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| KEYWORDS | ABSTRACT |
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| <p>The people's Republic of China, Turkey, Asian Partnership, Diplomacy</p> <p>Received 25 July 2022 Revised 04 January 2023 Accepted 10 January 2023</p> | <p><i>The People's Republic of China is renowned as Turkey's most important import partner. The relations between these two countries have developed over time through complex diplomacy and have been consolidated thanks to an increasingly intense economic exchange favoured by the new trends of market globalisation. This speech intends to analyse the historical development of the relations between these two political-institutional entities, their role within the geometries of power in the Eurasian continent, the impact of the cultural elements that influence diplomacy between the two countries and the future of these relations about the great political transformations that history is undergoing.</i></p> |

Introduction

When we talk about the Republic of Turkey and the People's Republic of China, we are undoubtedly talking about two of the main players in the politics of the great Eurasian continental mass. Both of these actors have their own interests, their own history, and their own differences, but the dialogue between these two entities is made necessary by the sharing of the same large geographical space, which is the Eurasian continental landmass. Obviously, China and Turkey are located in very different regional sectors, but recent developments in technologies for both human and commercial movement and connection have greatly shortened distances, and the infrastructure building projects of the People's Republic of China today involve the whole continental mass and the next seas. In a global reality such as that described by Parag Khanna in *Connectography* (2016), geographic proximity is not the most important element for links of any kind – in this case, interstate links. Specifically, between these two countries, there is a link of fundamental importance with respect to the pre-eminence (exercised in various regions) in the great Eurasian continental mass.

Ethnic subjectivities of great diplomatic importance for relations between the two countries, such as that of the Uighurs, also testify to their shared history, given that this group that lives in the territory of the multinational state of the People's Republic of China is Turkic. The Uyghurs, however, are only one of the various Turkish-speaking ethnic groups in China: this fact should testify to the deep ethnic and geographical ties that exist between the two countries. The Turkish and Chinese cultures are of profound relevance in the Eurasian continent, and their encounter far precedes contemporary geo-economic issues. Throughout history, relations between the Turkic peoples and China have always been very close, as demonstrated by extensive documentation (Golden, 1992).

In the recent history of China, with the formation of the new revolutionary government and the birth of the new state following the expulsion of foreign political entities and the victory of the communist side against Chang Kai Shek (Meisner, 2010), Turkey has repeatedly demonstrated that it understands the reasons of this Far Eastern country. This was due to the similar nature of the two countries, both resurrected thanks to modern national revolutions, and both were humiliated by Western powers, albeit in different ways.

This article intends to illustrate the current condition of international relations between Turkey and China through the lens of geopolitics and geoeconomics. Both of these disciplines are notoriously hybrid and consider a whole series of factors and levels, not only at a global level (an area in which we will use the “connectographic” reading extended to these two states, so distant and so close at the same time) but also at a disciplinary one. In this sense, what interests us most in this analysis is a historiographical reading of the separation of these two countries from Western influence and the beginning of a dialogue based on relatively similar historical-political elements. Besides that, the history of diplomacy between these two countries in contemporary times, as well as the beginning of economic and trade relations between them, will be used in this article. In addition to the economic exchange per se, the economic analysis also and above all, focuses on the large infrastructural construction projects and expansion of commercial networks on the Eurasian continent so as to explain the type of relationship that could unite these two countries in the long term, in addition than during the development of the aforementioned projects. The fundamental question that grips many analysts and that sees us interested in this article is also that of how much Turkey is willing to invest in building a future of solid interrelationships with China. Here the ambivalence of the geographical-territorial question returns, as the evaporation of the classic distance measurement system: China and Turkey are, as we have mentioned, both important countries on the Eurasian continental mass, which cannot fail to attract each other commercially and diplomatically according to their own gravitational power, that two countries that live in very different regions, with the cultural and geopolitical effects that follow. The equation is complex, and solving it is not easy, but adding elements and comparing them with the current state of affairs can certainly help.

From Humiliation to Cooperation

If Turkey, with the fall of the Ottoman Empire, had seen the West feast on its remains before the advent of Atatürk, China would have experienced years of political and economic subordination to European countries.

In describing this period of subordination, Chinese President Xi Jinping, on the centenary of the founding of the Communist Party of China, testified to the role of this political organisation and the previous nationalistic efforts of the Chinese people in liberating the country and its productive forces (Xi, 2021).

This type of submission imposed on the two countries – even if that of Turkey was, in particular, consequential to the First World War, having been the country feared in its past by the European powers (Motta, 1998) – has created, over time, a feeling of redemption that has transformed into the construction of a modern nation, more focused on the processes of political unification and competitiveness in international and economic terms. China, on the other hand, has also produced specific concepts on the development of international relations that must guarantee fair development for those countries that have been subdued and subordinated. The role of the “century of great humiliation” in the development of contemporary China's doctrine of international relations (Scott 2008: 3), a doctrine fundamentally imbued with anti-colonialism, should not be underestimated. This project has had different stages of development: from the idea of the development of the Third World of Maoist ancestry (Jiang, 2013) to that of a harmonic

internationalist order promoted by Hu Jintao (2005) and Xi Jinping (2015a, 2017). In this sense, China and its new political hierarchies immediately became interested in the role of Islam and Muslim countries in the world, understanding their potential in human, demographic and economic terms. All this was part, as mentioned, of a pan-Asian and Third World strategy, in which Turkey also had its role.

As Gillespie reminds us (2014: 12), Maoist politics was aimed at creating something like a "third force" at the international level, also producing new political-theoretical formulations within the communist camp (Meisner 2010) and giving life to the political currents of national-communism and third worldism (Gnerre, 2022: 109-110). Before the historical frictions with the Soviet Union, which took place with the conclusion of the experience of the Soviet presence in China under the government of Khrushchev (Gnerre, 2022: 109; Suyin, 1969: 91), China according to Gillespie (2014: 12) thus juggled between the great Eurasian socialist country and other nations which, despite an apparent difference on the ideological level with respect to the perspectives of international communism, had much more in common with its political history. By doing this, China would have opened a space of great importance in international politics, a space that wedged itself between the two blocs of the great global political challenge and went on to define a third area of belonging (Gillespie, 2014: 12). This then produced a new political reality which in turn was manifested by Mao with the theory of the Three Worlds (Mao, 1998: 454), and which influenced the Chinese view of the world thereafter (Gillespie, 2014: 12). This approach also assumed, in Mao's thought, the idea of non-hegemonic international equilibrium (Gnerre, La Grassa 2019: 52).

These ideas of cooperation between humiliated and subordinate countries matched harmoniously with those of resurgence that had developed in the Turkish cultural and political world. Specifically in those environments with a nationalistic imprint that advocated an Ottoman recovery through the tools of technical and economic modernisation. The aforementioned circles had opened their eyes to the international reality and had long ago identified possible great Asian allies for this process of the ascent of non-Western countries. Among these, of course, was China:

“All [those] authors [were] linked by their vigorous emphasis of the religious (Islam), ethnic (Turkishness) and historical (“Ottomanness”) dimensions of their own identity. On the other hand, the latter is, according to them, the reason why Turkey must turn its attention towards its immediate neighbours and do justice to its vocation as a regional power independent of the West. Although the authors differed fundamentally in their preference for specific neighbouring regions with which Turkey should intensify its relations, they were nonetheless united in their consistent rejection of their country’s unilateral alignment with the European Union. This dissociation from the EU thereby acquired a long-term, strategic character, while relations with the USA would and should be generated by tactical deliberation. In those years, [their] ideal partners were Japan and China, both of which [...] had been humiliated by the West” (Seufert, 2012: 13).

Özşahin, Donelli and Gasco have defined one of the links of great importance in the Sino-Titch relations such as revisionist stances towards western hegemony (Özşahin, Donelli and Gasco, 2022: 232). They add that “the relationship has deepened beyond material exchanges, and an additional factor that has facilitated the strengthening of ties is ideological” (Özşahin, Donelli and Gasco, 2022: 232).

While Sino-Turkish relations initially experienced difficulties due to Turkey's Atlantic framing, these problems dissolved towards the 1970s, thanks to Turkish political changes and the political leadership of Deng Xiaoping in China. In 1971, for example, Turkey promoted, together with 76 other nations, the cession of the United Nations seat to the People's Republic of China, which was notoriously formerly occupied by Taiwan.

In 1971, relations between revolutionary China and Turkey officially began, following the entry of the former into the United Nations Security Council (Akçay, 2017: 75). According to Akçay (2017: 75), the international relations between the two countries were not of great magnitude previously, and this was undoubtedly due to the economic-political profile of the far-eastern country, which, in the Maoist era, famously adopted a greater closure than the world market. It was the coup d'état of 12 September 1980 that gave way to a course of events that gave renewed life to relations between the two Asian countries, renewed life that took the form of a real revival of political-diplomatic relations, given that this event was perceived negatively by the European Economic Community which consequently moved away from Turkey, allowing the latter to approach an influential partner with which to build other forms of cooperation (Akçay, 2017: 75).

Thanks to Deng Xiaoping's reforms and China's greater economic openness, economic relations with Turkey have accelerated the already existing diplomatic ones and are of increasing importance (Akçay, 2017: 76).

The Economic Bridge

Although since ancient times, there were already trade agreements between the Chinese Empire and the Turkish states (Sandikli 2010: 226-227), despite ups and downs, relations between China and Turkey have evolved on various levels, of which the economic one is probably one of the most significant. This is because, as we have said, both countries represent realities that are establishing themselves on the global scene at rather fast growth rates, within a phenomenon that has allowed the creation of cooperation groups such as that of the BRICS (in which, however, Turkey does not figure).

Notoriously, one of the factors of great change in the world economic scenario about a decade after the Cold War – during which Turkey and China relied on different political fellowships (Yıldırım, 2020) – was the rise of the BRICs (Goldstein, 2011), then BRICS. These countries have shown a great ability to grow at an accelerated rate. This phenomenon, in which China plays an important role associated with a mutation of world balances (Parenti, 2009), has its own particular physiognomy (Li, 2014). It is precise with the end of the Cold War, indeed, and the international opening that has been achieved (which took place for step and not all at once) that the relations between China and Turkey have taken off, especially in the economic sector, which for a long time, one of the levels in which the greatest successes are recorded (Yıldırım, 2020): this type of connection predictably will tend to strengthen itself (Yıldırım, 2020) if the trend is confirmed by international political events and by the development of existing value chains and commercial lines.

Turkey, for now, external to the BRICS, has been for the latter a similar element in terms of growth to be taken into account (Farrar and Ariff, 2014: 149-158). As explained, therefore, Turkey entered this trend with what is called the real “economic boom” of the 2000s.

The economic rise of Turkey, to date one of the prominent players in the global market scenario, went hand in hand with the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) (Jarosiewicz, 2013: 1), making it difficult for observers distinguish between the political successes of the party in question and those of the national economy. Between 2002 and 2007, the Turkish economy grew at an annual rate of 7.2%, maintaining momentum quite well despite the 2008 global economic crisis (Jarosiewicz, 2013: 1) “after a slowdown in GDP growth to just 0.6% in 2008 and a subsequent recession (which saw a 4.6% contraction in GDP), the economy strongly rebounded, producing 8.8% growth in 2010 and 9.2% in 2011” (Jarosiewicz, 2013: 1).

This type of growth, despite the various perplexities and doubts frequently raised by analysts, is

proving to be a particularly continuous trend. According to data, the Turkish economy grew by 11% in 2021, after a period of necessary global contraction due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Erkoyun, 2022). Yet, Turkey was one of the few countries that, in 2020, in a period of the world health crisis, grew economically (Erkoyun, 2022).

Despite the fact that Turkey is not part of the BRICS, among Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, also President Erdogan also attended the BRICS meeting in 2018 (Ay, 2018), testifying to common interests that exist between these political entities. In doing so, Erdogan stressed the importance of this summit within South-South cooperation and overcoming trade competition, and how the BRICS countries made up 50% in 2017 over the previous decade (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 2018).

In 2000 alone, Turkey's trade with the BRICS countries made up 3% of total exports and 11% of total imports. In 2013, following global geo-economic transformation trends, these figures rose to 8.4% and 23%, respectively (Dinçer, 2015: 3). Arslan Ayan's analysis (2019: 3-4) suggests that Turkey would benefit from joining the BRICS in terms of positioning in the world-system and international prestige. In economic terms, he argues that it would contribute substantially to the level of Turkish exports, making Turkey less dependent on Western countries, and finally, it would guarantee the possibility of developing technology (including military type) with other members. Therefore, greater cooperation between these political spheres could be very beneficial for Turkey, considering the economic interdependence that already exists. Other elements of great importance, in this case, are undoubtedly the greater opening of Turkey to the large markets of these economies and the possibility of receiving flows of financing from these countries (Başbay, 2018).

The level reached by the exchanges with the BRICS reconstitutes the international map of Turkey's interlocutor. Its export-import ratio with the BRICS countries was about 18% in 2020, changing the percentage trade relationship that Turkey has with the countries of the European Union (Kutlay and Öniş, 2021: 1098). As Kutlay and Öniş (2021: 1098) rightly point out, the long-term economic relationship between Turkey and European countries always remains of great weight, and Europe itself is still a commercial pole of interest. However, the increase in trade with the BRICS countries automatically leads to a reconsideration of this type of relationship, given and considered as the majority of the Turkish trade deficit in 2020 was towards the BRICS countries themselves.

All this, however, considers the overall picture of the BRICS countries, which should be disaggregated to better understand the terms in which Sino-Turkish economic relations are characterised. After 2016, various Chinese delegations were invited to China to help the country develop in the context of national security and also of the economy (Yang, 2019). In 2021, China became Turkey's second-largest trading partner. The bilateral trade volume corresponds to 35.9 billion dollars. Turkey exports many raw materials to China, including metals and other mineral elements. In addition to this, it also exports chemicals to the Far Eastern country. China exports raw materials to Turkey as well as machinery and various other finished products. According to data released directly by the Republic of Turkey on trade with China, Chinese investments in Turkey correspond to approximately \$ 4 billion and are primarily allocated to the sectors of energy, finance, infrastructure and so on (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs). This type of economic option for Turkey necessarily takes on political contours (Öniş and Yalikum, 2021), especially in the sphere of foreign policy (Ergenc, 2015).

From Infrastructures to Asian Partnership

Keeping in mind the issues related to building infrastructure networks on the Eurasian continent, China famously launched the Belt and Road Initiative project. With this project, China intends to

build an intercontinental commercial network that passes through the main hubs but also through peripheral sectors of Eurasia. This project combines pipelines, railways, ports and other infrastructure assets under the same planning (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Sweden, 2019). If fully implemented, this would plausibly produce various positive externalities for the Eurasian countries that would be connected to these large commercial spaces (Maliszewska and Van Der Mensbrugge, 2019). Many countries are at the forefront of welcoming Chinese investments in this program.

Among these, there is also Turkey, which values the project positively and wants to join it. President Erdogan himself participated in the Summit for the construction of the Belt and Road in Beijing in 2017. "Positioned in a key place for the Belt and Road" (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs), according to the Turkish government's own words, Turkey would like to complete the "Trans-Hazar Middle Corridor" of this important project with its contribution, uniting Asia to Europe. Specifically, the construction of roads and railways is expected in Turkey to connect Anatolia with Central Asia and China through Azerbaijan and Georgia (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

This role of the bridge envisaged for Turkey in this imposing Eurasian infrastructural construction traces in all respects the ambivalent nature of Turkish civilisation and geography, linked on the one hand to the great Asian tradition and on the other to the culture and history of Europe. A country that experiences this apparent contrast, similar to Turkey, is Russia, which over the centuries has had to face the heated debates between Westernists and supporters of the Asian heritage, opting, however, for the affirmation of its own specific civilisational culture (Leont'ev, 1987). This seems to be the same as Turkey's option in this sense, which arises within the framework of international relations with a marked awareness of the national interest but also of multilateral cooperation. The geographical position places Turkey in a place to have to dialogue with very different political entities, but whose harmonisation is necessary for the management of security and the promotion of continental development.

This role is evidently also recognised by the People's Republic of China, which frequently affirms the importance of state entities in the securitisation processes of the planetary geographic regions (Xi, 2017). The regionalisation process promoted by China is understood by its political guides as the necessary cooperation between states and governments to create a balance of prosperity and collaboration. In this sense, China has often reiterated the importance of cooperation over competition (Xi, 2015 a), especially in opposition to the phenomenon that geopolitical analysts have defined as the "Thucydides trap". There is no doubt that the role that Turkish subjectivity plays in Asia, on which this country leans, is substantial. In the thought of President Xi Jinping himself, all Asian countries must collaborate in the process of Asian reform that must not be called into question by the countries of the so-called "north of the world".

"Accounting for one-third of the world economy, Asia is one of the most dynamic regions with the most potential, and its global strategic importance has been rising. Over the past 70 years, Asian countries have gradually transcended their differences in ideology and social system. No longer cut off from each other, they are now open and inclusive, with suspicion and estrangement giving way to growing trust and appreciation. The interests of Asian countries have become intertwined, and a community of common destiny has increasingly taken shape."

The destiny of the Asian peoples is, according to Xi Jinping, connected by a whole series of needs and difficulties that the region is facing and will have to face, and only the recognition of the same culture and history within a space as vast as it is common will lead to greater security. This security clearly takes on different colours, within a perspective that is that of a development of international political and economic relations within the aforementioned regional space. Some of the aspects of

this security are economical and peaceful coexistence. Xi Jinping also asserts, to underline the importance of collaboration, that “it remains an uphill battle for Asian countries to grow the economy, improve people's livelihood and eliminate poverty” (Xi, 2015 b). This means that another of the historical needs to be taken care of by the Asian peoples is that of improving the collective well-being and social development of their countries, in a situation of the relatively recent establishment of the national autonomies of many of the states which are of great prominence in the Asian region. In fact, it was pointed out that, precisely in this sense, the Chinese interest in the Middle East and Turkey is growing (Özşahin, Donelli and Gasco, 2022: 220), precisely in relation to the condition of extra-westernity (with what it entails in historical terms and development processes) of these sectors. This integrates favourably with inter-Asian dialogue projects and finds an actor in Turkey with which to interface, which has great influence in these areas.

Within this macro-regional discourse, the role of Turkey is important for China. Turkey, on the other hand, has fully developed awareness of its necessary participation in Asian issues by joining the pan-Asian initiative called “Asia Anew”.

It is clear to everyone how the world is experiencing a moment of redefining the weight of the actors that make it up, especially from an economic and commercial point of view (Stuenkel, 2015). Within this phenomenon, in which the BRICS certainly play a key role (Stuenkel, 2015), there has been a major component of Asia in the last twenty years (Zhanaltay, 2021). This phenomenon of widespread economic growth in its Asian location is the result of the economic growth of India, Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea, China and Japan (Zhanaltay, 2021). When Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu announced the Asia Anew project for cooperation with Asian countries without breaking or neglecting relations with Western ones, he clearly had in mind the economic rise of contemporary Asia, an element to which he added that of strengthening ties with ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which should be interpreted more from the point of view linked to the strengthening of the regional perspective, beyond simple bilateral relations (Zhanaltay, 2021). Despite the economic factors that guide (or at least induce) these choices, it is clear that the counterweight to this is the awakening of an Asian conscience in the Turkish actor. Zhanaltay comments on this type of choice as follows: “one of the main goals of this policy is to implement focused and applicable strategies that address regional dynamics in diplomatic approaches with different countries” (Zhanaltay, 2021); and adds that “at this point, Turkey, by signing the ASEAN Friendship and Cooperation Agreement in 2010, has taken an important step towards solidifying its relations at the institutional level” (Zhanaltay, 2021). If the purpose of this type of “sliding” towards the East is not oppositional towards the West (Zhanaltay, 2021), it rather represents a renewed Turkish vision towards some clear elements of its geopolitical nature, fuelled by historical-cultural awareness and by a certain sensibleness to the regional context in which it is inserted.

Of course, when we talk about processes of peaceful development and securing large regions, paradoxically, we cannot fail to speak of the sphere of national and collective defence. In this sense, China and Turkey have begun paths of rapprochement and collaboration within the Shanghai Organization for Cooperation. In this sense, Turkey has been a dialogue partner with the SCO, in which China's role is primary, since 2012 (Anadolu Agency, 2012). In 2016, President Erdogan referred to the possibility of definitively joining the group (Wang, 2016). All this while Turkey is also a member of NATO. This type of attention to both political and territorial horizons (China Daily 2016) derives directly from the geographical mediumship that characterises this country.

Conclusion

The role of China and Turkey, as we have said, is pre-eminent in the Eurasian continent, and both have specific interests and particular political and cultural traditions. Nonetheless, the processes of

integration and construction of international partnerships are a contrasted but still growing trend, despite the announcements and fears of major decoupling and forms of de-globalisation. Clearly, in these cases, the outcome of these processes must be analysed in the long term while always keeping an eye on the present and on the not-insignificant sphere of diplomacy.

Turkey, as we know it, has often been defined as a bridge between the European and Asian worlds. It is undoubtedly true that her civilisation is indebted to both of these historical-cultural spheres. Nonetheless, there is an important weight of the Asian tradition in its history, and this is certainly valid within a more solid process of structuring relations between Eastern countries. Obviously, this is part of a development path of multilateral relations and global economy that does not cover only the Asian space, and as we have seen, the role of the BRICS is not of little importance in this sense. However, relations between China and Turkey are moving along the lines of Asian security and development in a reform process that aims at relaxing international relations between the players in the area and cooperation. In these contexts, economics and politics can be treated on separate levels, but they will never be completely disjoint.

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