



## Turkish-Chinese Relations in the Shadow of the Uyghur Problem

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Starting with the second half of 1990s, Turkish-Chinese relations have had a considerable revival. Along this process, officials from both countries have made numerous mutual visits on many levels, signing a number of agreements. However, the events that took place on July 5th 2009 in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xīnjiāng Wéiwú'ěr Zìzhìqū / 新疆维吾尔自治区 / شىنجاڭ ئۇيغۇر ئاپتونوم رايونى) have caused great anger among the Turkish public.

While China was protested by the Turkish public, the ruling government adamantly criticized the incident, with Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan describing the situation as an "almost genocide." In fact, looking at the incidents from a more informed perspective, it is possible to see that the situation is different than it appears to Turkey. While the harsh response of Chinese security forces to the protesters or the poor performance of legal channels deserve criticism, certain other facts have been largely ignored, such

as the instigators being mostly Uyghurs and the majority of the dead and injured being of Han Chinese origin.

There are two main motives behind Turkey's harsh response to the events. The first one is the government's political concern to satisfy public opinion domestically. The second and the most significant motive is getting Beijing's attention to focus on Ankara and showing Beijing Turkey is also on the field. In this manner, Turkey in a way was reacting to its "Chinese initiative," which was started in 1997, rendered futile, and giving Beijing the message that the rules of the game needed to change.

This short article focuses on the Uyghur problem, which is one of the most significant obstacles before the improvement of Turkish-Chinese relations. Having examined the situation from a number of angles, at the end of the article there are some

recommendations towards improving the relations between the two countries.

### History of the Region

Today, up to 20 ethnic groups, including Uyghur, Han Chinese, Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Kazakh, live in this autonomous region of China. Xinjiang, where Uyghurs constituted the majority up until the 20th century, has not experienced stabilization but continuously changing administrations. Like other nations in the world that live in buffer zones, Uyghurs have long paid the cost of being situated between China and Central Asia. Both internal and external regional powers, on the the other hand, have been put in a position where they were to adjust their manouvering according to the ascendance or weakening of China's central power. Hence, the lands that were a part of China during the powerful eras of Chinese dynasties have been witness to locally-centered defiance and struggles for independence at the time of China's weakness.

In 1884, China changed the name of the region to Xinjiang (新疆), meaning "new frontiers", declaring it a Chinese province.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Thus pro-separatist Uyghurs never use the name Xinjiang, using instead Şerqiy Türkistan, meaning East Turkestan. Since the official name is Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, this article refers to the region as Xinjiang.

Making use of the turmoil of the Civil War and the shift from the empire to republic, local powers managed to establish the First East Turkestan Republic in 1933. This short-lived experience was followed by the declaration of independence of the Second East Turkestan Republic in 1944. China re-established control after the People's Liberation Army entered the region. Beijing replaced the region's provincial status on October 1st 1955 declaring it the Zinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

### Repressive Policies and the Settlement Problem

One of the biggest problems in the region is the population of the Han, which is increasing at the expense of the indigenous people. The densest migration movements in China post-1949 took place in this region. In order to both alleviate the burden on the over-populated southern regions and to expediate the Zinjiang's integration with China, Chinese officials encouraged these migration policies.

The first wave of migration into the region took place in 1950s. Under the name of Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, thousands of ethnic Hans were given agricultural land and encouraged to move here. In addition, extreme policies during this period affected population movements. For instance, during the Great Leap Forward, between 60.000 and 100.000

Uyghurs and Kazakhs took refuge in the Soviet Union to escape famine and arrests by the police. By 1978, with Han migration hitting the peak, Han population constituted 41.6% of the total population.

After this date Chinese population of the region has been steadily declining. The primary factor here is that the one-child policy has been applied to Han Chinese only and not to Uyghurs because of their ethnic minority status. After 1980, Han migration into the region increased once again due to the economic packages launched to support the region's development as well as other programs.

June of 1990 saw a head-spinning transformation of the region with the new economic policies announced by the Chinese government. Starting with the regional capital Ürümqi, many cities began changing at incredible speed. China has given great importance to the region's infrastructural investments for its political and economic integration, including opening airports for the smallest administrative units and building highways. The 1.452 km<sup>2</sup> Southern Xinjiang Railroad project, a prominent example, has been completed in May 1999.

Xinjiang is China's wealthiest region in terms of underground resources. 80% of all the oil extracted in China comes from this region, as well as 45% of the gas and 75% of

the gold. The abundance of underground resources and the state's investment in this sector are also among the factors in economic development. In March 2000, the Chinese government started a new economic program encompassing western provinces, the Uyghur region among them.

However, this transformation and economic development has not produced the desired outcome in Uyghur integration. The principal reason behind this is that while the indigenous population cannot make full use of the existing transformation and developments, the Han that have migrated from the outside are able to get a larger share of resources. The capital Ürümqi is an explicit testament of this situation. While prosperity and progress are felt clearly in predominantly Han neighborhoods, poverty is prevailing in areas where the Uyghur reside.

### **Struggle for Independence or Terror?**

The Uyghur Region has been a troublesome one for Chinese rulers throughout history. Despite Chinese presence and political rule in the region dating back to ancient history, the fact that the peoples of the region were distinctly different from central China in language, religion, ethnicity, culture, cuisine and other aspects has made its integration difficult. Geographical attributes, being a border region and open to the influence of

other countries have been other factors that made Chinese control more difficult.

Unrest and demonstrations first started in 1980s in parallel to student incidents that had spread all around China, but changed in essence by 1990s. Uprisings of April 1990 and 1997 became widespread in the region and were repressed by Chinese armed forces with disproportionate force.

China has been frequently criticized by the international community due to the policies implemented and methods employed to suppress incidents. In their reports issued since 1998, Amnesty International has accused China of wrongful arrest of many Uyghurs, political criminals being the biggest target group.<sup>2</sup> The reports have maintained that the Chinese government uses torture to obtain depositions and tries in courts with pre-arranged verdicts. While reports also condemn China's actions in Tibet, it is stated that the pressure on Uyghurs is even heavier. During her China visit in November 2001, Mary Robinson, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, said human rights violations in East Turkestan have been put on the agenda.

<sup>2</sup> For some of these reports, see: Amnesty International (1999) People's Republic of China: Gross violations of human rights in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. Amnesty International (2000) Annual Report for China- including Hong Kong and Macao. Amnesty International (2002) People's Republic of China: China's anti-terrorism legislation and repression in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. Amnesty International (2004) Country Report: People's Republic of China; Amnesty International (2009) Uighur Ethnic Identity Under Threat in China.

China has responded to these accusations with three main arguments. The first is that what happens in the region is China's domestic problem and no one else will be allowed to interfere. The second one is that other states play a significant role and support in the spreading and escalation of the uprisings in the region. The third argument, which is included in several reports prepared by China, is that the participants of the uprising are militants that are members of radical Islamist organizations connected to Al Qaeda.

The US initially opposed the Al Qaeda connection. At the APEC Summit in October 2001, then-President George Bush said the Uyghur problem is an ethnic and social one and that the Chinese government should not oppress its minorities using the war on terror excuse. However, a later report prepared by the US Department of State, two organizations by the name of East Turkestan Liberation Organization and East Turkestan Islamic Movement were pointed out together with the fact that some Uyghurs were captured during combat in Afghanistan. Following this, the US Department of State listed the East Turkestan Liberation Organization as a terrorist organization in August 2002, and the UN followed soon.

Indeed, after 1990 Al Qaeda has been the factor in turning the Uyghur region into an important domestic threat for China; since the character of Uyghur rebellion has religious, as much as ethnic/national elements, it gained support from radical Islamist organizations capable of global movement. That Zahideen Yusuf, who started the Akto rebellion in 1990, was a theology student, the usage of Afghan mujahideen methods and that the rebellion was started with jihad are points demanding attention.

China has worked towards gaining international support for its policies in the region through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and preventing rebels from operating from neighboring countries, and has been successful at both. Following the Kosovo incidents of 1999, the SCO reiterated that human rights should not be used to interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries. In July 2008, China decided to establish an anti-terrorism center to effectively fight radical Islamists and drug trafficking.

The latest incident took place in July of 2008. A crowd of Uyghurs congregated in Ürümqi to protest the government's repressive policies quickly got out of control and targeted Han civilians. On the first day of the riots many Han people had their store, house or vehicle set on fire, many Han

people were beaten to death or injured heavily. With the news of the incidents spreading to Han neighborhoods, Han people started to gather and attacked Uyghur neighborhoods with vengeance.

While thousands of police and soldiers that were sent to the region to prevent the incidents performed search-and-prevention work with disproportionate force in Uyghur neighborhoods, they failed to intervene on time in the Uyghur-hunt started by Han crowds. According to the numbers provided by the Chinese authorities, of the total death toll, 137 are of Han background, 46 are of Uyghur and 1 is of Hui. The number of people arrested in relation to the riots is 1434. On the other hand, Rebiya Kadeer, leader of the Washington-centered World Uyghur Congress, states these numbers to be biased and claims between 1000 and 3000 Uyghurs died during the riots.

### **Turkish-Chinese Relations**

Turkish-Chinese relations, which officially started in 1971, entered a new period with the end of the Cold War. Between 1990 and 1997, Turkey's foreign policy ignored Chinese sensibilities. Trying to gain leverage with the "A Turkic World from the Adriatic Sea to the Great Wall" slogan, Turkish policymakers lent full support to pro-independence Uyghurs.

During his meeting with East Turkestan's ex-president Isa Yusuf Alptekin in Istanbul March 1992, President Turgut Özal said it was East Turkestan's turn to gain independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During this period, Uyghur activities towards independence such as mobilization or protests also were tolerated.

Starting with 1997, Ankara embraced a new approach to improve relations with Beijing with such ambitious goals as entering the rapidly growing Chinese market, buying weapons and missile systems that Turkey could not acquire from the West and earning support on Cyprus. Several measures were taken such as the secret memorandum number 36 issued in December 1998 that limited separatist East Turkestan activists in Turkey or a banning of East Turkestan flags. Following then-PM Bülent Ecevit's explicit statement that Uyghurs cannot remain a problem in Turkish-Chinese relations, 10 members of the East Turkestan Liberation Organization were arrested.

Bilateral visits continued increasingly in this period. Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Turkey in April 2000 and announced alongside Süleyman Demirel that the two countries will cooperate against terror. The plan of action adopted during this meeting was implemented in January 2002 during the visit of Chinese PM Tang Jiaxuan to Turkey. In January 2004, Recep Tayyip

Erdoğan visited China in his capacity as the Head of AKP and announced his full support to the joint fight against terrorism. The last official visit was paid by President Gül in June 2009 and lasted 6 days, which is a considerably long period of time for this kind of visits.

Nevertheless, the events of July 2009 left Turkey in a dilemma. While Turkey wanted to improve her ties with China, she also felt the need to stand in solidarity with the Uyghurs, who are Turkey's ethnic, linguistic and religious relatives. Especially after increasing pressure from the public opinion and the weight of domestic political concerns, PM Erdoğan made a tough statement, accusing China of perpetrating a near genocide.<sup>3</sup> Minister of Industry Nihat Ergün Çin advised the public to boycott Chinese products.<sup>4</sup> The public reaction has been adamant as well. People gathering after prayers organized country-wide protests against China.

<sup>3</sup> Erdoğan 'Adeta soykırım' dedi, 11/07/2009, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalHaberDetay&Date=11.07.2009&ArticleID=944578>

<sup>4</sup> Türkiye-Çin ilişkileri geriliyor, 10/07/2009, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalHaberDetay&Date=10.7.2009&ArticleID=944429>

On the other hand, the Foreign Ministry has maintained a more constructive attitude and called for those responsible for the events to be caught. In the whole process, the most ignorant and, despite this fact, the most aggressive attitude has been that of the Turkish media. Unfortunately the Turkish media failed its test by making a number of tangible mistakes, such as putting in their frontpage banners photographs of Han Chinese that were beaten to death as if they were of Uyghurs.

Turkey's reaction to the latest events should be analyzed as a result of her not getting the desired response to the opening up to China since 1997. While the trade deficit between the two countries keeps growing, the PKK was not defined as a terrorist organization by China, China's support was not secured for the Cyprus problem and the desired partnership in military technology was not achieved.

Turkey's harsh response caused question marks regarding the future of Turkish-Chinese relations. There have been many opinions brought forward predicting that Turkish-Chinese relations will henceforth remain under the shadow of the Uyghur problem or that China will counteract by getting involved with and supporting the PKK. In order for this not to happen and for bilateral relations to return to normal, the Uyghur problem needs to be followed in an

objective manner. Other recommendations are listed below.

### Recommendations

- **The “mine fields” of Turkish-Chinese relations need to be cleaned out at once.**

China, which is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, is the world's third largest country in terms of trade and the sixth biggest economic power. Turkey needs devise policies to remove all obstacles and improve her relations with this country that comprises 1/5th of the world's population as well as the world's biggest market. Right now there are two main problems between the two countries. The first one is the pro-Chinese imbalance in bilateral trade, and the second one is the Uyghur problem. The Uyghur problem especially is causing lack of trust and suspicion in the way both the governors and the people of the two countries approach each other. This is why the parties need to come up with a new approach towards solving the problem and start working on methods that will please all sides. Before all else, however, Turkey will need to establish peace domestically. That Turkey's standing on the Uyghur problem is problematic on a number of fronts when the country's own “Kurdish problem” has not been satisfactorily solved cannot be dismissed.

• **Prejudice against China among the Turkish media and public must be broken down.** In Turkish public opinion, China is still a poor “republic of fear” that enslaves workers, ignores the concept of human rights, steals technology and manufactures cheap, imitation and poor quality goods. Whereas in reality, while harbouring many contradictions within, China is a rapidly developing country that closely follows the changes in the modern world. The prejudice against China in Turkish public opinion can be seen in Turkish media as well. The media’s failure to report the latest crisis accurately is testament to how deep the prejudice has seeped. Bilateral mechanisms need to be built in order to abolish these prejudices and for the two peoples to get to know one another based on real information.

• **Turkey should start reading China from the East.** To this day Turkey has synched her relations with China to the West’s China policies. The period following the Cold War does not suit such a reading. Turkey should be able to explain to other countries of the region that she is devising her own policies and not being a little master for another country. It is important to remember that a significant part of the reason China opposed Turkey’s membership the Shenghai Cooperation Organisation despite Turkish willingness to join is Turkey’s image as the Trojan horse of the West.

• **The necessary steps should be taken to build cooperative mechanisms between the two countries to fight terrorism.** Turkey is crucial for the peaceful resolution of the Uyghur problem as much as the Kurdish Administration in Northern Iraq is in ending PKK terror. Support lent to Beijing in this area will have the function of a springboard in improving bilateral relations. Turkey needs to make a clear distinction between the preservation of Uyghur cultural rights and terrorists in the region who claim to act in the name of the Uyghurs. The anti-terror cooperation accord announced by Chinese Head of State Jiang Zemin and Süleyman Demirel in April 2000 is an important starting point. Mechanisms based on this accord and involving relevant civil society actors will have a positive impact on the process. Turkey, on the other hand, should lead this process taking into account all sensitivities. Turkey needs to explain in detail to both the Uyghur Diaspora and the Turkish public the implications of the cooperation with China, and be careful not to alienate the Uyghur population. Within this process, it will be an significant success for both parties to guarantee the wellbeing of diaspora Uyghurs and ensure their safe return home.



**Abstract :**

*Turkish-Chinese relations, which had been active since 1997, re-entered a strained period with the incidents in China's Uyghur region in July of 2009. Turkey, while standing in solidarity with their ethnic and religious kin, gave a tough response to the Chinese administration. The first reason behind this response is the Turkish Government's desire to satisfy the public opinion. The second reason is the disappointment at the futility of the efforts the governments have been showing to engage China since 1997. On the other hand, Turkey does not have the luxury to prolong this tense environment when it comes to a "giant" such as China. Turkey therefore needs to determine the points of contestation and at once start a process with the Chinese counterparts to redress the situation.*

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