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THE EFFECT OF THE UYGHUR TURKS ON TURKEY-CHINA RELATIONS

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The Uyghur Turks have lived with the Chinese throughout history. They have been independent twice. The first instance of independence was during the existence of the East Turkistan Islamic Republic in 1933-34 while the other was during the existence of East Turkestan Republic between 1944-49. Both states came to an end with the occupation of the Peoples Republic of China. East Turkistan has always been important for China due to its natural resources and the centrality of its location with regards to important energy transit lines and trade routes (the Silk Road). Today, the Uyghurs, a relatively tiny minority group in China, has become a key element in Chinas general domestic policy, identity politics, and national security perception, which has resulted in them being oppressed and exposed to human rights violations.[1]

The Uyghur issue, which the Chinese administration has long treated as its own domestic issue, has come to international recognition because of these people being kept in mass detention camps and being subjected to increasing human rights violations. The denial of this policy by China, the attempt to explain the problem by referring to terrorism, and the lack of interest shown towards the social, economic, and cultural dimensions of the problem has caused the issue to acquire an international character over time. In this context, cotton exports in the region, which constitute approximately one-fifth of the world supply, have also triggered increasing concerns about the forced labor of Uyghurs. This situation has also affected the policies of international brands: well-known brands have reportedly collaborated with China in the cotton trade. As a result of demonstrations, these world-renowned brands have also made statements that they are against the forced labor of Uyghurs. H&M, for instance, no longer acquires supplies from the region. The Trump administration of the US has banned the import of cotton from XPCC, one of Chinas largest producers.[2] Ikea also stated that it would stop sourcing cotton from Xinjiang. Adidas has claimed to *The Guardian* that it does not source goods from Xinjiang and have told suppliers not to do so either.[3] Such approaches and reactions of major brands directed the attention of the world public opinion to the Uyghur issue.

Today, Turkey and other Muslim majority countries have refrained from adopting an accusatory stance against the Chinese government about the pressure exerted by China and human rights violations against the Uyghurs. Undoubtedly, the most important reason for this attitude is considerations over economic relations. Turkey, in an evolving Eurasian

context, is striving to establish good trade relations and economic alliance with China in the east. Turkeys attitude stems from the growing need for Chinese investment at a time when Western capital is not sufficiently available.[4] In this conjuncture, China becomes an important economic partner for Turkey.

Nevertheless, Turkey has historically been a safe haven for thousands of Uyghurs fleeing persecution in China since the 1960s. Turkey has time and again stated that it was deeply concerned by Chinas persecution of Uyghur Turks in Xinjiang. It is a delicate double-edged policy expressing concern for the treatment of Uyghurs, on the one hand, and developing good economic relations on the other. This policy is criticized by some that Turkeys support for the Uyghur minority has been watered down.[5] Currently, China is making major investments in Turkeys infrastructure development projects. In a country that connects Europe to Asia, such investments are important for Chinas trade routes to the West. Chinese freight trains have started heading towards Europe through the Marmaray railway.[6]

Despite all the sensitivities, Turkey holds the Uyghur issue on its agenda with the larger perspective of the solidarity with the Turkic world. In doing so, Turkey seeks to pursue a constructive approach towards China. Turkey strives to explain that the Uyghur Turks can act as a bridge for establishing people-to-people bonds between China and Turkey, and that China should not break down this bridge. In the 75th United Nations (UN) General Assembly meeting, Turkey urged that the cultural and religious identity of the Uyghur Turks should be respected and guaranteed. According to this statement, while following the issue on international platforms including the UN and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Turkey would continue constructive and direct dialogue with China in this regard.[7] According to recent information, the agreement on extradition that was signed in 2017 between China and Turkey has been ratified by China. This news has created concern among the Uyghur diaspora in Turkey. With this agreement, the Chinese administration aims to accelerate the process for the extradition of those who allegedly committed terrorist crime and took refuge in Turkey.[8] Chinas ambassador to Turkey is reported to have stated that Turkey will endanger its economic relations with Beijing if it continues to criticize the state of the Uyghur Turks in China.[9]

At the same time, we had noted in a previous article[10] that the criticisms towards China concerning the Uyghur issue come at a time when the global power balance is noticeably shifting from the Euro-Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific region, with China being the prominent rising power in this context. As such, some of the more aggressive international criticisms directed at China may be interpreted as an excuse to interfere in Chinas domestic issues to curtail its rise as a global power rather than a genuine interest in human rights and concern over the plight of the Uyghur Turks.

In sum, deepening economic ties are important for both Turkey and China. Chinas decision to invest in Turkey is based on the acknowledgment of the fact that Turkey is a nexus for transcontinental energy and trade routes. China and Turkey may unfortunately have different positions regarding the sensitive issue of the Uyghur Turks. However, this has not prevented the growth and development of the relationship between the two parties.

Photograph: Daily Sabah

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Şevval Beste Gökçelik graduated from the Department of International Relations, Faculty of Political Sciences of Ankara University in 2019. Following the completion of her bachelor's degree, she began a graduate program with a thesis in Eurasian Studies at the Middle East Technical University in 2019. In 2018, she took undergraduate and graduate courses at Università di studi degli Siena (University of Siena) as part of the Erasmus program.

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