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### Evaluating the Impact of Culture and Identity on Sino-Turkish Cooperation in the Belt and Road Framework

*Türkiye'nin Çin ile İşbirliği Yapabilme Kapasitesinin Kimlik ve Kültür Üzerinden Değerlendirilmesi: Kuşak ve Yol İnisiyatifi Çerçevesinde İnşacı Bir Perspektif*

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#### ABSTRACT

This study examines the material and intellectual factors that make inter-state cooperation possible from a constructivist perspective and aims to assess the impact of identity and culture on Türkiye's planned partnership with China under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI, which envisions the creation of a new China-centered economic-political structure and value system in the long run, seems to be a manifestation of China's desire to transform the existing order of international relations. The article examines from a constructionist perspective the question marks raised by Turkey's participation in this large-scale project, where Westernized intellectuals are the main constitutive element, and where Türkiye has been included in the economic, political and military architecture of the West since the Second World War with the Truman Doctrine, Marshall Plan and NATO membership.

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**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kuşak ve Yol İnisiyatifi, Türkiye-Çin İlişkileri, İnşacılık, Türk-İslam Sentezi, Kimlik ve Kültür

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#### ÖZ

Bu çalışma devletler arası işbirliklerini mümkün kılan maddi ve düşünsel faktörleri inşacı bir perspektiften ele almakta, bu çerçevede Türkiye'nin Kuşak ve Yol İnisiyatifi (BRI) kapsamında Çin ile gerçekleştirmeyi planladığı ortaklık üzerinde kimlik ve kültürün etkisinin değerlendirilmesini amaçlamaktadır. Uzun vadede Çin merkezli yeni bir ekonomik-politik yapı ve değerler sisteminin yaratılmasını öngören BRI, Çin'in uluslararası ilişkilerin mevcut düzenini dönüştürmeye dair arzularının bir tezahürü gibi görünmektedir. Makalede Batılılaşmış aydınların temel kurucu unsur olduğu, İkinci Dünya Savaşı'ndan itibaren Truman Doktrini, Marshall Planı ve NATO üyeliği ile Batı'nın iktisadi, politik ve askeri mimarisi içerisinde yer almış Türkiye'nin, bu geniş çaplı projeye katılımının yarattığı soru işaretleri inşacı bir perspektiften irdelenmektedir.



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## Introduction

The 2008 economic crisis that emerged in the US financial system and the real estate market and quickly became globalized has pushed the People's Republic of China, as a rising power, to draw macro conclusions about global politics and economics as well as the Western-centered world order and international relations system. Launched in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative is more than just an opening up of market opportunities narrowed by the 2008 crisis. In addition to revealing China's aspirations and goals in the race for global hegemony, the project offers students of IR the opportunity to reason about the possibilities and limits of a network of strategic cooperation that has its roots in the organizational forms of the current Westphalian order, but also refers to the possibility of a post-Westphalian interstate order (Bunskoek and Shikh 2021, p. 88).

This study focuses on evaluating the potential for cooperation between Türkiye and the People's Republic of China through the lenses of identity and culture, particularly within the context of China's strategic vision for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It will also critically examine the aforementioned possibilities and limitations within this framework. There is a vast literature on the content and magnitude of the Belt and Road Initiative, the roads, bridges, ports, railways built within the scope of the project, and the economic cooperation agreements and partnerships established that give meaning to all these (Liu and Dunford, 2016; Huang, 2016; Dunford and Liu, 2019; Rolland, 2017). Similarly, there have been many detailed analyses on the possible effects of BRI on China's growing economy and its power struggle with the West (Li, 2020; Flint and Zhu, 2019; Zhao, 2021; Yu, 2021). Many academic studies have also explored the implications of the Silk Road Economic Belt, the terrestrial component of the BRI, on the future of Türkiye-China relations, including the economic, political, and foreign policy impacts for Türkiye, Türkiye's role in the project, and the challenges arising from the areas of contention between China and Türkiye regarding this role (Kulaksız, 2019; Gürel and Kozluca, 2022; Kadılar, 2017; Koçakoğlu, 2021; Işık and Zou, 2019; Çolakoğlu, 2019; Güneylioğlu, 2022). This growing Turkish literature continues to expand over the years. However, there is a notable gap in the literature when it comes to examining Türkiye's role in the BRI from a constructivist perspective within international relations theories. Adhering to Western political rhetoric, Türkiye has preferred to keep its relations with China minimal due to its position in the NATO alliance, discomfort with the demands and actions of Maoist leftist organizations and factions, and cultural and historical affinity with the Uyghur Autonomous Region. Türkiye's rulers have oriented the country's economic and political trajectory towards the West since the early years of the republic. In fact, "contemporary civilization" (Bora, 2017, p. 87-88) was set as a goal for the young republic, and this goal was supported by moves such as the abolition of the caliphate, the adoption of the civil code and secularism, the alphabet revolution, and the change of the calendar and measurements. However, identity and culture are multifaceted and relational phenomena. In Türkiye, Asianism and Islam are also important components of identity (Oran, 2001, p. 20-24) and these elements, as much as Westernism, determine the direction of domestic political events and foreign policy. Political legitimacy in Türkiye, rests only to a limited extent on a legitimacy ground derived from the notion of a secular state and its sanctity, which protects the constitutional equality of people bound to the state by citizenship ties. Legitimacy in Türkiye is rooted in a synthesis of Turkic Asiaticism, drawing on the shared past, the constructed memory of the Pax Ottomana, and Kemalist enlightenment nationalism—the foundational value of the secular republic, which seeks to unite people through the principle of equal citizenship. This complexity arises because the material transformations that shaped Türkiye's ruling classes did not follow the structural evolution seen in Europe, where the merchant bourgeoisie and absolute monarchies, through their alliance, dismantled feudal labor, distribution, and power relations, paving the way for modern tax borders, centralized states, and eventually, nationalisms and nation-states. In contrast, the Turkish bourgeoisie emerged late, shaped by the final efforts of an empire in decline yet still centralizing. This empire's primary and most populous social element was Sunni Turks, and the nationalist policies of the young republic, formed in an Anatolia made relatively homogeneous (Ünlü, 2018) after World War I, further reinforced this identity.

Since the Justice and Development Party (JDP) came to power in 2002, the Islamic component of identity has gained prominence in both domestic and foreign policy, especially until the mid-2010s. Since 2016, a Turkish-Islamic synthesis blending Islam with Asianism has come to the fore, and this synthesis has supported certain practices in domestic and foreign policy (Copeaux, 2016, p. 79-81; Kadioğlu, 2020: 816; Kelleci, 2022, p. 547) from a Eurasianist perspective. This trilateral synthesis has facilitated new areas of cooperation with non-Western actors such as Russia, Iran, and China, especially as Westernism's ideological influence has waned, and conflicting interests with Europe and the US have narrowed the scope for cooperation.

In order to discuss the validity of this hypothesis, the study sets 3 objectives. By interpreting Türkiye-China relations and the cooperation opportunities emerging from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) from a constructivist perspective, this study aims to make a unique contribution to the literature by incorporating identity-culture contexts into the discussion. The first objective is to examine the explanatory and predictive capacity and validity of constructivist theory in the context of the BRI. The second objective is to present the global innovations brought by the BRI and its importance and scope within the current international relations order, particularly concerning

centrifugal forces and revisionist interests. This section will show how China's revisionist interests refer to ancient Chinese identity and history in its effort to produce an alternative to the Western-centered IR system. The third objective is to review Türkiye's historical foreign policy tendencies within the context of the BRI and reassess them in relation to the competing domestic identities vying for influence. In this context, the study will analyze three key elements of national and cultural identity in Türkiye to assess the country's capacity to establish, develop, and sustain cooperation with China.

## **1. Social Structure and Actor Tension in the Constructivist Approach and the Problem of Applicability of the Approach to Turkey - China Relations in the Axis of the Belt and Road Initiative: Which Constructivism?**

In this section, the relationship between constructivist theory and foreign policy, as well as the applicability of constructivist theory to Türkiye-China relations and Türkiye's involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), are discussed. The idea that actors' social relations influence their attitudes toward each other entered the field of international relations in 1989 with Nicholas Onuf's pioneering text *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (Onuf, 2013), almost a decade before Alexander Wendt's foundational work *Social Theory of International Politics* (Wendt, 1999, p. 2). Onuf begins his book with a critique of the concept of anarchy, the basic assumption of Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, published in 1979 and widely accepted in the discipline. Taking an anarchic international environment as a given, Waltz defined states as dependent subjects acting on the basis of the distribution of material capacities. According to Waltz, this dependence stems from the fact that actors have to exist and survive within a structure in which they are positioned against each other according to the distribution of material capacities. Actors cannot avoid fulfilling the requirements stipulated by the structure (Waltz, 2010, p.109). Considering the major transformations in the international system since the mid-1970s, the power vacuum created by the end of the Cold War, the efforts to fill this vacuum, and the chaos created by the vacuum, it is clear that in order to explain the problematics of Türkiye's involvement in the Belt and Road initiative, it is necessary to go beyond the patterns drawn by Waltz and the intellectual universe of realism. Onuf, with his emphasis on political science, history, law, ethics, and aesthetics, subjects Waltz's correlation between anarchy, structure, and actor behavior—along with realism's deterministic assumptions about human nature and actor preferences—to intense criticism (Onuf, 2013, p. 183-184). Accordingly, in almost every aspect of social and human relations, there is a construction through socialization, language, discourses and behaviors (Onuf, 2013, p. 38-41).

In 1992, three years after the publication of Onuf's pioneering work, Wendt followed Onuf and continued to undermine the position and importance that the concept of anarchy occupies in traditional IR theories, writing that anarchy is not an independent variable but a constructed phenomenon shaped by the way states view it, whose negative effects can be limited with the right approaches (Wendt, 1992, p. 403). But how does this construction become visible? Alexander Wendt answers this question as a positivist realist. Instead of rejecting Waltz's concept of structure altogether, this answer would be a response based on transforming its form and content. According to Wendt, it is true that there is a structure on the ground on which IR takes place; however, it is not generated solely by material conditions and cannot be explained in terms of material conditions. The structure of international relations emerges constructively in the course of intersubjective interaction. Actors' identities determine their interests. And identities are in a constant state of reconstruction due to the nature of interaction (Wendt, 1999, p. 327).

So far, it seems that the constructivist approach can be useful in explaining Türkiye's foreign policy behavior and opportunities in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. However, at this very point, one may ask how the identities of the interacting actors emerged in the first place prior to this interaction. Alexander Wendt seems to answer this important question by envisioning the state as an anthropomorphic unit, a rational human being (Wendt, 1999, p. 318) and reducing the process of identity construction to the social interaction that takes place on the system. Thus, in Wendt's view, the identities developed prior to the social interaction between states are not characteristic identities specific to the actors themselves, but rather corporatist identities that arise from the ontological features of the world in which the actors exist and serve to establish and sustain them as units (Wendt, 1994, s. 385). Rather than completely rejecting Waltz's concept of structure, Wendt's response involves transforming its form and content. According to Wendt, while a structure exists within the realm of international relations, it is not solely the product of material conditions and cannot be fully explained by them. The structure of international relations emerges constructively through intersubjective interaction, with actors' identities shaping their interests. These identities are continually reconstructed as a result of ongoing interaction (Wendt, 1999, p. 327). He leaves the formation of identity and interests to be analyzed through foreign policy only after actors have engaged in intersubjective interaction within the system. Maja Zehfus argues that this is a dangerous convergence

that undermines constructionist theory, which promises to remove realism's concepts of anarchy and balance of power as necessary tools for explaining state behavior (Zehfus, 2006, p. 95).

Given Türkiye's complex and non-uniform relationship with China, particularly as a key member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Zehfus' concern warrants serious consideration. To fully explain this relationship from a constructivist perspective, it is essential to revisit the pioneering ontological claims of constructivism. Similarly, in order for bilateral relations to think beyond the generic stereotypes produced by the mechanics of the Cold War and the material and immaterial cultural barriers produced by East-West antagonism, constructivist positivism needs to be re-evaluated (Hoffman, 1988, p. 61) in a way that supports the possibility of establishing a normative ground for improvement in the international relations system.

In Wendt's social constructivism, while actor identities are dynamic, the individual cultures of actors prior to their interaction are not given sufficient importance. For this reason, this approach, which is called systemic constructivism, has been criticized in many respects by other IR theorists and other constructionists, and these criticisms have led to the emergence of different types of constructivisms (Bozdağlıoğlu, 2023, p. 91-94; Katzenstein, Keohane, & Krasner, 1998). While approaches that prioritize the unit level (Katzeinstein, 1997; Hopf, 1998) focus on issues such as nationalism, gender, domestic politics and culture, authors called holistic constructivism (Kratochwil and Koslowski, 1995) have adopted an attitude that gives equal importance to social structure and actors (Reus-Smith, 2002, s. 488). It can be argued that social constructivism has a deeper understanding of China's or Türkiye's foreign policy behavior than realist theories and neorealism in particular. For instance, while the distribution of material capabilities in the international system has changed over the centuries, China's *para bellum* strategy of continuous power accumulation has remained consistent (Johnston, 1996, p. 216). Mao's security and foreign policy strategy can be traced back to the policies of the Ming Dynasty or the Song Dynasty going back to the 10th century. The fact that this strategy was not much affected by structural developments after 1949, such as the transformations in international relations, China's articulation with the economic pillar of the Western political-economic order and its compromise with liberalism, and the end of the Cold War, points to its intellectual, cultural and identity roots (Johnston, 1996, p. 217).

Trine Flochard traces the intellectual and material roots of such biographical continuities, arguing that actors' ontological security needs and questions of self-worth are at the heart of such long-term strategies (Flockhart, 2008). In China, the relationship between dynasties, large families, landowners, business elites, and peasants spans thousands of years and reflects the ongoing struggle to establish order within the country. Themes such as China's historical encounter with capitalism, the process of peripheralization (So, 1984) and the resistances developed against it, and the process of nation building are the identity and cultural background behind this strategy. Similarly, Türkiye's national and cultural identity, which prioritizes both the BRI and its relationship with the People's Republic of China, is nourished by multiple strands, including Ottoman, Asian, Islamic, Western, and European Union influences. Constructivist approaches that prioritize the unit level or adopt a more holistic stance in the actor-structure debate seem particularly useful for understanding Türkiye's relations with China within the context of the BRI, especially when addressing themes such as domestic politics, nationalism, and political culture.

## **2. The Position and Importance of the Belt and Road Initiative in the Context of Status Quo and Revisionist Interests in the Current IR Order: Building a New Identity and Value System in China?**

There is a widespread misbelief that the People's Republic of China was relatively mildly affected by the 2008 global economic crisis in the US financial system and real estate market compared to Western countries and other developing countries (Adas and Tussupova, 2016, p. 136, 146; Li, Willett and Zhang, 2012, p. 147). However in China, maintaining the delicate political balance within the country depends on high economic growth (Knight and Ding, 2012, p. 318-319). Therefore, the crisis has deeply affected the People's Republic of China, like other countries that have been integrated into the global economic system, where the growth rate has decreased by about 17% compared to 2007 and exports fell by about 16% in 2009 compared to the previous year (Jing, 2012: 650), and has created many socio-political risks in addition to economic risks. This rupture in the current order of international relations and the global economy has prompted the People's Republic of China to not only make protective moves to ensure its economic security, but also to draw macro inferences about the legal, economic, political and economic status quo in the Western-centered world order and international relations system (Benabdallah, 2019, p. 93; Mendes and Wang 2023, p. 111).

The euphoria about the superiority and triumph of Western civilization under the leadership and protection of the United States, which peaked in the 1990s, faded in the mid-2000s with new developments triggered by the global economic crisis. Instead, themes such as unemployment, the rise of the far right, declining living standards, negative future prospects for younger generations, distrust of policymakers and professionals, Islamophobia, and

anti-immigrant sentiment have emerged in Western public opinion (Cooley and Nexon, 2020, p. 12-13). In this context, parallel to the Western world's shift toward a more defensive and conservative mentality and economy, it can be argued that the "optimistic" era, which began with Richard Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1972 and continued with the official recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1978, marking China's integration into the global economy, has come to an end. Indeed, the win-win principle based on interdependence and the balance of power that neo-liberal institutionalists criticized structuralist realism and placed at the heart of the mechanics of the functioning of the international relations system (Keohane and Nye, 1973, p. 161) is clearly working slowly, if not collapsed, judging from June 2024 (Wilmot, 2024) when the US government imposed a 102.5% tax on electric vehicles exported from China. The war in Ukraine, the spiral of violence in the Middle East around the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, including Hezbollah, Iran and Yemen, and the escalation in Asia-Pacific where the national interests of China, Taiwan, North and South Korea, Japan and India are increasingly triggering an arms race (Luo, 2021, p. 125-126) show that the order that emerged after the Second World War is not only fracturing but is heading towards disintegration.

Taken together with the picture summarized above, it is difficult to think that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which emerged in 2013, was merely an opening to market opportunities that had shrunk due to the impact of the 2008 Crisis. The BRI has attracted attention with the massive investments made and planned by the People's Republic of China and its potential to transform international relations, the global economy and the global geopolitical landscape. In addition to revealing China's aspirations and goals in the race for global hegemony, the project offers students of IR the opportunity to reason about the possibilities and limits of a network of strategic cooperation that has its roots in the organizational forms of the current Westphalian order, but also alludes to the possibility of a post-Westphalian interstate order (Bunskoek and Shikh, 2021, p. 88). This new material order undoubtedly requires the construction of a new system of values, historical identity and cultural codes that can generate legitimacy and consent. The literature created by the Beijing leadership and Chinese academics and intellectuals on this necessity (Khanal and Zang, 2024, p. 262-263) has resulted in the reclamation of ancient Chinese history, identity and dynastic philosophical-administrative-legal-religious concept sets from the mid-2000s, after the end of the Cold War and the rapid fading of the rhetoric of absolute Western supremacy in the 1990s, as keys to explain contemporary conditions.

Parallel to the threats and opportunities created by the global economic crisis, the global balance of power, the bricks of which have shifted significantly especially in the 2010s, has paved the way for a series of moves in which China has redefined and developed its revisionist interests in the international order. The Belt and Road Initiative can be seen as a central component of these moves. These moves show that Deng Xiaoping's formulation that China needs to maintain a "low profile" in international politics and diplomacy that does not intimidate its rivals in order to sustain its economic development has been set aside, especially under Xi Jinping's leadership (Yan, 2014). This foreign policy strategy formulated by Deng Xiaoping in the 1990s envisioned that in exchange for China not competing with the US global hegemony, the US would not perceive China as a threat and China would realize a national revival based on economic development in a peaceful international environment (Yan, 2014, p. 155).

However, since the early 2000s, Chinese political elites and thinkers have in a sense "remembered" or recalled from the pages of history the ancient Tianxia culture and philosophy (Tingyang, 2016, p.124), which looks beyond the logic and borders of the nation-state, i.e. the Westphalian state order. They have attempted to construct a new system of values and identity that makes this philosophy the legitimizing ground for China's new aspirations in the international relations system. This should be read as a reaction and a search for an alternative to the new unipolar world order in which the United States emerged as the superpower after the Cold War and set the rules, and to the Westphalian order in general, which has been gradually established since 1648.

However, this new initiative, which is essentially a reaction to the Western-centered order of international relations, has turned into a propaganda technology that romanticizes ancient Chinese Mythology and China's imperial periods at the level of discourse, and strengthens the image of a peaceful China by "recalling" the historical theme of "Chinese pacifism". This new ideological framework, referred to as neo-Tianxianism and based on the Confucian doctrine of "junzi he er butong", which can be translated as the harmony of differences or harmony within differences, refers to the ability of international actors with different identities, cultures and worldviews to cooperate and to create a ground where their common interests are not undermined by these differences (Zhang, 2011, p. 312; Qin, 2011, p. 251; Qin, 2007). This ideological framework is based on a set of principles summarized as "peaceful development" (heping hazan) in the 2005<sup>1</sup> and 2011<sup>2</sup> government policy

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/book/152768.htm>

<sup>2</sup> [https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2014/09/09/content\\_281474986284646.htm](https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/09/09/content_281474986284646.htm)

reports. Accordingly, China should realize its development by contributing to world peace, and China's development should be perceived as an opportunity for common interests and common development (gangtong fazan) among actors in international relations (Dossi, 2012, p. 124).

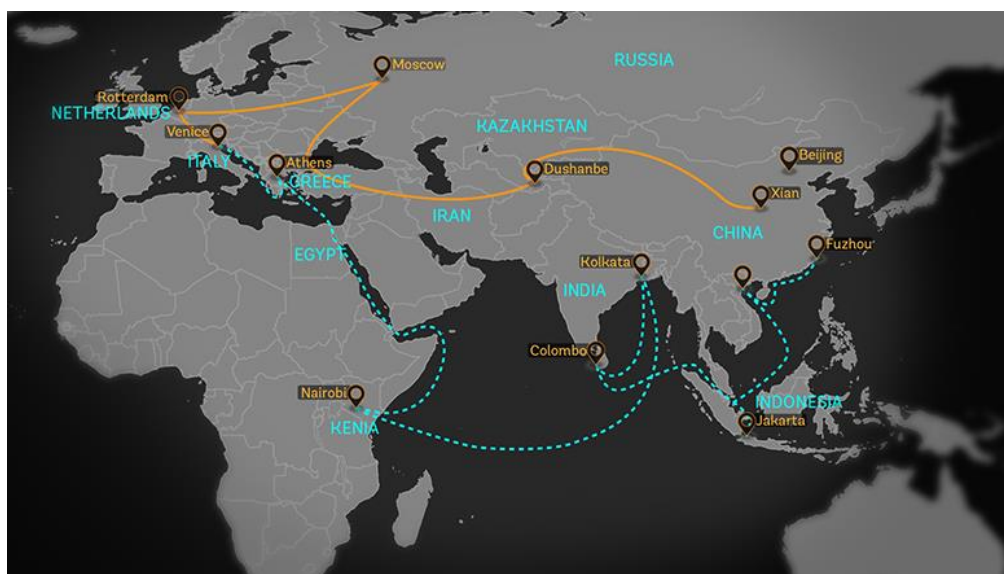
In the 1990s, when China was relatively weak and the Western world, led by the United States, had full confidence in it, a body of international relations literature emerged that China, far from being a threat to the Westphalian order, had integrated into it in a way that supported its foundations. In this framework, pioneering studies on Beijing's stance towards the control of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles (Johnston, 1995: p. 123), its approach to the protection and promotion of human rights and its bilateral relations with the United States on this issue (Kent, 1995, p. 3-4; Kent, 2007, p. 67), and the possible positive effects of its accession to the World Trade Organization (Hsiung, 2003, p. 87) were conducted, offering a promising perspective on China's adaptation to global norms and its contributions to the functioning of international institutions. These studies offered a promising view of China's adaptation to global norms and its contributions to the functioning of international institutions.

However, this optimistic literature emerged during a brief "interim period" following the end of the Cold War, a time when there was widespread belief in the relative stability of the international system, and China was still an emerging power, neither globally nor regionally dominant (Carlson, 2011, p. 90). The subsequent decade, marked by the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and the 2008 global economic crisis, brought significant disruptions that shook the foundations of the global order. Major upheavals in the 2010s and 2020s, such as the Arab Spring, the annexation of Crimea, the global COVID pandemic, the Ukraine War, and the Gaza conflict, ushered in a chaotic period necessitating inevitable transformations. This turbulence unfolded against a backdrop of China's marked increase in economic influence.

More recently, there has been a growing body of work arguing that China is not merely adapting to the existing Westphalian order but is also seeking to reshape the system of sovereign equal states to better reflect its own interests and values (Wang and Rosenau, 2009, p. 6-8). This perspective is supported by strategic initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as developments in domestic law concerning global governance areas like cybersecurity and digital infrastructure (Parasol, 2018, p. 68). Additionally, China has made strides in international cooperation, exemplified by its involvement in the 2014 Internet Forum with the United States (Cuihong, 2015, p. 489), and has adopted a more proactive stance in regional conflicts (Ferdinand, 2016, p. 102; Rolland, 2017, p. 54). However, the most prominent pillar of these changes, reflecting China's desire to influence the rules and norms governing international interactions, is undoubtedly the BRI.

Through the BRI, the People's Republic of China aims to diversify existing trade routes, create a transportation network that fosters interdependence with potential trading partners, establish alternative land routes to existing sea routes, secure access to energy resources in the Middle East, Caucasus, and Central Asia, and find new markets for its burgeoning industrial output (Yang, Hu, Collins, Yang & Esedo, 2022, p. 410-411). Infrastructure investments, including road and rail projects and port construction, are expected to lower the cost of trade and, in the medium term, create a China-centered economic system with enhanced connectivity (Ishnazarov, 2020, p. 68).

**Figure 1: Belt And Road Initiative**



Source: (World Bank, 2018)

Infrastructure investments under the BRI open up a vast space beyond the borders of the local economy for the construction sector, which has been the engine of China's rapid growth over the last 30 years. The construction sector is expected to trigger growth, provide medium and long-term energy security through new pipelines, increase purchasing power by creating economic development in the peripheral regions where the BRI extends, thereby creating new markets for Chinese goods, and ultimately, the Yuan is expected to achieve reserve currency status within the economic system to be created (Yang, Hu, Collins, Yang & Esedo, 2022, p. 411). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is one of the most important projects realized so far under the BRI. The budget of the project, which includes airports, railways, pipelines and highways built for the modernization of Pakistan's Gwadar Port, the connection between Gwadar and Kashgar and thus establishing China's connection with the Middle East, has exceeded 60 billion dollars. The Bandung - Jakarta high-speed rail line was completed in 2015, and the Bombasa - Nairobi railway line connecting Kenya's coastline with the capital in the interior was completed in 2017. The Khorgos crossing on the Kazakhstan-China border (Grant, 2019, p. 7), which has facilitated the movement of goods between Europe and Asia since its opening in 1987, has also been restored under the BRI.

China has also created financial institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Silk Road Fund, and the China Import-Export Bank to finance the infrastructure projects developed under the BRI. These institutions provide loans to the aforementioned infrastructure projects and encourage developing countries to participate in these projects (Chin and Gallagher, 2019, p.246). Through the loans and grants provided for the realization of infrastructure projects by countries that have developed strategic cooperation within the scope of BRI, China is also increasing its influence in the international financial system, acting relatively more independently and ultimately aiming to secure its long-term economic security by creating an alternative to the power and dominance of the US dollar as a reserve currency (Matthews, 2019, p. 12).

### **3. The Construction of Material and Ideological Elements of National and Cultural Identity in the Republic of Türkiye: Is Cooperation with China Possible?**

The geopolitical and economic rivalry of the Ottoman Empire with its northern neighbor Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire to its west, combined with battlefield defeats and nationalist revolutions—if we consider the Treaty of Paris of 1856, which ended the Crimean War, as a milestone—set the stage for the severe disintegration that would last some 50-60 years. However, from a broader perspective, the historical dynamic that brought down the Ottoman Empire can be viewed as the emergence of the historical capitalist system in Europe, which peripheralized much of the rest of the world (Wallerstein, 1972). The material transformations that began in Western Europe and extended to the Ottoman geography eroded the religious, cultural and local loyalties of the time and created the need for a new ideology that would bind the classes of society living in rural and urban areas to the state. Nationalism responded to this need in the periphery as well as in the center of capitalism. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the secular and Enlightenment form of nationalism in the form of republicanism competed with other legitimating strands such as Turkism, Ottomanism, Westernism and Islamism. (Berkes, 2002). This form of nationalism, which served as a catalyst for the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the consolidation of the social forces that gave rise to the Republic of Türkiye, "ostensibly" defeated its rivals Islamism and Ottomanism by blending itself with nationalism in the form of Turkism and Westernism representing Enlightenment values. However, this victory was apparent rather than definitive, as it followed the broader historical trajectory. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, historical capitalism, centered in Western Europe, required political organizations in the periphery that mirrored those in the center to access raw materials and markets. The use of land, water resources, modes of production and product varieties need to be transformed or transformed in such a way as to guarantee the flow of raw materials and markets from the periphery to the center in accordance with capitalism's raw material and market needs. World War I can be seen as the product of the economic, political, legal, and cultural struggle between the old and new legal owners of the system during this material transformation. Türkiye, as the successor state to the Ottoman Empire, experienced late industrialization, having been exposed to capitalism relatively late. As a result, Türkiye did not develop a commercial bourgeoisie like that which emerged in Europe from the 16th century onwards, nor an industrial bourgeoisie like that which developed at the end of the 18th century and primarily in the 19th century. The Turkish industrial and commercial bourgeoisie emerged with state support, shaped by the homogenization of the Anatolian and Thracian population after the Balkan Wars and World War I (Ülker, 2023, p. 61-62), and the principles of statism, nationalism, and populism that the young republic built upon this homogenization. Consequently, political legitimacy in Türkiye, as in the West, is only partially based on the secular state and its sanctity, which protects the constitutional equality of citizens. Legitimacy in Türkiye is also rooted in Westernism—the founding value of the secular republic—as well as in Turkic references to Asiaticism, Islamism based on the ummah's brotherhood, and a constructed memory of Ottomanism, symbolized by the Pax Ottomana.

The Westernized-republican elites, who formed the state's founding ruling class, and the lifestyle and culture signified by their values, created a contrast between the major cities and the relatively prosperous coastline, where the military-bureaucratic elite is concentrated, and the economically and politically peripheral populations of Anatolia. The governments of the Motherland Party, the True Path Party, and the Welfare Party represent a chain of political rhetoric and leadership that emerged from the peripheral social elements' (Yavuz: 1998: p. 20) economic and ideological movements towards the center. Moving beyond realist and neo-realist claims that national interests—which determine the direction of foreign policy—are driven solely by power struggles, anarchy, and the distribution of material power, national interests, and foreign policy in Türkiye can be understood as defined by the state's national and international identity (Flockhart, 2008, p. 87).

In this context, the foreign policy moves of the Justice and Development Party (JDP), which came to power in 2002, have been shaped by the new interests emerging from conflicting and mutually constructing identities at the intersection of the struggle for material distribution within the country and the ideological struggle for power. The JDP claims to represent segments of society seeking to gain wealth and prestige by moving from the periphery to the center and to gain an advantage in the ideological competition with Westernized-secular segments. It is true that the elite class that carried out Ottoman modernization, led the Turkish War of Independence, and founded the Republic of Türkiye was Westernized, and Türkiye 's foreign policy has historically aligned itself with the Western camp, its economic system, and security umbrella, while trying to distance itself from Middle Eastern politics (Bozdağlıoğlu, 2008, p. 55-56, 62).

However, this picture changed when the competition between the center and the periphery intersected with the neoliberal transformation in global politics and the economy. The periphery, which derived legitimacy from Islamism and neo-Ottomanism, gained the upper hand over the secular and Westernist founding axis by riding the wave of neoliberalism. This shift was evident as the interventionist attitudes and habits of the military—the republic's founding force and protector of secularism, the rule of law, and Enlightenment values—gradually gave way to acceptance (Bozdağlıoğlu, 2014, p. 19). The legitimacy ground produced by the dynamic shift from the periphery to the center through the JDP and Erdoğan was also accepted by the Turkish Armed Forces. It is important to note that the global neoliberal wave, which set the stage for this change, became visible in the 1980s, with its effects in Türkiye emerging after the 1980 coup d'état and the Turgut Özal government. As Tanıl Bora notes, after the coup, Turanist ideology was suppressed, and space was opened for Islamist ideology, resulting in the NMP increasing its votes in the 1999 elections and becoming a ruling partner (Bora, 2003, p. 111). This situation also explains why China's oppressive governance in the Uighur autonomous region has not become a major issue in the development of Turkey-China relations. This period saw the materialization of the ideological ground known as the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, making it clear that the discourse of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, which became prominent during the second period of JDP rule, did not emerge in a vacuum. All these transformations do not suggest that the new Islamist elite, which has taken over the political center and state institutions, has succeeded in imposing its norms and practices in a way that completely determines foreign policy. As Bozdağlıoğlu notes, drawing on Edward Said, society is a stage where different components with varying loyalties come together and interact to shape what is considered the national interest (Bozdağlıoğlu, 2007, s. 139). Situated at the intersection of Asia, Europe, the Caucasus, the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East, Türkiye is a mosaic of diverse cultural, class, religious, sectarian, and ethnic affiliations. As a result, the national identity that guides foreign policy is a highly dynamic field of competition, too complex to be dominated by a single element.

The prestige and power of the Republic's founding elite, rooted in the rhetoric of "founding the state" and "saving the homeland," allowed the enlightened, secular, and Kemalist elites to dominate this competitive field—at least until the 1980s. However, this field of competition became more animated, particularly regarding Türkiye 's foreign policy behavior, after 2002, when the JDP government, representing the social periphery's material and ideological rise to the center, came to power. For Türkiye, which had joined the US-led containment policy against the Soviet Union with the Truman Doctrine, became a NATO member in 1952, and opened its territory to the Western alliance and US military, the JDP's mobilization stretched the boundaries of traditional alliances, paving the way for active cooperation with Russia and China.

In the early years of JDP rule, the European Union accession process, along with reforms and a pro-Western foreign policy agenda, was strategically used to weaken the influence of the secular-republican-nationalist elite in domestic politics (Hintz, 2016, s. 353). Initially, the JDP pursued a foreign policy closely aligned with Europe and the United States, reconstructing national interest through the Western rhetoric of democracy, human rights, and freedom. However, the party soon adopted a more "pragmatic" and multifaceted approach, occasionally turning eastward toward Russia and China. An interesting example of this "pragmatism" in foreign policy is Türkiye 's efforts to meet its air defense system needs, including technology transfer. Efforts to procure air defense systems from China in 2015 culminated in the purchase of the S-400 air defense system from Russia in 2021. This example clearly demonstrates how the identities within Türkiye's social and public order are invoked in the



continuous construction of national interest, driven by the reflex to consolidate domestic power. However, the JDP's pragmatism in foreign policy, which united elements of Islamic, neo-Ottomanist, nationalist, Turkist, and conservative identities in domestic politics, ultimately undermined Türkiye's credibility in the eyes of the Western alliance, leading to its removal from the F-35 program (Kara, 2023, p. 433).

As this example illustrates, the identities of social classes, individuals, and pressure groups act as catalysts in Türkiye's foreign policy decisions, within a context where national interest is continuously being reconstructed. The Islamist and nationalist-conservative tradition in Türkiye, driven by the need to consolidate power and legitimacy, pursues a hybrid foreign policy that can shift national interest toward the US, China, Russia, or Europe, often drawing on references to Asian, Turkish, Ottoman, and Islamic identities. This identity heterogeneity explains Türkiye's pragmatism as a NATO member signaling strategic cooperation with China and Russia through BRICS at a time when the possibility of a global and conventional war is being discussed in both national and international media. Therefore, while Türkiye's deep integration within the Western alliance does not pose a structural obstacle to cooperation with China, this cooperation will likely be shaped by Türkiye's unique approach. The multifaceted Turkish identity allows the country to redefine its national interest in response to new conditions, creating appropriate legitimacy by invoking Asianism, Turkishness, Islamism, Ottomanism, or Westernism and modernity. For instance, China's policies in the Uyghur Autonomous Region or Türkiye's NATO membership are sometimes presented as obstacles to relations with China, while at other times, they are downplayed.

With the 2017 referendum, Türkiye transitioned to a Turkish-style presidential system. This system has allowed the JDP government, backed by the Nationalist Movement Party (NMP), to integrate those who identify with Turkish, Islamist, and nationalist ideologies within the social classes, bureaucracy, and military into a single melting pot known as the Turkish-Islamic synthesis (Yörük, 2002, p. 316; Yesevi, 2012, p.81). This new rhetoric and identity have facilitated the development of strategic affinities with major Asian revisionist powers such as China and Russia. Additionally, the presidential system's influence on the legislative, executive, and judicial branches has enabled Türkiye to bypass traditional foreign policy-making channels more easily. This shift has allowed Türkiye to navigate away from the constraints of the EU, US, and Western political-economic and security architecture in certain areas, including the BRI and relations with China. For example, despite its longstanding ties to the Western economic architecture since the Marshall Plan, Türkiye did not hesitate to integrate the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project, initiated in 2007, into the BRI to facilitate the transportation of Chinese goods to Europe. The line made its first export from Cerkezkoy to Xinzhu city in December 2020, and after the earthquake disaster of February 6, 2023, 50,000 tent materials for 50,000 people in 200 containers sent from China to Türkiye were also transported by this line<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, in the field of energy, Turkey, which has not bound itself to EU and Western frameworks on the grounds that it is a developing country, can cooperate with China on energy transmission lines and fossil fuel energy production within the context of the Silk Road Economic Belt (Ergenç and Göçer, 2022, p. 100-102). Notable examples include the thermal power plant in Adana-Hunutlu, built by China Energy Engineering Group with loans from China and inaugurated in 2023, and the thermal power plant in Konya Ilgın, financed by the Chinese financial giant ICBC (Industrial and Commercial Bank of China) and constructed by the CİNER group. Türkiye views the Belt and Road Initiative and the new Silk Road Project as opportunities to unlock its potential, particularly through its historical and cultural connections with Central Asian countries. Türkiye does not want to be left out of the economic system, opportunities, and growth momentum that may arise from infrastructure investments such as transportation and communication infrastructure, roads, energy transmission lines, energy production centers, and bilateral and multilateral trade agreements realized or potentially realizable within the scope of the BRI (Yıldiran, 2020, p. 218).

## Conclusion

The 2008 banking crisis, which began in the US real estate market due to the disproportion between high real estate prices and demand, quickly spread to multiple sectors, triggering a domino effect that shook financial markets and real economies worldwide, leading to a global depression. The Belt and Road Initiative, introduced by the People's Republic of China in 2013, may initially appear as a massive international trade endeavor involving hundreds of countries and tens of billions of dollars in transportation and infrastructure investments. However, it would be more accurate to interpret the project as a manifestation of China's revisionist ambitions concerning the existing international relations order. Through the BRI, China aims to construct an architecture of international relations centered on itself, with the Yuan eventually becoming the reserve currency, and to draw nearly 150 participating countries into this framework. Türkiye, with its strategic geographical location, demographic structure, educated population, and stable public order, occupies an important position in the development of the BRI. However, the revisionist nature of the project raises questions about Turkey's involvement, given the

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/baku-tiflis-kars-demiryolu-hatti-yeniden-acildi-859784.html>

economic, political, and military architecture that the country has been part of since the Truman Doctrine, Marshall Plan, and NATO membership.

This study addresses these questions from a constructivist perspective. Since the mid-2000s, Türkiye has undergone a cultural, socio-political, and economic transformation in which the elites defining the national interest have shifted, and peripheral elements within Türkiye have moved toward the center. Central to this transformation is a rhetoric emphasizing the movement of Anatolian people from the periphery to the center, those who have historically received a smaller share of cultural prestige and material wealth. The new elite class, which embraced the Turkish-Islamic synthesis and leveraged Islamism and neo-Ottomanism to establish political legitimacy, pushed the Westernized, Kemalist, and secular elite into the background and positioned itself at the center. In foreign policy, this shift, represented by the Justice and Development Party (JDP), led to an era where traditional diplomatic tools and channels were bypassed, alliances were redefined, and foreign policy operated through unconventional means. By stretching the traditional contours and decision-making mechanisms of Turkish foreign policy, this new era has created momentum in neighboring regions such as the Middle East, the Balkans, North Africa, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. This momentum has, at times, pushed beyond the economic, political, and cultural boundaries set by the Western alliance in which Türkiye is embedded. Consequently, Türkiye has found itself more accepting of and aligned with the BRI, a project born from China's suspicions about the current international order, the way rules are made, and the identities of those who make them. China's revisionist desire to reshape this order in its favor has resonated with Türkiye's evolving foreign policy approach.

#### **AUTHOR DECLARATION**

**Research and Publication Ethics Statement:** This study was prepared in accordance with the rules of scientific research and publication ethics.

**Ethics Committee Approval:** This study does not require ethics committee approval since it does not include analyses that require ethics committee approval.

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