

The Place of Uyghur and Kurdish Issues in Sino-Turkish Relations

written by Vusal Guliyev

In late December, 2022, Türkiye's Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, raised the Uyghur issue at an end-of-the-year press briefing by questioning whether Xi Jinping's government had failed to keep a promise made five years ago. The Uyghur issue concerns events that began in 2017, in which the accusations against the Chinese government's crackdown on thousands of Uyghurs in detention camps under the guise of an anti-terrorist operation has started. The promise of which Çavuşoğlu spoke was an unfettered visit by a Turkish to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). However, that promise has not been kept because of the myriad of requirements placed on the visit by China, such as predetermining the places to be visited. This interference has prevented Turkish officials from travelling to the region for five years. Thus, Çavuşoğlu accused China of a lack of cooperation regarding the mass detention and reeducation of Uyghurs, and [argued](#) that the issue has had a negative impact on relations between the two countries. Although the number of bilateral cooperation agreements between the two countries increases every year, it seems that the Uyghur issue, which has repeatedly caused political tension between the two states, remains a sensitive and pressing topic for the parties.

In this article, we will try to analyze the factors contributing to the rapprochement between Türkiye and China, as well as clarify the accusations that China and Türkiye have leveled at each other. The article also systematically analyzes the mutual economic relations and commercial interests of the two Asian countries as well as

intergovernmental treaties signed by Beijing and Ankara, China's investments in Türkiye, and joint technical work carried out in international projects over the past decade. In addition, we will analyze the nuances affecting further diplomatic relations, the fruitless steps taken towards solving problematic issues negatively affecting relations, the factors accelerating Türkiye's rapprochement with the China, distancing itself from the West, Ankara's position on the Uyghur issue in the rapprochement process, official Beijing's use of the Kurdish card in response to accusations regarding its treatment of Uyghurs, the emergence of modern Sino-Kurdish constructive cooperation and Beijing's strategic goals and economic interests in Iraqi Kurdistan. Although the article is primarily intended to analyze events over the past 20 years, it briefly looks at the role that Türkiye has played in Sino-Uyghur relations from the 1950s and 2000s, as well as the history of initial Kurdish-Chinese political rapprochement.

Ankara and Beijing rapprochement against the background of geo-economic and strategic interests

Although there have been serious political crises in Sino-Turkish relations since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1971, the two sides have tried to maintain constructive relations for the sake of their geo-economic interests. Sino-Turkish relations have improved significantly after the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002. Moreover, due to Türkiye's economic contraction, dwindling currency reserves, decreasing foreign direct investment inflows, the rapid depreciation of the lira, a sharp drop in gross domestic product, rising mass unemployment and rampant inflation in recent years, the country's ruling AKP party has had to look for trade partners and reliable partners outside Western nations. On the other hand, the critical situation in Turkish-American diplomatic relations under Trump and sanctions [imposed](#) on Türkiye by the US, as well as the [economic consequences](#) caused by the coronavirus pandemic, have accelerated the development of Ankara-Beijing

relations. Additionally, a [marked cooling in relations between Ankara](#) and its Western allies after the 2016 coup attempt in Türkiye can also be described as one of the important factors contributing to the rapprochement between Türkiye and China. Even the AKP administration, which has distanced itself from NATO and the EU, one time [made serious efforts](#) to work closely with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), one of the largest regional security blocs in Eurasia, where Türkiye has held a dialogue partnership status since 2012.

By continuing to strengthen relations with official Beijing in many areas through China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), AKP authorities seek to increase the investment interest of China, which has become one of the world's largest investors and lenders over the past decade. Turkish president Erdoğan, who some time ago [believed](#) that he could cope with social and economic upheaval through China's model of economic development, [encouraged](#) China to invest in the Turkish economy at a summit with his Chinese President Xi Jinping. Of course, Türkiye is of serious importance to Beijing because of its geostrategic location, its proximity to the European Union, which is one of China's main consumer markets, and its dynamic and cheap labor force. It is no coincidence that multinational technology corporations, including *Huawei*, *Xiaomi*, *TCL*, *Oppo*, *Tecno*, among others, have built production facilities in Türkiye, where more than 1.000 Chinese companies [operate](#). Nevertheless, Türkiye's location on the *Central and West Asia Transport Corridor*, which is planned to be developed as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, is one of the main characteristics that increase the importance of Türkiye for Beijing as a transit country. Therefore, strategic cooperation accords have been signed with Türkiye within the framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative. In addition, according to the memorandum of mutual cooperation between the parties signed in 2016 on the development of the *Trans-Caspian International Transport Route*, the importance of which [increases](#) day by day due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine,

regular cargo shipments from Türkiye to China and back via Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan have been carried out since December 2020.

The development of the transport and logistics potential of Türkiye, one of the important BRI members, in particular, the construction and financing of a rail network that can handle the large volumes of cargo transported across continents, has been repeatedly proposed by China, yet the governments have been unable to come to a concrete agreement on it. Despite this, the Istanbul-Ankara high-speed intercity rail line, commissioned in 2014, was co-built by Chinese and Turkish companies. In addition, China offered \$750 million in a loan for the construction of the said high-speed rail line. Thus, Türkiye became the first country in which China, which has the world's largest high-speed rail network, has built a high-speed rail line outside the country. In general, Chinese companies have been closely involved in the development of high-tech public transportation systems in Türkiye's major cities in recent years. The fully automated and driverless vehicles that can move at a speed of 120 km per hour along the Kağıthane-Istanbul Airport metro line, which was inaugurated by Erdoğan in Istanbul on 22 January 2023, were developed by CRRC Zhuzhou Locomotive Company, a Chinese electric locomotive manufacturer.

The lack of agreement between Türkiye and European rail construction companies to build and improve high-capacity rail infrastructure across the country and the impossibility of implementing such a huge project through domestic resources increase the probability that Ankara, which aims to become a major transit player in intercontinental freight transport, will also continue to cooperate with Beijing in this area in the near future. In addition, amid attempts to strengthen its economic stronghold in the Mediterranean basin, China in 2015 acquired a 65 percent stake in Türkiye's third largest container terminal, Kumport, at an initial purchase price of \$950 million.

In parallel with the above trends, significant progress [has been achieved](#) in attracting Chinese tourists to Türkiye, which, before the pandemic, held the largest share in the global tourism industry. Not coincidentally, as a result of the joint efforts of Türkiye's Ministry of Tourism and its embassy in Beijing to attract more Chinese tourists to Türkiye, it [was decided](#) that 2018 will be the *Year of Türkiye Tourism in China*. In addition, Türkiye [was](#) one of the countries that pioneered the testing and mass use of *CoronaVac*, China's Covid-19 vaccine, the use of which has [caused](#) widespread debate. Without going into detail, to the list of important intergovernmental agreements signed with China under AKP rule, we can add the Sino-Turkish Strategic Partnership [Treaty](#) (2010), the [accord](#) providing for the extradition of criminals (2017) and two bilateral currency swap agreements ([2012](#) and [2019](#)).

Clearly, the transformation of the East Asian region into one of the world's leading financial centers over the past decade as well as China's emergence as a key player in the world economy has prompted Türkiye to adopt a more pragmatic and balanced policy towards the Far East. China's massive investments in partner states through the Belt and Road Initiative in parallel with its economic expansion has further intensified Ankara's East-oriented policy. In this sense, the *Asia Anew Initiative*, [announced](#) in 2019, which envisions the comprehensive development of constructive relations with East Asian and Southeast Asian countries, especially China, is of particular importance. A year after the announcement of the state program, a new structure called the *Coordination of Asia Again Initiatives* [was established](#) under the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, responsible for the regulation of relations with Asian countries.

The impact of the Uyghur issue on interstate relations

The Uyghur or East Turkestan issue is one of the main topics affecting the dynamics of Sino-Turkish diplomatic relations.

Beijing's violent suppression of the bloody [ethnic rioting](#) that occurred in 2009 in Urumqi, the capital of the vast, restive northwestern Xinjiang province, one of the five Uyghur-dominated regions in China, provoked a strong reaction from Ankara. Turkey's then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan condemned the 2009 incidents and even [accused](#) China of genocide against the Uyghurs, which led to a serious rupture in diplomatic relations. Another incident that has had an extremely negative impact on diplomatic relations between Ankara and Beijing occurred in February 2019. The dissemination of news about the torture and murder of the famous Uyghur folk musician Abdurehim Heyit caused a serious resonance in the Turkish public. The Chinese side tried to prove the groundlessness of Ankara's accusations by sharing [a video message](#) in which Heyit states, "I am in good health and have never been abused," after a Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesperson put out a sharp [statement](#) about his death. The deportation of 109 Uyghurs who were granted asylum in Thailand in 2015 under pressure from Beijing was also one of the events directly [condemned](#) by the Turkish Foreign Ministry; however, this did not cause a major foreign relations crisis. Another similar incident occurred in 2015, when several government departments and agencies in China's far western region of Xinjiang [banned](#) students, teachers, and civil servants of Uyghur origin from fasting during the month of Ramadan. Turkish nationalists reacted angrily to the news, calling for a boycott of Chinese goods in Türkiye. At the same time, all of these cases have influenced the spread of Sinophobia in Türkiye, as [we can see](#) from various attacks organized by ultra-nationalists against Chinese tourists (there have also been cases of attacks against representatives of other peoples from East and Southeast Asia, mistaking them for Chinese).

Türkiye has had a foreign policy relationship with the Uyghurs of Xinjiang since the 1950s. Ankara's accession to the anti-communist bloc in the 1950s created favorable geopolitical conditions for Türkiye's ruling parties to maintain close ties

with Uyghur nationalist leaders. Incidentally, a small portion of the Uyghurs who settled in Türkiye consisted of young students who came to the country to study at the invitation of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881 – 1938) in 1932. During the Cold War years (1947-1991), characterized as the heyday of the Uyghur diaspora, Türkiye was considered the main stronghold of Uyghurs abroad. Isa Yusuf Alptekin (1901-1995), one of the main political figures in emigration, played an exceptional role in settling his compatriots in Türkiye. With the assistance of the UNHCR, Uyghur refugees were flown to Türkiye in UN planes and received both citizenship and financial support and privileges. Alptekin, known for his closeness to Turkish statesmen Turgut Özal (1927 – 1993) and Süleyman Demirel (1924-2015), ultimately failed to draw Western attention to the issue of Uyghur independence during the Cold War. Although the position of the Uyghurs in Türkiye was strong, the concentration of Western attention during this period on the struggle against its main rival, the Soviet Union, had moved China-related issues to the background. Expressing particular sympathy for the Uyghurs, Turgut Özal not only supported the activities of Alptekin, but also [desired](#) to see East Turkestan a free country, like the Turkic republics of Central Asia and Azerbaijan who gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

Although the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which had long isolated itself from the world, did not pay attention to the Uyghurs' active lobbying activities away from its borders and to Türkiye's systematic support in this direction, since the early 1990s, it has criticized Turkish heads of state and government in different ways (media, political tribune, etc.). Although China and even some representatives of the Turkish government opposed the initiative, the then-Mayor of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Erdoğan in April 1995 the Isa Yusuf Alptekin Park in Sultan Ahmed Square, the historic center of Istanbul. Attending the inauguration of the park, Erdoğan touched on topics such as the sinicization of East Turkestan,

pointing to emigrant leader Alptekin's contributions to Eastern Turkestan. However, eight years after the opening of the park, Erdoğan, now AKP Chairman, visited Beijing as a deputy of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, and there showed support for the principle of territorial integrity of *United China*. He hailed CCP efforts towards combating separatism. We can see Erdoğan's moves here, in fact, as part of the weakening of the Turkish-American alliance since the end of the Cold War. As China became one of the key drivers of the world economy, official Ankara took more pragmatic steps in China policy.

Undoubtedly, the ethnic composition of Uyghur Turks, their religious beliefs, as well as countries the region borders, its geographic location, natural resources, etc. have prompted China to treat XUAR differently than other non-Han territories in China. Plus, the location of the Xinjiang province on the trade corridors going westward of the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as the China-Pakistan Trade Corridor, running through the region, and which is one of the main trade arteries of this initiative, providing China's access to the Indian Ocean via Pakistan could further add weight to the region. The fact that this vast region (about 1.7 million km²), which forms China's remote northwestern border, borders with the Turkic states of Central Asia as well as with Afghanistan, where religious extremism is raging, is one of the main factors of concern for official Beijing. In this context, the Tiananmen Square events of 1989 and the independence of the former Soviet Central Asian republics in 1991 pushed the Chinese government to tighten its grip over its Uyghur population. Of course, CCP authorities, fearing that an autonomy or independence movement might gain strength after the unexpected collapse of the USSR, decided to suppress ethnic separatist tendencies in the cradle. On the other hand, as a result of systematic pressure, there has been a significant increase in the number of Uyghurs fleeing the region in the last 70 years. This, in turn, paved the way for

the effective organization of Uyghurs in the international arena and the formation of a strong diaspora network.

The Chinese central government has for many years taken tough measures against the risk that the long-standing armed conflict within Afghanistan, as well as the sectarian extremist ideas occasionally spread by non-traditional religious currents and radical forces in Central Asia that could spill over its borders. The fact that armed groups such as [The East Turkestan Islamic Movement \(ETIM\)](#) (also known as the Islamic Party of Turkistan) and [The East Turkistan Liberation Organization \(ETLO\)](#), which threaten the territorial integrity of China, such as XUAR (which China and some states consider terrorist organizations), maintain close links with a number of separatist and jihadist forces, including Al Qaida and the Taliban, leads to increased anti-terrorist measures.

ETIM, which has repeatedly committed bloody terrorist acts in various Chinese cities and has strong ideological pillars in Pakistan and Afghanistan, is one of the [jihadist groups](#) that had emerged as a key player in the Syrian civil war in 2013. Official Beijing, which has taken up the Uyghur issue as part of its national security doctrine, has demonstrated to the world at intervals a joint struggle with its military-strategic partners against what it labels the three devils—terrorism, radicalism and separatism. Thus, Beijing manages to control and monitor the activities of Central Asian Islamist extremist groups, which could potentially support separatist Uyghur movements.

The [leak](#) that documented Xi Jinping's detention of Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic groups (local Kazakh Muslims) at reeducation camps has put the Uyghur issue back on the agenda of the world and Turkey since 2017.^[1] Of course, for Beijing, mass arrests, [regarded](#) by the world community as a violation of human rights, are part of anti-terrorist measures. We can also [see](#) this in the response from China's UK ambassador Liu Xiaoming three years ago to a question addressed to him about

the inhumane situation. Noting that the camps were established exclusively for training purposes and that the [official documents](#) seen by *BBC Panorama* revealing the deplorable situation there were fake, the Chinese ambassador stressed that the local population supports the state policy pursued by the government in Xinjiang and that Beijing carries out this *preventative work* to curb terrorism and organized crime. Appearing on a TV show, the ambassador [seemed to have difficulty](#) responding to a videotape which showed footage of shackled prisoners. In addition, the NPR interview of Qin Gang, then China's ambassador to the United States, in January 2022 sparked discussion, for he called the charges against China disinformation, but [nonetheless asserted](#) that some Uyghurs were terrorists and "the destination for them is prisons."

In general, Chinese government officials [describe](#) all leaked documents detailing Uyghur detention camps disseminated by anti-China forces as a smear campaign and interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. Strongly refuting Western accusations that innocent people have been arrested, tortured and physically abused on the grounds of ethnic cleansing, Beijing also [impedes](#) creating conditions for independent rights groups to conduct transparent investigations in the region. In particular, Türkiye's top diplomat in his speech on 29 December 2022, also complained that "our ambassador hasn't been there (Xinjiang) for 5 years." According to Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu, after Beijing said they want him to follow a "program that they provide," Turkish officials [had](#) to reject the proposal, given the possibility that it could cast a shadow over the transparency of the visit.

Watching Turkish media, we observe that there are several fundamental approaches to the Uyghur detention camps. According to the Turkish opposition, Erdoğan has done little about the Uyghur issue in order not to spoil economic relations with China during amid dramatic financial shocks.

The fact that the AKP administration barred Rebiya Kadeer, leader of the World Uyghur Congress, which is considered a terrorist organization by China, and president of the American Uyghur Association from traveling to Türkiye (in 2006 and 2007) raised the ire of the opposition. Rebiya Kadeer in her biography published in 2009 [wrote](#) that she was prevented from meeting with the Uyghur community in Türkiye because official Ankara is concerned that China might interfere in the Kurdish issue. The attainment of a majority in parliament by the Republic Alliance (AKP-MHP coalition), which is committed to religious and ethnic practices, suggests there will be greater sensitivity to the issue at hand, yet government officials prefer to proceed cautiously.

On the other hand, the anti-imperialist left-wing nationalist group led by the Chairman of Türkiye's Patriotic Party Doğu Perinçek believes that the Uyghur issue is a geopolitical project calculated to be artificially exaggerated by the US in order to hit Turkey and China in this way; he has [called on](#) Ankara to act with restraint and not to indulge in speculations. Moreover, the recent sympathy for Eurasianist ideology (Secular leftist nationalists who view themselves anti-Western and advocate a paradigmatic shift toward Russia and China) among government officials [appears](#) to be another decisive factor behind the central government's indecisive stance toward China's Uyghur policy. More interestingly, although the AKP has been accused of neglecting a well-known issue, Turkish experts [do not suggest](#) that any competing political party or former government officials in the country would be more enthusiastic about the Uyghur issue than the current administration. This situation is due to the superficial approach to the problem, which representatives of these parties have done when they were in power in previous years.

Beijing wants a guarantee, at least verbally, from each Turkish statesman visiting China that Ankara will respect China's struggle against any forces that might harm the

country's territorial integrity and national security. Although Beijing has occasionally demanded this of Turkish diplomats, the fact that the US and Britain have regularly raised the issue of Uyghur mass detention in recent years in addition to the issues of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Tibet (critical issues include, in some cases, Beijing's suppression of practitioners of *Falun Dafa*, a religious movement founded in China), does not allow official Ankara to stay away from a topic that confronts the two countries. Pan-Islamic and pan-Turkic sentiments among Turkish government officials and the population often prompt Ankara to take a principled stand on Uyghur detention camps. While Türkiye in 2019 and 2020 did not back UN declarations urging China to "ensure full respect for the rule of law" about human rights, Ankara in 2021 [signed](#) the declaration, which then gained the support of forty-three countries. Also, in November 2021, Erdoğan in a video message to the 37th Ministerial Session of the Standing Committee for Economic and Commercial Cooperation of the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (COMCEC) [said](#): "Turkey follows the situation of the Uyghur Turks in China with great sensitivity." In the past two years, we have witnessed steps (such as signing declarations), taken by AKP authorities, who are content with merely expressing hope that Uyghurs will live in peace and tranquility under Chinese rule and raise concerns about crises experienced by them.

Türkiye has kept its doors open to Uyghur migrants fleeing persecution in China for 70 years (while Uyghur settlers were granted citizenship in the early years, in the last decade most have been issued only temporary or permanent resident permits), but in recent years this policy has become another factor adding to tension between Ankara and Beijing. An estimated 30.000 to 50.000 Uyghurs [are currently believed](#) to live in Istanbul alone. The Uyghurs have managed to form a diaspora in Türkiye with strong lobbying activities. Although [there are allegations](#) that Erdoğan's administration, which is increasingly financially and technologically dependent on

Beijing, has deported Uyghur refugees to China, official government agencies have said these allegations are false. On the other hand, [the spread of news](#) that some Uyghurs who have taken refuge in Türkiye have gone to Syria to join the ranks of the Islamic State (ISIS) has exacerbated Sino-Turkic tensions. Associations between Uyghurs and global terrorist groups have rhetorically allowed China to justify its *counter-terrorist* measures at home. Although there have been no cases of deporting Uyghurs who took refuge in Türkiye to China despite Beijing's serious efforts, the 2017 agreement signed between the two nations to extradite any person wanted on charges of criminal activity has [raised](#) serious concerns.

Kurdish problem on Beijing's agenda

Responding to Türkiye's stepped-up rhetoric on the Uyghurs at the United Nations, China [has put](#) the Kurdish issue in play. Emphasizing that there is an analogy between Uyghurs and Kurds in many aspects, Chinese officials at every meeting with their Turkish counterparts have played up the importance of joint action against all kinds of international terrorism, national separatism, and religious extremism.

The Kurds, who have never achieved nation-state status and are one of the largest stateless nations in the world, [number approximately](#) 25-30 million. Residing mostly within four Muslim countries across the Middle East (eastern Turkey, western Iran, northern Iraq and northern Syria), the Kurds have struggled for independence and autonomy over the past century. The fact that they inhabit a region straddling the borders of these countries has been seen by the governments of those four states as a serious threat to their territorial integrity. In particular, the separatist tendencies of Turkish Kurds have become the basis for the long-standing Turko-Kurdish conflict. The long-standing suppression of the national identity of Anatolian Kurds, caused by the Turkicization policy pursued during the early periods of the Republic, [laid the foundation](#) for the formation of ethno-

nationalism and anti-government sentiments. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is internationally recognized as a terrorist organization, has committed bloody [acts of terror](#) in various cities and regions throughout Turkey, which resulted in thousands of deaths. This has prompted Ankara to strengthen its control and pressure mechanisms on Kurdish citizens, which, in turn, only fuel Kurdish ethno-nationalist sentiment and independence ambitions. Although the AKP government has put forward a number of *rational initiatives* (*çözüm süreci*) to radically solve the Kurdish question, no final result has yet been achieved. Türkiye is the country with the largest number of Kurds among the states listed above (although there are no exact figures, they [are estimated](#) to account for 15 to 20% of Türkiye's total population), yet the Kurds are now the most politically active ethnic group in Iraq. Local Kurds, taking advantage of the political turmoil in the country caused by the weakening of the central government after the war in Iraq (2003-2011), have strengthened their political position in Iraq's northern provinces (Iraqi Kurdistan) and run a de facto foreign policy. China has become one of the most important international political and economic contacts for Iraqi Kurds.

The history of modern Kurdish-Chinese relations goes back to the middle of the last century. One of the Kurdish leaders, Jalal Talabani, first traveled to China in 1955 and gained political support, but China [undermined the hopes](#) of Kurdish nationalists by not supporting them politically. However, half a century later, in 2003, Jalal Talabani, who would become the founder and secretary-general of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and later the first non-Arab president of Iraq (2006-2014), was welcomed as an important guest in Beijing. Beijing's sympathy for Kurds coincided with the US invasion of Iraq (2003-2011). The location of rich oil fields, key for China's huge manufacturing industry, in areas densely populated by Kurds in northern Iraq, [set the stage](#) for China's warm attitude towards Kurds. China tellingly has a consulate in the city of Erbil, the administrative center of Iraqi

Kurdistan, one of the hottest spots in the world, where the risk of terrorist attacks remains. The fact that Iraqi Kurds are engaged in an armed struggle against ISIS, whose foreign recruits are sometimes Uyghur Muslims, is another factor influencing Sino-Kurdish rapprochement. While emphasizing the development of economic ties with the Kurds, official Beijing continues to increase investment in Erbil. Sino-Kurdish cooperation manifests itself in many fields, including education, agriculture, construction, and humanitarian spheres, to name a few. Chinese medical supplies, especially vaccines, were delivered to help Iraqi Kurdistan deal with its coronavirus outbreak, and as a result, [changed](#) the situation in the region in favor of Beijing. Humanitarian projects have laid the foundation for the development of constructive cooperation and closer coordination between the two parties. Chinese transnational corporations compete with commercial companies from Türkiye and Iran for a foothold in Iraqi Kurdistan. Trying to limit its relations with the Iraqi Kurds in economic terms, the Chinese government, however, [did not accept](#) the proposal of the former, not a de jure nation-state, to open a political office in Beijing in 2007.

Kurdish classes have also been organized over the past few years [at](#) the Peking University Department of Arabic Language and the Asian-African Department of Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU). Given the tradition of teaching foreign languages, which is usually of strategic importance for China, we can understand the importance it attaches to Kurds on the world stage. As an example of the work towards enhancing cultural relations, we can [mention](#) courses for the Chinese language opened at the Erbil-based Saladin University in 2019. The Chinese language department, created with the logistical support of the Chinese consulate in Erbil, is considered the first and only center to teach Chinese in Iraq and the Kurdish world. Of course, because of China's rhetoric on the importance of respecting state's internal affairs, it is extremely far from supporting Kurdish separatists in any

state—Türkiye, Syria, Iraq, or Iran—who could pose a threat to the territorial integrity or national security of any sovereign state. In recent years, however, we have witnessed how Chinese officials under Xi Jinping, which prefer harsher diplomatic rhetoric and aggressive foreign policy, [respond](#) to those governments who criticize China's human rights record, by pointing to those states' oppression of their own minorities.

Moreover, in the past few years, Beijing has also [responded](#) to Ankara's stance on the Uyghur issue, joining global condemnation of Türkiye's military incursion in northern Syria and Iraq. For example, China's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations [criticized](#) Turkey's operations in northeast Syria in 2021 under the pretext of securing the country's southeastern borders, stating that they are a gross interference in the territory of a sovereign country and contrary to international law. In addition, Chinese and Turkish ambassadors to the UN again [exchanged heated accusations](#) over [airstrikes](#) on the PKK's Syrian branch, the YPG/SDF, due to the November 2022 terrorist attack on Istiklal Street, one of Istanbul's main tourist attractions. As the strategic interests of China, one of 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council, grows in the Middle East, we can assume that Türkiye's condemnation of military action and geostrategic attack in the region will become even more intense shortly.

Conclusion

Dramatic changes in geopolitical events on a global and regional scale over the past two years have and will continue to influence the dynamics of Ankara and Beijing relations. In particular, Turkic countries' unprecedented solidarity in the international arena under the aegis of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), the rapid distancing of the Central Asian Turkic states from the Kremlin's orbit, the strengthening of Ankara's position in both the South Caucasus and Central Asia

after the Second Karabakh War and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and emphasis at OTS summits by heads of state that the Turkic world does not consist only of Turkic-speaking states, of course, could not be unequivocally perceived by the Chinese authorities. In addition to the facts listed above, another interesting aspect is the coincidence of the date, 12 November 2021, when the official name of the organization was changed from the *Cooperation Council of Turkic-speaking States* to the *Organization of Turkic States*, with the dates of foundation of the first and second East Turkistan Republics, in 1933 and 1944, respectively (the date of establishment of both states founded by the Uyghur Turks coincides with November 12).

To summarize, even though Türkiye and China have periodically experienced political disagreements and controversies, and even if they seriously criticize each other before the world community, they have generally continued to increase the number of joint actions, both in the political-economic, and socio-cultural and humanitarian spheres. Despite the bloody events of Urumqi in 2009, one year later an agreement to establish a strategic cooperative relationship covering multiple fields [was signed](#) between the two countries. On the other hand, every time controversy, such as the recent mass detentions and China's secrecy about them erupts, we can observe a lack of coordination and communication between Türkiye and China.

Thus, a conclusion drawn from official [statements](#) of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is that the Uyghur detention camps are not simply an issue that Türkiye can solve by expressing its concerns from time to time. In other words, Ankara has neither the economic capacity nor the political power to influence China's policies against the Uyghurs. To do so, other countries must also show solidarity. In any case, in connection with the topic we are talking about, it is expected that alliances for international cooperation such as the Organization of Turkic States and the Organization of Islamic

Cooperation, based on ethnicity and religion, will take more results-oriented practical steps. However, it is apparent that Kazakhstan, the strongest Turkic state in Central Asia, which is largely economically dependent on China and shares a direct border with the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, or Uzbekistan, which is closest to Uyghurs among Turkic states and nations (Uzbek and Uyghur belong to the Karluk branch of the Turkic language family) and has established deep economic ties with Beijing in the last few years, have no serious concerns about the Uyghur issue. Spoiling relations with China, one of the biggest oil importers from the Persian Gulf, for whatever reason, would not be of interest to Arab countries either. Especially if we consider Xi's recent [trip](#) to oil-rich Saudi Arabia to develop deep geographic and strategic partnerships between the two states.

Given all this, and of course the economic ties and strategic interests we discussed earlier, we understand the reasons why official Ankara exercises caution when criticizing China for its oppression of its Uyghur minority. On the other hand, against the backdrop of deepening polarization in the world, we will see many states may face a dilemma over issues related to Uyghur and Kurdish problems and have difficulty in maintaining a balance. It is not difficult to predict that in the long term, the Uyghur crisis will become more complicated, which will also manifest itself in international diplomatic relations, and consequently, there may be potential for conflicting relations and crises.

Notes:

[\[1\]](#) Western states refer to these detention centers as *brainwashing*, *assimilation*, *labor* or *prison* camps, while China calls them *vocational education*, *rehabilitation* or *training* centers.