

The Belt and Road Initiative and the Middle Corridor: Complementarity or Competition?

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ABSTRACT *Though the Chinese government has projected the BRI in economic terms, it has been viewed critically by Australia, Japan, and the U.S. Turkey has, as a geostrategic connector of Asia and Europe, registered its trade interest in the BRI along with projecting the Middle Corridor Initiative (MCI) as a means to realize regional market connectivity and commercial cooperation. In view of the aforesaid, this study aims to explain whether the BRI has factored into Turkey's Asia policy and to what extent the MCI can complement the BRI. Moreover, the study analyzed the existing scale of China-Turkey trade and proposed a set of opportunities offered by both the BRI and the MCI. Nonetheless, the stated opportunities are beset with multiple challenges ranging from transregional instability to socio-economic upheavals. In order to accrue trade dividends in terms of inter-initiative cooperation and connectivity, both China and Turkey will have to play a leading role in developing policy coordination and establishing cultural linkages among the BRI/MCI community. Thus, operationally, Turkey would carry immense influence in Asian affairs economically and strategically.*

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, Middle Corridor, Transregional Trade, Market Connectivity, Turkey, China

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Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has attracted regional and global attention since its inception in 2013. Though China has presented the BRI in essentially economic terms, it has been viewed strategically by the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India.¹ Turkey, however, has maintained a cautious policy as far as the nature and character of the BRI is concerned. Indeed, as a connector of Asia with Europe, Ankara has, on the one hand, showing interest in the Chinese initiative for rational reasons and, on the other hand, come up with its own initiative commonly known as the Middle Corridor –which, while overlapping with the BRI in infrastructural terms, carries the potential to act as a bridge among Turkey, the Southern Caucasus, Central Asia, and China.² Moreover, as part of its Asian foreign policy, Turkey has projected the Middle Corridor Initiative (MCI) as means as well as ends in pursuing commercial, military, and strategic objectives in a geopolitical environment that is undergoing regional realignments.³

For instance, the U.S. is gradually rebalancing its policy in the Middle East where the former seems to have avoided military confrontation with Russia and accorded 'tacit' approval to the Turkish military operation in Northern Syria. In Central and South Asia, the Pacific, and Northeast Asia, the U.S. is still maintaining its military presence along with enhancing defense cooperation with India, Japan, and Australia.⁴ Importantly, under the Trump Administration, China had been conceptualized as a 'strategic rival' and 'economic competitor' that has to be countered in realist terms.⁵ Little wonder, the so-called 'trade war' between the U.S. and China has not only impacted bilateral (trade) ties but also carried negative repercussions for regional countries such as Pakistan and India.⁶

China, on its part, has also acted rationally. Under President Xi Jinping, Beijing is pursuing a policy of regional peace and economic integration as categorically laid out in the BRI and its attendant institutional arrangements such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund (SRF). Keeping in mind regional geopolitical complexity, the Communist Party of China (CPC) under the leadership of Xi Jinping seemed to have realized the American designs to encircle China militarily and strategically.⁷ Though the Chinese government has officially refrained from adopting a confrontational (dis)course towards Washington in military-strategic terms, it has, nonetheless, acted in the same fashion insofar as high tariffs under the trade war are concerned. Moreover, Beijing is also pursuing cordial commercial ties with Japan, South Korea, Turkmenistan, and India in a bid to, on the one hand, disallow complete control of the regional markets to the American enterprises and, on the other, to develop economic interdependence with such key countries in a manner that does not harm the Chinese interests both commercially and strategically.⁸

Importantly, China has lately strived to enhance military, strategic and economic relations with Turkey. To this end, the BRI was projected as a win-win cooperation for the two countries that traditionally followed a very complicated foreign policy –which will be explained at length later in the article. Presently, however, both China and Turkey have vowed to consolidate the ‘strategic cooperation’ through mutually agreed-upon measures to ward off conventionally held misgivings especially related to counter-terrorism and ethnic separatism. Ankara, historically and nationally, has taken a different view on the Uighur Muslim minority of Xinjiang Autonomous Region whom the Chinese state desired to integrate.⁹

The so-called ‘trade war’ between the U.S. and China has not only impacted bilateral (trade) ties but also carried negative repercussions for regional countries such as Pakistan and India

Thus, this study aims to explain whether the BRI has factored into Turkey’s Asia policy and to what extent Ankara and Beijing are willing to cooperate under the BRI framework. To explain the latter, the study revolves around Turkey’s Middle Corridor Initiative by emphasizing its commercial and connectivity role vis-à-vis the BRI. The secondary aim is to understand whether the BRI and MCI can work in tandem to realize mutual gains. Lastly, the overall objective of this research is to place the BRI and, to an extent, the MCI in Turkey’s Asia policy formulation to analyze Turkey’s role in Asian affairs in the foreseeable future. However, before these questions are addressed empirically, the chapter turns to provide a historical background to China-Turkey relations.

Background

The regions that comprise modern Turkey and China were connected, commercially and culturally, through the ancient Silk Road, which connected not only East and West Asia but also Asia, Europe, and Africa from the 2nd century B.C. till the 18th century.¹⁰ Hence, the Turks traded with other nations especially the Chinese through the ancient Silk Road from the ancient, medieval to the early modern period. With the advent of the notion of nation-states post-French revolution in Europe, and later in Asia after the end of colonialism, the empire-state system such as the Ottoman morphed into the Westphalian statecraft grounded in the principles of territorial sovereignty, national integrity, and economic autonomy.¹¹ Therefore, the modern republic of Turkey, founded in 1923, cognized the nation-state characteristics and begun a new chapter in the determination and implementation of domestic and foreign policy.

Economically, even before the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, China-Turkey bilateral trade remained a core component of strategic partnership

With respect to foreign relations, the Atatürk-led Turkey pursued cordial ties with its neighbors in Europe and Asia. Indeed, it contacted the Chinese leadership, in 1934, in order to resume diplomatic relations that were ruptured on account of political transformation in both Turkey and China in the wake of World War I.¹² However, domestic politics took a revolutionary turn in China in the subsequent years and, owing to the indeterminacy of political authority in China, the latter could not establish formal relations with İstanbul which, in the post-World War II, tilted towards the U.S. and, importantly, became a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949.¹³ The ensuing Cold War, predicated on geopolitics ideologically, i.e., capitalism versus communism, prevented both Turkey and China from approaching each other diplomatically during the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁴

Nonetheless, the opportunity arose in 1971 owing to the Sino-American rapprochement, which was logistically supported by Pakistan.¹⁵ Thus, the same year Turkey and China established diplomatic relations, though the degree of bilateral engagement remained very low during the 1970s owing largely to mutual mistrust, bureaucratic hurdles, İstanbul's pro-U.S./NATO stance, and China's introverted national policy under Mao. However, under Deng Xiaoping, China started 'opening up' towards the West particularly the U.S. whose insurance companies and banks registered remarkable interest to invest in the Shenzhen region of China.¹⁶ Little wonder, in the 1980s, not only China's trade started growing with the U.S. and Europe, it also began to explore regional markets for exports consumption. Contextually, then, Turkey-China bilateral relations saw an upsurge diplomatically, commercially, and militarily as depicted in the following:

Since the state visit of the Deputy Chief of the Armed Forces of Turkey in 1983, Sino-Turkish military cooperation began to develop rapidly. Thereafter, Chinese Chief of General Staff Yang Dezhi visited Turkey in October 1985 and in November 1986 the Turkish Chief of General Staff Necdet Üruğ visited the People's Republic of China. In November 1992, China's Defense Minister, General Qin Jiwei led a military delegation to visit Turkey...[Moreover] in April 1993, Turkish Chief of General Staff General Doğan Güreş, and the Minister of National Defense Nevzat Ayaz paid a visit to China and achieved a protocol. In return, Chinese Chief of General Staff Zhang Wannian paid a visit to Turkey in 1995.¹⁷

As the above reflects, Sino-Turkish relations achieved stability though the scale remained limited, confined largely to military exchange and security cooperation for both Beijing and İstanbul found common grounds insofar as ter-



Chinese President Xi Jinping with his wife Peng Liyuan (C), Russian President Vladimir Putin (front, 2nd L) and other leaders attend a group photo session at a welcoming banquet for the Belt and Road Forum at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China, on April 26, 2019.

JASON LEE - POOL / Getty Images

rorism and ethnic separatism were concerned. China had for long viewed the Uighurs of Xinjiang, who are ethnically Turks with cross-cultural affinity with the Turkish people, from security lens whereby the Uighurs, by and large, were linked with ethnic separatism and incidence of terrorism in that autonomous region post 9/11.¹⁸ Turkey, as a state and society, has traditionally seen the ethnic Muslim minority in China from a religio-civilizational perspective.¹⁹ Such divergence of views marred the growth of statist and societal relations between the two countries and their people in the early 2000s.

However, while walking cautiously in foreign policy domain, both Beijing and İstanbul looked for areas of cooperation in a manner that could diminish mistrust and misgivings. Indeed, as a consequence of multiple reciprocal state visits of prime ministers, presidents, and military chiefs during 2001-2019, China-Turkey relations were mutually placed in the category of 'strategic cooperation' and, the most recent presidential visits from Beijing to Ankara and vice versa, have opened up new avenues for bilateral cooperation.²⁰ The following sections of the article elaborate it further.

The Belt and Road Initiative and Turkey

Though the advancements in communication and transportation technology post-World War II obscured the functional relevance of the Silk Road, the latter staged a comeback in the early 21st century when, initially, the Amer-

ican politicians hinted at rejuvenating the abandoned Silk Road to connect with (Central) Asian markets. However, owing to the U.S.' preoccupation with the Middle East post 9/11 along with the growing cost of war especially in Afghanistan, it could not transform its connectivity idea into reality.²¹ Nonetheless, the Chinese government under the leadership of President Xi Jinping accorded extraordinary significance to the notion of economic globalization in terms of expanding rail and road infrastructure within and outside China.²² The latter, facing issues such as reduced exports and energy deficit, desired to explore 'extra' regional markets for investment, exports, and imports purposes. Formally, thus, the Communist Party of China led by General Secretary, Xi Jinping, launched, in 2013, a multi-billion mega project of market connectivity and commercial cooperation commonly known as BRI. With an estimated worth of \$1 trillion, the BRI is centered around *Wu Tong* (five connectivities): (i) policy coordination, (ii) trade and investment facilitation, (iii) infrastructure connectivity, (iv) financial integration, and (v) cultural exchange.²³

Under the BRI cooperative framework, six economic corridors are planned that would connect China with Central Asia, Russia, Mongolia, Indochina, South Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. Out of the proposed six corridors, four –China-Indochina Economic Corridor, China-Myanmar-Bangladesh-India Corridor (BCIM), China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor– are essentially part of the Maritime Silk Route (MSR) while the China-Mongolia-Russia Corridor and the New Eurasian Land Bridge constitute the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). Operationally, Xinjiang has assumed an extraordinary position on account of hosting three of the six corridors, namely, the New Eurasian Land Bridge, CPEC, and China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor. The latter originates from Xinjiang (Northwest China) and crossing the Central Asian States, it passes through Iran, the Gulf, the Arabian Peninsula and finally reaching Turkey.²⁴

Institutionally, the Chinese government has established, in collaboration with other stakeholders, the AIIB, New Development Bank, and the Silk Road Fund. The cumulative financial worth of these institutions is around \$240 billion.²⁵ Here, it is pertinent to mention the fact that Turkey is the founding member of the AIIB along with being a dialogue partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Moreover, Turkey is also a founding member of NATO, an accession member to the EU, a dynamic member of the G-20 and D-8 besides being an active stakeholder in many other regional alliances and organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC).

What can be deduced from the recent history is that China-Turkey relations are, by and large, very stable since 2010. The two countries are moving in the direction of sustained economic and institutional collaboration in the contemporary context. Economically, even before the launch of the Belt and Road Initia-

tive in 2013, China-Turkey bilateral trade remained a core component of strategic partnership. For example, the volume of bilateral trade was \$193 million in 1986 and it stood at \$18,700 million in 2011.²⁶ In the post-BRI years, China-Turkey trade volume was registered at \$27.27 billion in 2015, \$27.76 billion in 2016, \$26.30 billion in 2017, and \$23.63 billion in 2018. However, Turkey has consistently suffered from a trade deficit even though this started to decline in the preceding years. For example, it was \$21.08 billion in 2013 and went down to \$17.80 billion in 2018. However, this affected Turkish trade negatively. Thus, in 2019 (January-September) China-Turkey bilateral trade volume declined; it barely stood at \$15.1 billion. During this period, Turkish exports to China amounted to only \$1.9 billion whereas its imports from China stood at \$13.2 billion. However, “according to the provisional data, produced with the cooperation of the Turkish Statistical Institute and the Ministry of Trade, in December 2020; exports were \$17.85 billion with a 16.0 percent increase and imports were \$22.38 billion with an 11.6 percent increase compared with December 2019.”²⁷ In January-December 2020 Germany and China remained Turkey’s top partners for exports (\$15.97 billion) and imports (\$23.20 billion).²⁸

Besides, Turkey has formally joined the Belt and Road Initiative by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Chinese government during Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s state visit to Beijing in 2015.²⁹ Thus, in the last five years, the two sides have collaborated under the BRI framework in terms of implementing certain infrastructure projects in and around Turkey. This will be detailed later in the article. Here, it seems prudent to understand and analyze Turkey’s investment and connectivity initiative which is generally known as the Middle Corridor. The conception, evolution, construction, and consequence of the MCI vis-à-vis China’s BRI are discussed in the following section.

The Middle Corridor Initiative and China

Contemporaneously, Turkey has been able to manage its economy quite candidly. For instance, its foreign trade in September 2019 amounted to \$32.1 billion, which included a positive trade balance of around \$29 billion. Importantly, despite an economic crunch due to the U.S. tariffs policy imposed by the Trump Administration, Turkish exports grew in scale by 0.08 percent

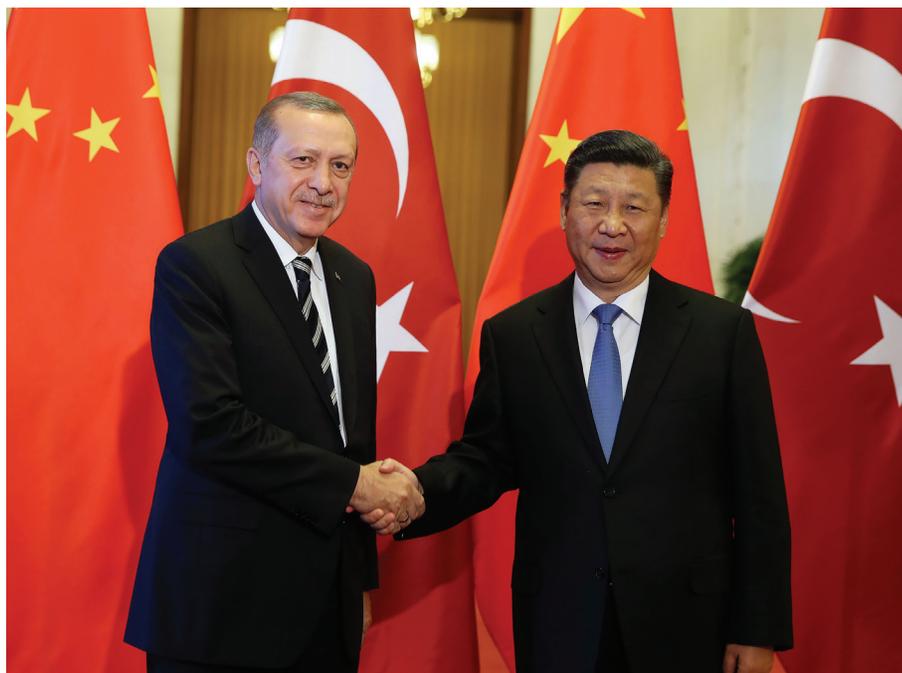
The Middle Corridor Initiative has earmarked an autonomous development model that, much like the Belt and Road Initiative, revolves around rail and road connectivity along with offering further areas for mutual collaboration, particularly for China and Turkey

The BRI and the Middle Corridor Initiative carry immense significance for transregional economic cooperation and market integration

when compared to September 2018 and the contribution of the cumulative export amounted to \$15.2 billion in September 2019. In addition, during January-September 2019, Turkey's grand trade volume stood at \$286.4 billion, whereas in 2020, its foreign trade volume stood at \$388 billion and \$879 million with a slight decline of 0.5 percent caused by COVID-19.³⁰

What the aforesaid suggest is that the Turkish economy is stable and resilient despite intermittent market shocks. Also, the Turkish government led by President Tayyip Erdoğan has ensured political and social stability in the county. Thus, with domestic strength, Turkey has been able to adopt a consolidated economic policy nationally and globally. In order to further expand its export-base and seek investment and trade opportunities on a sustained basis in a multiple setting, Ankara has, as already argued, principally approved of China's Belt and Road Initiative as an opportunity to accrue economic dividends while not compromising on its foreign policy goals in Asia and beyond. Importantly, taking advantage of the connectivity core of the BRI, the Turkish government, in collaboration with certain regional countries, has projected the Middle Corridor Initiative regionally and internationally.³¹ In this respect, the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor Initiative, shortly named as The Middle Corridor passes by rail and road through Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Caspian Sea, and reaches China through Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan. On this route, ports of Baku/Alat (in Azerbaijan), Aktau/Kuryk (in Kazakhstan), and Turkmenbashi are the main points of multimodal transport on Caspian transit corridor. Besides these countries, the Middle Corridor initiative is also supported by Afghanistan and Tajikistan.³²

As the above highlights, the Middle Corridor Initiative gained currency in the wake of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Quite interestingly, the two proposed multilateral initiatives seem to have coincided insofar as historicity is concerned. Little wonder, if the formal launch of the BRI was conducted in 2013, the antecedents of the MCI originate, the same year, in terms of Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TIRT). Initially, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia signed the Establishment of a Coordination Committee for the Development of Trans-Caspian International Transportation Route on November 7, 2013. Under the framework of the aforesaid agreement –to which China, subsequently, became a stakeholder– the pilot shipment was successfully concluded in July 2015. Operationally, a container train termed 'the Nomad Express' started its cargo journey from Xinjiang (Northwest China) and made it to Baku (Azerbaijan) through Aktau and the Caspian Sea within a short duration of only six days.³³



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (L) and Chinese President Xi Jinping (R) shake hands during their meeting in Beijing, China on May 13, 2017.

TURKISH PRESIDENCY / YASIN BÜLBÜL / AA

Moreover, under the Caravanserai Project, which seeks collaboration among the customs bureaucracy in the region vis-à-vis the MCI, major infrastructure projects such as the Marmaray Undersea Rail Project, the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge in İstanbul (inaugurated in August 2016), the Eurasia Tunnel Project (inaugurated in December 2016) and the İstanbul Airport (inaugurated on 29 October 2018) have been completed in time. All these projects are designed to expand connectivity between Asia and Europe. In addition, as a major part of the Middle Corridor, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway was inaugurated in October 2017. The BTK, pretty much like any BRI corridor, ushers in a new era of market connectivity between Asia and Europe. Indeed, 4December 4, 2020, was an important day in the economic life of the Eurasian region: a freight train departed from Istanbul to China along the Trans-Caspian transport route; that was the first time ever a Turkish train has set out on this route. Previously,, the communication occurred only in the opposite direction –from China to Turkey.³⁴ It is posited that due to its overlapping character with the Eurasian Land-Bridge and the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor of the BRI, the BTK can act as a catalyst in promoting transregional trade and commercial cooperation, especially between China and Turkey.

Last but not least, the member countries of the MCI have tried to expand the connectivity outreach of the Initiative by bringing the South Asian market into its fold. In this respect, the Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan-Afghan-

istan Transit Corridor Agreement, which is commonly known as the Lapis Lazuli Agreement (November 2017), can play a pivotal role in enhancing not only mutual economic cooperation but also stabilizing war-ravaged and landlocked Afghanistan, which would have access to the Central Asian and Caspian market.³⁵ Finally, the Middle Corridor Initiative, with its interconnected nodal points, has earmarked an autonomous development model that, much like the Belt and Road Initiative, revolves around rail and road connectivity along with offering further areas for mutual collaboration, particularly for China and Turkey which are, undoubtedly, the two major Asian economies. Whether the two parallel but autonomous and, at places, overlapping initiatives lead to complementarity in terms of realizing inter-Initiative connectivity and commercial cooperation or stir (market) competition, is analyzed in the following section.

The BRI and the MCI: Complementarity or Competition?

The BRI and the Middle Corridor Initiative carry immense significance for transregional economic cooperation and market integration. These initiatives can serve as a catalyst for the realization of the stated goals under both the BRI and the MCI framework. However, much depends on the involved stakeholders particularly China and Turkey which are already engaged constructively. Institutionally, the two countries have signed various MoUs such as the Establishment of a Joint Working Group for the New Silk Road Connection, Railway Cooperation Agreement, and Transport Infrastructure and Maritime Cooperation. In this respect, both Beijing and Ankara shared a long-term vision, in 2010, to consolidate a 'strategic partnership'.³⁶

Infrastructurally, mutual understanding and commitment have resulted in the conclusion of various projects such as the Eurasia Tunnel, Marmaray submarine railway, and the Çanakkale 1915 Bridge. Furthermore, high-tech projects that include GK-2 Earth observation satellite, the Salt Lake Gas Storage Facility, the CSUN solar power plant, as well as the 660 Megawatt coal-based power plants, are underway. Importantly, as an indication of bilateral collaboration under the BRI, Chinese companies are engaged in infrastructure development in Turkey, Ankara-Istanbul High-Speed Railway Line, that was completed in 2014 with Chinese funds worth \$750 million, is a case in point.³⁷ This railway project has the privilege to be the first high-speed railway project by a Chinese company overseas.³⁸

The focal point of China's BRI is the construction and maintenance of uninterrupted freight transportation from China to other regions of Asia, Africa, and Europe. With respect to the latter, the Chinese government planned to connect with England via Turkey in terms of the Edirne-Kars High-Speed Railway Line that cost \$30 billion. Besides, the BTK has assumed centrality in-

sofar as harmonization of the BRI and the MCI is concerned. The former is, in fact, part and parcel of the European-Caucasus-Asian Transport Corridor (TRACECA) project that interests Beijing to align the BRI with the Middle Corridor. The BTK, stretching over 7,000 km, would shorten space and time between China (Asia) and Europe from 30-45 days to around two weeks.³⁹

Culturally, the Belt and Road Initiative aspires to facilitate people-to-people contact in the BRI countries to promote cultural comprehension and diversity

As far as the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) project is concerned, the Chinese firms have invested in Turkish ports since 2015. In this respect, a consortium of China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO), China Merchants Holdings International, and China Investment Corporation spent around \$940 million on the Kumport Terminal. In addition, two more ports, namely, Çandarlı Port and Mersin Port, are being considered to be placed under the MSR. When these ports become functional, Turkey would have the capacity to not only host container ships across the Suez Canal but also access the North African market. This would eventually benefit China as well.⁴⁰

Besides, China and Turkey are collaborating under the BRI in the energy sector. Since Turkey imports petroleum products, it requires extension in gas storage facilities along with ensuring the safety of supply lines. Hence, it is enhancing the Salt Lake Gas Storage Facility. To this end, with the financial support of the AIIB –of which Turkey is a founding member– Islamic Development Bank and the World Bank, work on the Gas Storage Expansion Project has kick-started. The project is expected to upgrade the capacity of the Salt Lake Gas Storage Facility by 4.2-5.4 bcm, and that of the country to 9.7 bcm by 2023.⁴¹ Moreover, to meet its growing energy needs, the Turkish government, in collaboration with its Chinese counterparty, has planned to construct nuclear power plants.⁴² Importantly, the two sides have signed agreements to improve upon the financial sector, i.e., currency exchange, etc., through the mutual exchange of Renminbi (RMB) and Turkish Lira. The Bank of China and the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) have already started their services in Turkey, which will boost trade and investment for both countries.

Culturally, the Belt and Road Initiative aspires to facilitate people-to-people contact in the BRI countries to promote cultural comprehension and diversity. Since more than seventy countries and hosts of organizations are formally part of the BRI community, it seems prudent on the part of Beijing to encourage multiculturalism that, in turn, would carry positive implications for trade, investment, and commercial cooperation. To this end, China observed 2013 as the Turkish Culture Year. Moreover, 2018 was celebrated as the Turk-

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İzmir International Fair.⁴⁴ To further promote cultural capital, the Chinese government has started establishing Confucius Institutes in Turkey whereas the latter is planning to set up Yunus Emre Institutes in China.⁴⁵

These projects underscore the significance of the existing institutional, infrastructural, financial, and cultural cooperation between China and Turkey under the BRI and MCI framework. Deductively, it is posited that the prevailing degree and scale of cooperation between Beijing and Ankara does not suggest (economic) competition in the confrontational sense. Rather, the way the two countries are nourishing a bilateral relationship since 2010, it seems plausible that the BRI and the Middle Corridor can realize structural and commercial complementarity in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, to that end, the political leadership of the two countries would have to build on the existing cooperative data and practices by exploring more opportunities of which some are listed as follows.

Opportunities

Being located at the crossroads of Asia and Europe, Turkey has the natural advantage to act as a connector as well as a facilitator of transregional trade and investment between the two continents. With the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate of 5.35 percent over the last decade, Turkey seems set to increase its exports to the BRI world in the following years. As already mentioned, its trade deficit with China has shown a downward trend.⁴⁶ China, on its part, would have the transportation means available, through both the BRI and the Middle Corridor, to expand the volume of its trade with the Central Asian states, Trans-Caspian region, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean countries of which Turkey is a key stakeholder. China's current trade volume with Europe has surpassed \$700 billion and it can climb up if the BRI and MCI are materialized efficiently and constructively.⁴⁷

ish Year of Tourism in the People's Republic of China. Consequently, the number of Chinese tourists to Turkey hit 292,322 in the period January-August 2019.⁴³ In addition, in 2019, Turkish National Day was observed in Beijing at the platform of Expo 2019. On the occasion, the Turkish diplomats emphasized the necessity of cultural exchange for developing a better understanding of each other's political system, social norms, and market dynamics. While reciprocating, Chinese representatives took part in the 88th

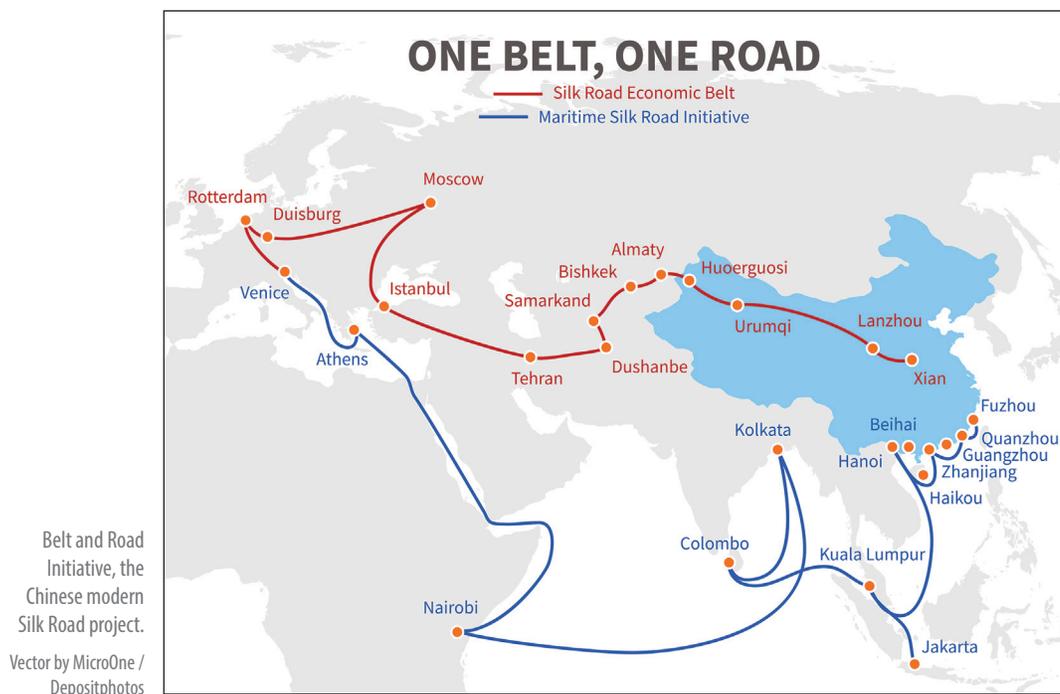
Along with Turkey and China, the other BRI countries such as Turkmenistan, in Central Asia, and Pakistan, in South Asia, could also reap benefits through infrastructure development and promotion of export-oriented trade. The European countries can also stay benefitted from the Chinese government's recent emphasis on increasing the volume of its imports in the spirit of the China International Import Expo (CIIE), which by default encourages other countries' exports.⁴⁸ In addition, the BRI, in particular, allows space for Turkey and other stable economies to negotiate newer financial arrangements such as facilitated currency exchange which may lessen overwhelming reliance on, for example, dollar and/or pounds sterling.

Moreover, owing to its prime geostrategic location –and dependency on external energy (re)sources such as Russia– the Republic of Turkey can become, in the foreseeable future, a hub of energy storage, consumption, and transition especially to Europe via inter-Initiative connectivity. The expansion of the energy market would also enhance Turkey's status as a protector of the transregional supply lines.⁴⁹ This, in turn, would encourage security cooperation not only between China and Turkey but also Turkey and the broader BRI/MCI world. Being a key NATO member and a regional (military) power, Turkey can play a pivotal role in securing the physical, if not the virtual, the infrastructure of the BRI and the Middle Corridor. Lastly, the BRI and the MCI can complement each other through policy coordination and cultural exchange by putting up more funds for (vocational) education, scientific research, media, and communications, promotion of languages as well as dissemination of cumulative practical experiences gained through engagement with a different aspect of the BRI and the MCI officially and informally.

Challenges

Despite the mentioned set of opportunities, the future of the two initiatives, however, is not without its challenges. To begin with, the fundamental challenge that the BRI, in particular, faces is related to regional instability in, for instance, the Middle East, Ukraine, and Afghanistan. Indeed, both China and Turkey live in a hostile neighborhood.⁵⁰ Regional instability, if not tackled through cooperation, generates civil wars, ethnic conflict, and sectarianism along with allowing space to non-state terrorist organizations such as ISIS.⁵¹

Moreover, some countries along the BRI and the MCI alignments, which include China and Turkey, have territorial disputes. Non-resolution of territorial disputes has resulted in the militarization of such regions in the world, i.e., Syria, Ukraine, and Israel-Palestine.⁵² Often comparatively strong countries use proxies that may employ terrorist means to intimidate their rivals. In such a militarized context, construction, and later safety, of physical infrastructure under, for example, the BRI becomes a herculean task. Hence, both the Chinese and the Turkish governments, in collaboration with other BRI/



MCI countries, need to devise a mutually agreed-upon mechanism to tackle security threats.

Political and socioeconomic instability seems a regular feature in many of the BRI/MCI countries. The Central Asian states, for example, lack in participatory politics and sustained economic policy,⁵³ as do the Middle Eastern and South Asian countries.⁵⁴ However, Turkey in West Asia and China in East Asia have achieved political stability and socioeconomic cohesion due largely to the effectiveness of their respective party systems.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, this challenge needs to be converted into capability if the BRI and the Middle Corridor are to realize their full potential. However, it is easier said than done. In addition, concerns related to ‘loans’ to economically dependent countries such as Sri Lanka and Pakistan need to be amicably addressed as well.⁵⁶

Culturally, there is an urgent need to promote inter-Initiative social mobility coupled with an emphasized educational and academic exchange on a sustained basis. Here, it is pertinent to mention that despite the Chinese and Turkish governments vows to delink particularistic narratives regarding, for example, the Uighurs Muslim minority in Xinjiang, the Chinese and the Turks, overall, still know very little about each other’s cultural and political worldview.⁵⁷ Even at the state level, the past-oriented mistrust and misperception persist and often express itself through bureaucratic hurdles in policy implementation. This

could probably be a general phenomenon in the BRI/MCI community. Its solution lies in long-term and collective efforts –initiated at the state and societal level– aimed at establishing deep-rooted cultural linkages that predicate on consensually evolved principles of cultural diversity, political pluralism, socio-economic egalitarianism, and ideological non-totalization.

In order to consolidate bilateral relations, both Beijing and Ankara have refrained from meddling in each other’s internal political dynamics, though popular misperceptions and misgivings related to nationalistic narratives persist at the societal level

Conclusion

This study intended to explain whether China’s Belt and Road Initiative has factored into Turkey’s Asia policy and, to what extent, the Middle Corridor Initiative –that Turkey has projected through its foreign policy– has impacted Turkey’s relations with not just China but also other countries that have joined the BRI. While addressing the questions posed, the study empirically concludes the following.

China and Turkey have engaged with each other diplomatically for a long time and, since 2010, the trajectory of bilateral relations has reached the level of ‘strategic cooperation.’ In order to consolidate bilateral relations, both Beijing and Ankara have refrained from meddling in each other’s internal political dynamics, though popular misperceptions and misgivings related to nationalistic narratives persist at the societal level. Also, at the state level, the past-oriented bureaucratic mistrust might prevail in policy implementation.

Moreover, Turkey, being a regional (military) power with a stable economy, seems to have approached the BRI in rational terms. Having observed a trade deficit with China in the preceding years, the Turkish government has already expedited its exports to the Chinese market to the effect that in 2019, the former’s exports to China grew in scale incrementally. To further expand its export base, ensure energy supply and access the transregional markets in Southern Caucasus, Central Asia, South Asia, and China, Turkey has supported the Belt and Road Initiative in the spirit of win-win cooperation. Nonetheless, among the Asian countries including Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, Turkey is the only Muslim-majority country that has negotiated the BRI from a position of strength in economic and strategic terms. Importantly, along with its Trans-Caspian partners, Turkey has embraced and initiated the Middle Corridor that, at places, overlaps with the BRI infrastructurally. The Middle Corridor, thus, is utilized as an instrument to not only complement the BRI in terms

of market connectivity and commercial cooperation but also enhance Ankara's diplomatic and strategic influence in Asia.

Nevertheless, the prospects of BRI/MCI complementarity in terms of infrastructural development, fulfillment of energy needs, and transregional market access are challenged by regional instability, i.e., civil wars, territorial conflicts, political turmoil, and socioeconomic upheavals –that plague most of the Asian and African countries. The solutions to such challenges are easier said than done. However, the BRI/MCI countries and their political leadership need to work in tandem in order to evolve mutually agreed-upon norms and principles grounded in multiculturalism, political pluralism, religious harmony, social tolerance, and above all, scientific research. ■

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