral Relations Evolution, 2017).

It should be noted that there were several naval visits between Turkey and China. The Turkish frigate ships visited Shanghai harbor

and Hongkong in 2011 to celebrate the diplomatic relations between those two countries. In 2015, there are at least 55 Chinese frigate ships visited Istanbul as a form of friendly mission. This has resulted on the Turkish military that is currently dominated by pro-Eurasian generals. Since Erdogan is also having a strong tendency on the side of pro-Eurasia, the military cooperation between Turkey and China has a good potential of getting closer in the upcoming years (Söylemez, Turkey and China: An Account of a Bilateral Relations Evolution, 2017).

### **CHINA AS ONE OF THE NEW WORLD'S ECONOMIC POWERHOUSE**

Under the leadership of Erdogan, Turkey also sees China as one of the most important foreign policy tool. In today's globalized world of interdependence, China has become the world's new economic powerhouse and politics leading actor. Its partnership with China is actually also a part of their multi-dimensional foreign policy. Turkey will also gain a new market as the result of its relation with China (Tarihi Y. K., 2017).

Many scholars and columnists in Turkey began to examine that Turkey should strengthen the bilateral relations with Russia and China. They believe that Turkey needs new allies in order to expand its power in today's world of interdependence. Additionally, even though Turkey has been trying to be

a part of European Union (EU) since 1963, it has not resulted on any significant progress. In the last period of time, the relations between Turkey and EU have also deteriorated. This is actually why Turkey is looking for another backup plans to conduct their foreign policy. Eventually, China has been considered as one of new alternatives for the Turkish Government under the Erdogan's leadership (Tarihi Y. K., 2017).

Furthermore, some of Turkish scholars have frankly expressed that EU is no longer becoming Turkey's priority. The relations in the interdependence of EU, have already started to lose their fundamental meaning for Turkey's interests. Turkey is now even considering EU more like as a tool,

not their long-term goal. This also means that EU's existence is not really essential for Turkey's foreign policy. For that matter, Turkish government has more concern about China's big projects (Tarihi Y. K., 2017).

China is also one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). As a matter of fact, Building a strong relations with China will eventually give Turkey the capacity to expand its scope of power towards the international context. The "One Belt One Road" (OBOR) that was officially announced by China in 2013 have given Turkey a bright perspective on its future. This project would be the main gate to connect Turkey with Europe, Africa, and Asia. Chinese government also

officially stated that Turkey is apparently has a special place in this big project (Tarihi Y. K., 2017).

The building of OBOR is aimed to fulfil the economic development and strategic demands of both Turkey and China. This Silk Road initiative embodies a new idea of opportunities for the China's strategic operation towards Eurasia, Europe, and Middle East. The increasing of China's national power and its OBOR initiative will bring many good future prospects for Turkey to strengthen its position as a world-leading country, as well as a beneficial chance for Turkey to have a strong alliance and play a greater role in the international relations (Zou, 2003).

During the G20 summit that was held in 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasized that China would “obey the integration into the global economic, carry out the OBOR, and create a community that shares common interests” (Xinhua, 2015). Through his speech, Xi also commits to reinforce the strategical communication and development strategies; both China and Turkey should actively use the platforms such as the Silk Road Fund, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and another innovative cooperation style in order to achieve common development and welfare (ZAN, “Turkey Dream” and the China-Turkish Cooperation under “One Belt and One Road” Initiative, 2018).

Turkey's excitement towards OBOR initiative was proven by the Erdogan's statement in "Belt and Road Forum" in 2017. Erdogan expressed, "I do believe that OBOR will eventually become a win-win project to distribute peace and stability in the next future. This cooperation is a beneficial project for everyone. This initiative, especially as a part of emerging effort to fight terrorism in the world, Turkey is always ready to give any kind of support for this." (Tarihi Y. K., 2017).

Another beneficial offers that provided by China to Turkey are the international energy development and its project contracting. Both Turkey and China are the evolving strength that have developed close economic partnerships with the

Asian and African countries, as well as the foremost powers in the global level. Furthermore, Turkey has been committed to make their country as the biggest energy source in Eurasia, which brings many potentials to widen the energy development cooperation to the Caspian region and Middle East countries. In fact, Both Turkey and China have high expectations on getting through the energy channel of Eurasia (Zou, 2003).

Besides taking the advantages of complementarity and elevating the mutually beneficial partnership in the term of communication and transportation, both Turkey and China will also actively expand their cooperation in the bigger aspects such as renewable energy, finance, mining, high



technology, and another practical cooperation. Many experts argue that Turkey's cooperation with China will eventually become really positive for Turkey's economic development and long term welfare (Zou, 2003).

As a sovereign country as well as a rational actor, Turkey tends to refuse the claims by the international community and media regarding the domestic conditions of Xinjiang, namely the case in the Uyghur itself. Of course, Turkey does not want the Uyghur issue becomes an obstacle to have a good partnership with Turkey in the term of social and economic. Turkey aware that China's presence and its strategic location remain to be really

essential in order to achieve one of Turkey's national interests.

All of these considerations have eventually influenced the decision maker, Erdogan, to prioritize its Turkish partnership with China rather than the Uyghurs. Erdogan clearly stated that Turkey will not let any of this Uyghur issue to spoil the relations with China. It is really prominent for Turkey to strengthen the cooperation with China in many aspects such as bilateral trade, OBOR initiative, military, and SCO framework. Therefore, despite the Uyghur issue that happens in Xinjiang, Erdogan stressed that Turkey remains committed a great position in its relation with China and is willing to strengthen the cooperation in various field.

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