

## Belt And Road Initiative and Turkey China Relationships Through Soft Power Concept

DOI: 10.26466/opus.831498

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### Abstract

*China, has the second-largest economy after the USA in the world following the Reform and Openness policy. Besides its fastly growing economy and increasing effect on global politics, China's "soft power" efforts have accelerated much. China's cultural values, student exchange programmes, conventionalization of Chinese, efforts in written and visual media and are the methods followed in efforts to create "soft power". Additionally, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was the biggest project of China in terms of economy and politics, is the most effective project besides the efforts for creating "soft power". BRI, which unveiled in 2015 by Xi Jinping, aim to entagration countries in different continents via big infrastructure investments. Turkey is located in the Middle Corridor within the scope of BRI, constitutes one of the biggest parts of this project with its geographic allocation, young population and increasing effect in global arena in terms of economy and politics. But looking at the Sino-Turkish ralations, it is seen that the relations between the set two countries are not on a positive trend and they do not know each other well. The aim of this study is to ascertain China's efforts in Turkey within the scope of its current soft power and BRI and present suggestions for increasing the amount and variety of such efforts and investments in order to improve the relations between the two countries.*

**Keywords:** Soft Power, China, Belt and Road Initiative, International Politic Economics

## Yumuşak Güç Kavramı Bağlamında Kuşak Yol Girişimi ve Türkiye Çin İlişkileri

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### Öz

Çin, Reform ve Açıklık politikasından sonra günümüzde ABD'nin ardından dünyanın en büyük ikinci ekonomisine sahiptir. Hızla büyüyen ekonomisi ve küresel siyasette artan etkisi ile birlikte Çin'in "yumuşak güç" çalışmaları da büyük hız kazanmıştır. Çin'in kültürel değerlerini tanıtmak, öğrenci değişim programları, Çin dilinin yaygınlaştırılması, yazılı ve görsel medya alanında yapılan çalışmalar yumuşak güç oluşturmaya yönelik kültürel ve kamu diplomasisi alanındaki bazı yöntemleri oluşturmaktadır. Bununla birlikte, Çin'in kendine özgü yumuşak güç çabalarından en önemlisi ekonomik ve politik hedefler içeren Kuşak Yol Girişimidir. Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi (KYG), 2015 yılında Çin başkanı Xi Jinping tarafından açıklanan bu proje büyük altyapı yatırımları yoluyla çeşitli kıtalarda yer alan ülkeleri ekonomik olarak birbirine entegre etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. KYG kapsamında Orta Koridor olarak adlandırılan bölgede yer alan Türkiye, coğrafi konumu, genç nüfusu, ekonomik ve politik anlamda küresel arenada artan etkisi ile bu projenin en önemli ayaklarından birini oluşturmaktadır. Ancak Türkiye Çin ilişkilerine bakıldığında iki ülke arasındaki ilişkilerin olumlu bir seyir izlemediği ve ülkelerin birbirini çok tanımadığı görülmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Çin'in Türkiye'deki mevcut yumuşak güç ve KYG kapsamındaki çalışmalarını ortaya çıkarmak ve ülkeler arasındaki ilişkilerin geliştirilmesinde bu tür çalışma ve yatırımların sayısının ve çeşitlerinin artırılması konusunda öneriler sunmaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Yumuşak Güç, Çin, Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi, Uluslararası Politik İktisat

## Introduction

China is a strong actor in international arena as the country with the largest population and biggest economy. Besides its big investments in military and economic areas, China strives in economic, political and technological areas to be the greatest power on earth while declaring itself the champion of economic integration and globalisation thanks to big projects like BRI. One of these areas is the “soft power” which is the measurement of a country’s charm and its ability to impress the people of other countries’ people. (Albert, 2018).

Since 90s, Chinese authorities and academicians have started to emphasize the importance of endorsing Chinese culture in the foreign arena. China wants to gain more friends in world public by highlighting its traditions, values, language and culture. China allocates serious funds for efforts towards this aim. Communist Party of China (CPC) used the concept of soft power first in in 2007, at its 7th National Congress. Chinese President of the period Hu Jintao expressed the importance given to this subject with the quote ‘What will accompany the rejuvenation of Chinese nation is absolutely the advancement of Chinese culture’. With a vision accompanied by slogans like “peaceful rise”, “harmonious society”, China tries to eliminate the perception in Western societies that it is a threat to the order. (Barker, 2017).

With its multi-dimensionality, scope and magnitude, BRI holds an important place in China’s soft power efforts. Improvement of relations with Turkey, which has a significant place within BRI, bears significant importance for both countries. In this sense, China’s soft power efforts in Turkey, whether they are adequate or not and question of what should be done holds great importance in regards to the future of relations between the two countries. BRI, as a different and effective instrument of soft power efforts, has a great importance regarding Sino-Turkish relations. This study will primarily discuss the soft power concept, China’s classical methods for establishing soft power and BRI. Turkey-China relations will be analyzed within the concept of soft power and suggestions will be proposed.

## Concept of Soft Power

In international relations, the concept of power is traditionally described with “hard” terms and stresses the military and economic power of a country. The concept of soft power was brought into the literature by the international politics theorist Joseph Nye in 1980s. It is defined as a country’s superiority against another country or other countries without its economic and/or military power. Besides this, “soft power” can also be defined as the global image and international prestige of a country. Sources of soft power consist of culture, political values and foreign policy according to Nye (Nye, 2004, p.14).

There are three reasons why China accelerates its soft power efforts. Firstly, Chinese authorities acknowledge that great powers hold power in global arena through establishing a soft power. Secondly, they believe that conflicts between great powers are not carried out by classic warfare but by struggles in areas like soft power. Lastly, they have been trying to show that their country is not a threat to others by endorsing China’s positive sides to the world. (Suzuki, 2010:201).

Although soft power is a concept that is hard to measure, there were many categorizations regarding the sources of it and many methodical efforts regarding the measurement of soft power. A part of these efforts is public opinion surveys. (Yapıcı, 2015).

The study titled “The Soft Power 30” by Portland USC Center on Public Diplomacy established the concept of soft power within the framework of the definition based on Joseph Nye’s approach. Soft power rankings are released on annual periods under the title of “The Soft Power 30”. Soft Power 30 index scores according to specific criteria and ranks the top 30 countries with highest points (Baş, 2018).

Within the frame of index in the 2019 report, the 65% weighted set of soft power aspects consist of variables like the government, digitalization, culture, enterprise, fidelity, education. The other 35% set consist of concepts measured by votes such as local cuisine, technical products, friendship ties, luxury goods, foreign policy and quality of life. According to this index, China was in the 27th place with 51.25 points while France claimed the top spot with 80,27 points. Turkey was at 29th

place with 49,70 points. The fact that, despite many negative incidents like trade wars in economic and political arena, developments regarding the Huawei company, policy towards Uighurs and Hong Kong protests, China climbed from 28th in 2018 to 27 in 2019. It is very important indicator of the importance China gives to this subject (Global Soft Power Index, 2019).

To increase its soft power, China not only takes steps in cultural area but also does it in economic and political areas with BRI. In this sense, the methods China uses to increase its soft power differs from other countries.

### **China's Methods for Establishing Soft Power**

There are various instruments China uses in soft power efforts. Confucius Institutes in many countries are the most important instruments in these efforts and they aim to endorse Chinese language and culture. Some of methods China uses to establish its soft power are as follows: Student exchange programs, investments in Hollywood cinema industry, bought football clubs in many countries of Europe and transferring foreign players to Chinese league and "Panda Diplomacy". In addition to these, BRI stands out as a different method China utilizes to create soft power in terms of economics and politics.

### ***Confucius Institutes***

China opened the first Confucius Institute in Seoul, South Korea in 2004. As of 2019, number of these institutes have reached 555. Europe is the region with the most Confucius Institutions with 184 institutes in a categorization where Turkey is placed in Asian continent. These institutes are non-profit organizations which work under Hanban institute (Hanban, 2019). In these courses, participants are provided with Mandarin language education, Chinese cuisine and calligraphy lessons and additionally celebrations of Chinese national holidays. Contrary to its counterparts like British Council of England, Alliance Française of France, Goethe of Germany and Cervantes Institutes of Spain, Confucius

Institutes are founded under specific universities in the countries they are founded (Jacques, 2009, p.554).

However, there have been claims of espionage and, especially in some states of America, threats to autonomy of universities regarding the Confucius Institutes. What lies under these claims is the fear that the only authority on the curriculum of these institutes is Chinese government and their whole expenditure is paid by Chinese Government will cause universities to become financially dependent on Chinese Government. American Association of University Professors stated that it is necessary to shut these institutes down in a report they published in 2014. In 2018, a bill was presented to the US Congress requesting to shut them down (Konak, 2018). In 2015, initially the Stockholm Confucius Institute, the Confucius Institutes in Sweden, France, Netherlands, United States of America, Canada and Australia were shut down one by one on the claims of interfering with domestic politics of said countries. In 2019, University of Vrije in Belgium decided to shut down the institute within its body due to the fact that the director of the institute, Soong Xinning was prohibited from entering the country for he had committed acts of espionage. (Lau, 2019).

### *Hollywood Investments*

China's influence in Hollywood has significantly increased in the last decade. Big production and distribution companies like Walt Disney, Warner Brothers, Universal and Sony have included Chinese actors and actresses with positive characters in their productions especially in the recent years. For example, just in 2018, Chinese actors and actresses played some of the main characters of expensive productions like Skyscraper and MEG (Guerrasio, 2018). Wang Jianlin, owner of Dalian Wanda, which is China's one of the biggest companies in the retail and entertainment industry, incorporated AMC and Legendary Entertainment by spending 3.5 and 2,6 billion dollars for them respectively after negotiations held in Hollywood in the last months of 2016. AMC is a famous production company that holds an important place in Hollywood as the producer of movies like Godzilla and Pacific Rim. Wang Jianlin declared that he made this investment as a part of the

network Chinese President Xi Jinping has created within the framework of establishing soft power. These investments were an indicator of China's escalating cultural influence and soft power according to Wang (Barnes ve Forsythe, 2016). Although investments in Hollywood are seen as a result of establishing soft power, on the other hand, it is clearly seen that the rise in box office returns from Chinese moviegoers in the last decade also plays a part. Hence, it is very hard to come across a Chinese character with a negative character in such productions due to both the investments in cinema industry within the scope of soft power and the fact that foreign producers have discovered a wide audience such as China. (Garrahan ve Clover, 2017).

### *Investments to Popular Football Teams*

China plans to make 813 billion dollars worth investments to sports industry till 2025. It has allocated the largest part in the industry to football. The aim of developing 10.000 football players annually as of 2030 is also important in understanding China's strategy in this area. China perceives sports industry not only as a platform for healthy lifestyle but also an area where there are big investments in a large country like China. These investments made in sports industry are also one of the most prominent methods of soft power efforts at the same time (Lovett ve Townsend). Bearing football's fame and large share of importance in global entertainment industry in mind will enable the better understanding of this industry's importance in regards to soft power. With this aim, China has both been continuing its economic investments with partnerships and purchase of the following football clubs and also taking serious steps towards establishing soft power.

In 2016, Chinese businessman Tony Xia bought Aston Villa, one of England's rooted clubs, and in 2018 sold some of club's shares (Aston Villa website, 2020). Wolverhampton football club was bought by Shanghai-centered Fosun Group in 2016 (Wolverhampton website, 2020). 87,8% of West Bromwich Albion's shares belong to Chinese companies Yunyi Guokai and Guochuan Lai (West Bromwich Albion website, 2020). 60% of French football club Auxerre's shares were bought by Chinese company ORG in 2016 (insider football website, 2019). 100% shares of

Sochaux football club, which was founded by the owners of French Peugeot Company and which has special place in football history as a club belonging to workers of Peugeot automobile company, were bought by Ledus, and illumination company from Hong Kong (yts website, 2020). The fact that the club holds a symbolic history for the French and there is Chinese language option in its website shows this purchase's importance regarding soft power establishment efforts. Atletico Madrid football club's 17% shares which was bought by Chinese Wanda Group in 2015 were sold to Israeli Quantum Pacific company (usatoday, 2018). Inter Milan, which made record profits in 2019, was bought by Chinese Suning company in 2016 (jourdan, 2019).

### *Student Exchange Programmes*

Chinese students are the largest group of foreign students in the world. One of every six foreign student in the world is Chinese. 5.194.900 students have received education in abroad in the last forty years and the number of students which went abroad to receive education is 662.100 in 2018 only and just 369.548 of these students' study in USA (statista website, 2020). According to 2018 data, 492.185 students from 196 countries came to China for education. While 60% of this number consists of students from countries in the Asian continent, students from Africa, Europe, America and Oceania continents respectively also receive education in China. Students from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan were not included in these numbers as foreign students. An interesting point is that USA ranks 5th among the countries of America continent, which has the least students going to china to study, in the number of students going to China for education (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2019).

### *International Media Efforts*

Media organizations for the public that has emerged since the last century, besides spreading their sphere of influence to the whole world with the advent of communication technologies and globalization, have seen great changes in terms of number, variety (TV, radio, internet etc.) and ownership (private, government). International media organizations have now been being used not only as the informing and propaganda



instrument of states but also as private sector's publications instrument towards their own interests. While only 5 big international news agencies such as Associated Press, United Press International, Agence France Press, Reuters ve TASS (TASSITAR) used to fulfill the world's public opinion's need to receive information, nowadays thousands of tv, newspaper, internet news channels from government or private sector operate in this area (Karaduman, 2019:470).

Many media organizations with the aim of informing global public opinion and propaganda have emerged in People's Republic of China too. China's official news agency Xinhua (Xinhua Tongxun She) leads these organizations. Founded in 1931 as Red China News Agency, it is China's the biggest and most effective media organization today. Xinhua has 32 local bureaus in China and has more than 170 foreign bureaus. It attracted great attention with its artificial intelligence anchorman recently (Regan,2018). CCTV, which is China's first 24-hour English broadcasting channel, started its broadcasting life in 2000 (Shambaugh, 2016:252). It is a media organization which reports news throughout the world and broadcasts in Chinese, English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Korean, Russia and languages belonging to Chinese ethnic groups. In 2016, CCTV merged under the roof of CTGN (China Global Television Network) with other tv and radio organizations such as CRI AND CNR. It broadcasts to more than 170 countries with its channel that broadcasts in 6 languages (CGTN, 2020). Another media organization that reports and informs about economy and finance is Caixin (Caixin, 2019). CRITurk, which broadcasts in Turkish, is the media organ that has outlets like a website that also teaches Chinese and a radio (CRITurk, 2019).

One of China's biggest struggles is the fact that it is often conveyed to the world through western news agencies. Bearing in mind that media organizations nowadays not only aim to inform but also aim to manipulate societies, the fact that China wants to convey its culture, language and ideology to the world's public opinion through its own perspective rather than foreign, especially western, media organizations has led to an increase in the number of international media organizations in China. When we look at the broadcast quality and content of these media organizations, it is seen that they are very succesful in terms of

use of technology, rich content and visuals. From this point of view, these media organizations have great importance regarding China's soft power efforts.

### *Panda Diplomacy*

People's Republic of China has been trying to decrease the tension or improve the relations with the countries that it has tense relations or relations with room to improve with by sending a couple of pandas. This practice actually started in 7th century with the two pandas sent by Emperor Wu to Japan. However, in modern diplomacy, the first application of this was the panda named Pingping which was gifted to Soviet Union. Empathy towards pandas has been, in a sense, a representation of China's rising soft power (Buckingham et al, 2013, p.2).

As of 2017, there are totally 48 diplomat pandas with 12 in America, 8 in Japan, 4 in Singapore, 3 in Malaysia and Spain and two each in England, France, Germany, Belgium, Austria, Canada, Australia, Netherlands and Thailand. Due to the fact that pandas struggle to adapt to different climates, pandas born in different countries have to be sent back to China when they reach the age of four. Official status of diplomat pandas are designated as commercial attaches (Sputnik, 2017).

Despite the suspicious approach towards the Confucius Institutes, Panda diplomacy is perceived as rather "cute" by many countries. Following Dalai Lama's visit to Austria in 2013, Chinese government threatened Austria with having the panda back (Packer, 2017). Consequently, while sending a panda shows the importance China attaches to that country, having it back in some situations shows the tension in relations. Apart from the aforementioned soft power efforts, BRI is a project that is different from the other methods towards improving China's soft power and influence of which is felt in many areas.

## **Belt and Road Initiative within the Context of Soft Power**

According to Nye, soft power is defined as a country's ability to convince others to do its bidding without using force. Bearing the assets of soft power in mind, grounds of USA's soft power consists of assets such as ; liberal democracy, free market economy, human rights and freedom. However Nye's definition of the necessity for soft power and the reasons behind China's demand for soft power differ (Demirtepe and Özertem, 2013:101). According to Nye, besides hard power, countries must establish their soft power assets in order for their targets they intend other countries to commit to. However, what lies behind China's soft power use is the idea of changing the existing negative perception about China in the world public opinion. In establishing the soft power assets to thwart this perception, not only the popular culture and the improvement of public diplomacy but also the economic and diplomatic approaches like participating in multinational organizations, aids and investments should be utilized. While not pursuing a hegemonic power in international relations, Beijing seeks a soft power that shows it will use every type of power when necessary. China, in its international relations, offers "the charm of a lion not of a mouse" (Kurlantzick, 2007:6). In this sense, China's soft power evokes the concept of "smart power" (Yatağan, 2018:74) which is defined by the experts as the collaborative use of hard and soft power.

In 2019, in a survey conducted by Pew Research and participated by 34.904 individuals in 32 countries, most of the participants expressed that China is a very important country in world economy and politics. However, most of the participants find China very inadequate in terms of human rights, democracy and freedom. Russia, some countries in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan African countries are the regions where the majority has positive perception about China. Investments within the BRI have great importance regarding the positive perception, especially in Sub-Saharan African countries. Investments to this region has amounted to 182.88 billion dollars since BRI's reveal period (Molavi, 2019). 46 port investments again in this region continues within the scope of BRI (Devermont et al., 2019). Besides this, in most of the European countries, China's perception has been observed as negative.

The ratio is 53% in Spain while it climbs to 70% in Sweden. 60% and 65% of people in America and Canada respectively have negative perception about China. China's neighbours in the region, apart from Pakistan which is an important country regarding the maritime and land routes of BRI, have negative points of view about China. 85% of Japan, 63% of South Korea and 54% of Philippines have negative views about China (Huang, 2019). Grounds of China's soft power consists of following assets; peaceful rise, harmonious society, mutual win-win, mutual respect and learning (Rahman, 2014:257-263). BRI is an important instrument that will transfer these assets to these countries within the scope of the project. BRI has five fundamental objectives. These are; policy of coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and connecting people. Said human relations refer to; exchanges in educational and cultural areas and increasing tourism activities (Pop, 2016:2-12). BRI aims to export the principles of "harmonious society", "mutual win-win" and "mutual respect and learning", which are rooted China's philosophy and ancient history, to the world via economic activities (Demirtepe ve Özertem, 2013:105). From this point of view, BRI is an investment programme with intercontinental and long term economic, political and cultural objectives that aim to, not only with cultural instruments but also with intercountry economic relations, to improve and facilitate the infrastructure of countries that reside in the historical Silk Road route in order to enable their economic integration (Leer and Yau, 2016:3).

BRI is the transportation infrastructure and investment programme that encompasses Africa, Asia, Europe and Middle-East. China aims to rejuvenate and expand trade routes of historic Silk Road in Asia, Europe and Middle-East. BRI, which was revealed by Xi Jinping, continues its projects on full throttle despite the criticisms of debt trap and new colonialism. Belt and Road is an initiative which holds importance in terms of not only economy but also politics and culture. Besides the economic projects developed on win-win principles, activities aiming to improve the "soft power" such as enabling student exchange between countries, improving tourism, blending cultures and strengthening community ties are among the fundamental aims of the initiative (Reed and Trubetskoy, 2019:3).

China also tries to export the economic success it has achieved in the last forty years as a development model. BRI is seen as a soft power instrument in this sense. Financial institutions like Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Silk Road Fund and New Development Bank, half the capital of which was funded by China, have been founded to provide the great financial support to the Initiative. Besides these, various relief programmes, low interest loans and grants and education efforts provided in agricultural and public health areas are among the undertakings carried out within the concept of soft power (Cainey, 2018). Turkey, with its geographical location and economic and demographic features, has a very important place within the BRI. BRI is a project which holds great opportunities for Turkey. While BRI improves Sino-Turkish relations as a soft power instrument, BRI will reciprocally advance in a healthier way thanks to the improved relations. In this sense, BRI and the improvement of Turkey-China relations have become complementing assets.

### **Sino-Turkish Relations within the Scope of Belt and Road Initiatives**

While the relations between Turkey and People's Republic of China goes way back, diplomatic relations between Republic of Turkey and People's Republic of China were established in 1971 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). These relations have started to accelerate since China's Reform and Opening-up policy in 1978 and Turkey's January 24 Decisions in 1980s (Çolakoğlu, 2013, pp.32-45). Relations started to further strengthen with the "Strategic Partnership" signed in 2010 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018).

Modern time Turkey-China relations have shaped up in accordance with the world conjuncture. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's founding of Republic of Turkey saw great interest in China as a great victory against imperialist states. Founding of Republic of Turkey was seen as a model by Chinese (Adıbelli, 2016:150). With the founding of People's Republic of China in 1949, Turkey-China relations ceased and the two countries situated themselves in the opposite camps ideologically. Korean War was one of the biggest breaking point between the two countries. While countries like Turkey were labeled as the "dog" of imperialist USA by

Chinese, the Chinese were labeled as “communist” in a negative manner among Turks (Zan, 2009:69). These viewpoints unfortunately, although degressively, remains intact. There have been important developments between Turkey and China regarding culture and tourism in recent years. A cultural memorandum of understanding, regarding the establishment of cultural centers in each country was signed between the two countries in 2017. Efforts were finalized to open Yunus Emre Cultural Center in China until the end of 2018 (Akdağ, 2019, p.85).

Relations with China, in economic terms, has accelerated since the 2000s. Despite the targets of increasing the trade volume to 50 billion dollars till 2015 and 100 billion dollars till 2020 within the framework of Turkey-China Strategic Partnership, trade volume currently resides at approximately 27 billion dollars (Nuroğlu, 2019).

In 2000s, diplomatic relations with China accelerated and reciprocal visits were put through in presidential and prime ministerial levels. Relations continued to improve within BRI, with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s visit to China in May, 2017 and July, 2019 regarding the BRI. It is seen that there are great increases in the amount of direct foreign capital flow to Turkey from China following the reveal of BRI. In 2017, the ratio of direct foreign capital from China to total direct foreign capital actualized as 3,57%. Due to the reflection of the negative developments between Turkey and USA on the Turkish economy, this ratio actualized as 2,53% in 2018. Leaving very low ratios (permillages) in 2000s and the particular situation in 2018 aside, we see that the ratio of the capital flow is on increasing trend (TSI, 2019).

Turkey resides on part of BRI named the Middle Corridor, between the North Corridor that passes through Russia and South Corridor that passes through Iran. Middle Corridor is defined as; the line that starts from Turkey and passes Caspian Sea through Georgia and Azerbaijan in the Caucasus and reaches China over Afghanistan and Tajikistan through Middle Asia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). Due to the similarities between the “Silk Road Initiative and Caravanserai Project” put forward by Turkey in 2008, Turkey has very positive attitude towards this initiative (Durdular, 2016, pp.77-97).

“The Draft Memorandum of Understanding on Harmonizing Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road with Middle

Corridor Initiative” and “Turkey-China Rail Transport Draft Agreement” signed between Turkey and China within the scope of “Middle Corridor” at the G-20 summit held in 2015 were ratified in GNAT. This draft was Turkey’s first official step towards BRI. The Draft Memorandum of Understanding on Harmonizing Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road with Middle Corridor Initiative includes the coordination of policies between the two countries, undertaking of all types of infrastructure investment to facilitate transportation, use of national currencies in commerce between the two countries, student exchange programmes and regulations regarding the improvement of financial aids (GNAT, 378).

Besides these, the Ashgabat Declaration signed by the Ministers of Transport of Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Turkey in 2016 was an important step in strengthening Turkey’s place in the BRI. These developments were followed by Marmaray and Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge investments, Istanbul Airport and Baku-Tblisi-Kars and Edirne-Kars Railroad projects. While these investments constitute the land part of BRI, Purchase of Istanbul Kumport by COSCO company, one of the biggest logistics enterprises in the world, established BRI’S maritime part in Turkey (Esmer, 2018). Investments such as Three-Deck Tube Tunnel Project in Istanbul, Çanakkale Strait Bridge project, Edirne-Kars High Velocity Train project, Gebze-Orhangazi-İzmir Highway, Northern Marmara Highway project and construction of Filyos, Çandarlı and Mersin ports are projects that will increase Turkey’s regional connection prowess. With this agreement, it was decided that an investment of 40 billion USD at first stage and then annual investments of 750 million dollars would take place (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018).

While Turkey’s geopolitical location and high trade volume makes it an indispensable actor within BRI, the initiative also holds great opportunities for Turkey to create a distribution center for energy corridors alongside goods and services and to transform its economy and industry (Güler, 2019). Statements of Turkey’s President Erdoğan, who visited China in July the 2nd, 2019, in the article he penned for Global Times shows the importance Turkey attaches to BRI. By expressing that the Middle Corridor, which is led by Turkey, is in the center of BRI, Erdoğan stressed that the Middle corridor, which starts

from Turkey and reaches Georgia through railroad and from there to Azerbaijan and from there further to Turkmenistan over the Caspian Sea and then finally China after passing through Kazakhstan, is one of the most important constituents of the Belt and Road project (Aytekin et al., 2019).

Alongside this, Erdoğan also stated in his article that BRI is not just an economic initiative and discussed the impact it will have on a new world order. While economic globalisation progresses, its threats towards global free trade system threatens all world economies. These threats based on the false understanding that we still live in a unipolar world undermine world peace and stability. We, as Turkey, share the same visions with China on notions such as world peace and stability, encouraging multilateralism and sustaining free trade. In this day and age when the world seeks a new multi-polar order, the necessity for a new international system to ensure the common interest of whole humanity is obvious. Great responsibilities fall on Turkey and China as two of the most ancient civilizations in the history of mankind, in the process of this new system's foundation (Erdoğan, 2019).

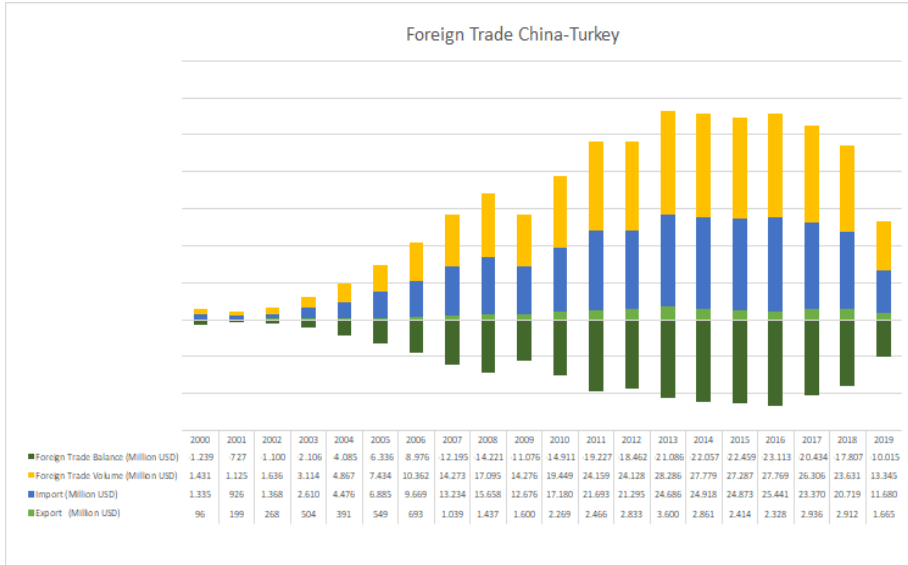
### **Problems in China-Turkey Relations**

China-Turkey relations progress in an "on and off" manner due to the conflicts of understanding between their peoples. The fact that these two societies learn about them from other sources rather than each other has a great part in this situation. We can categorize these problems as in the following.

#### ***Economic Problems***

China-Turkey foreign trade has a great deficit against Turkey. It can be seen in Graphic-1 that since 2000s, between Turkey and China, the foreign trade has been increasing against Turkey. This fact is actually not very surprising given China's place in world trade.





Graphic 1. Turkey- China Foreign Trade (Source: Created by us using TSI data)

Looking at the total trade of China and Turkey, it is seen that Turkey has a great trade deficit against China. Foreign trade deficit amounted to 28 billion USD, reaching a historic level. While Turkey sells mostly raw materials or semi-finished products to China, it buys technologic or capital-intensive products from it (TSI, 2019).

### Political Problems

Current political problems between Turkey and China are important with regards to the sustainability and safety of BRI investments. Uyghur issue is one of the most important political problems between Turkey and China. Also, Turkey’s dissertations in Cyprus, Eastern Mediterranean and Syrian Civil War conflicts with China’s. Turkey’s negative perception towards China stemming from its longstanding relations with the west and its being against the communist block for long years as a NATO member laid foundations of insecure feelings in Turkey China relations.

Uyghurs, who doesn’t belong to Han ethnic group, are a Muslim community with Turkish roots and a population of more than 20 million

which lives in China's autonomous Xinjiang region. Although Turkey foreign policy has regarded Uyghur problem as China's domestic issue since the formal visits in 1971, this problem is perceived as injustice and persecution towards cognates and coreligionists (Isik ve Zou, 2019, pp.278-293). "Extremity", "Separatism" and "Religious and ethnic secessionism", which were named as "three great evil" in 2011, are defined as China's own domestic problems. The fact that Uyghur Autonomous region is BRI's door to the west shows the importance of region's security for BRI. (Karan, 2019).

Uyghur problem is important not only for Turkey but also regarding the elimination of human rights and freedom in the modern world. This issue can be used as an instrument by those aiming to prevent China's development and BRI investments. From this point of view, solving the Uyghur problem is important for not only China-Turkey relations but also for the future of investments within the scope of BRI.

China prefers a distant approach towards Cyprus matter due to Taiwan and Tibet issues. China responded badly to Turkey upon its suggestion of "Taiwan model" for Cyprus in the past (Akdağ, 2019:49). China's policy to get along well with countries in the region regarding the natural gas sources emerged in the East Mediterranean covers not only Turkey but also Egypt, Greece, Greek Cypriots and Israel who are against Turkey. East Mediterranean has an important place in maritime part of BRI. While China has already been using Port of Piraeus since 2008, it has acquired 66% of port's shares till 2052 with an agreement in 2016. Additionally, the Port of Haifa was projected to be used by China for 25 years with an agreement worth of 2 billion dollars with Israel and there was an agreement with Israel regarding the use of Port of Ashdod but it was suspended due to the fact that the port was used by US Navy in Mediterranean (Demirci, 2019). Recently, there has been changes in China's attitude on this matter in favour of Turkey with regards to safety of the region which resides in Maritime Silk Road part of BRI. China's participation in a military maneuver in NATO member Turkey and high velocity train and bridge projects show that Turkey-China relations are relatively better than the past (Atun, 2012).

Turkey's relationship with the west and its NATO membership had an impact in bilateral relations. For example, the approach Turkey took

during the passage of the Ship Varyag, which China bought from Ukraine and claimed to use for touristic purposes, through the straits due to the pressure from USA and NATO countries is such an incident. However, with China's promise of more Chinese tourists, Turkey granted passage to the ship despite the pressure after all. China's unkept promise on this matter damaged the relations again (Çağlayan, 2015). Additionally, at the G20 summit of 2015 in Antalya, the cancellation of a previously accepted missile agreement with China due to USA's pressure caused further tension in bilateral relations again (Onuş, 2015).

Unkept promises between the countries may impact the future of investments adversely by increasing the insecurity of China and Turkey, which will carry out common projects, against each other.

### *Negative Judgements*

When talking about China, the Great Wall and the Chinese brides married to Turkish princes with the aim of toppling Turkish states from the inside are the first two things that come to mind in Turkish public opinion. Communism, Korean War and false informations regarding the lifestyle and eating habits of Chinese people created a negative perception about China among Turkish people. According to Üngör (2017); What lies behind the negative perception shared by people of various groups about China is not only the Uyghur issue but also the historical discourse which highlights negative issues such as hostility since the Middle Asia and Korean War. Generally, the perceptions of "weird", "distant" and "different" are what comes first tot the minds of Turkish people about China. Also, the fact that Turkish media presents news about China not in a rational but in an "exotic and unrealistic" manner helped the negative perception about China consolidate in Turkey.

Imported goods coming from China since 2000s have deepened the "cheap and poor-quality China" perception. In a survey conducted by Pew Research in 2019, it was revealed that 44% of Turkish people has negative thoughts about China (Silver et al, 2019).

### *Inadequate cultural soft power*

Kenan Evren became the first President to visit China in 1983. The Beijing duck Kenan Evren brought with himself on his return from China visit can be counted as the first example of soft power in Turkey-China relations. Karate movies with Chinese origin in 1970s and Bruce Lee name in 1980s attracted great attention in Turkey's public opinion. Although another Chinese cinema figure Jackie Chan was the most well-known actor in Turkey in 1990s, the fact that Chinese cinema had a relatively very weak profile in Turkey in comparison to Hollywood and Indian cinema shows the distance of those two countries' people's cultural structure.

Cultural Exchange programme was signed between the two countries in 1980. Sinology departments were established in Ankara University Faculty of Languages, History and Geography and Kayseri Erciyes and Okan Universities started to give Chinese lessons in order to introduce Chinese language and culture (Maimaiti, 2016:65). Currently, there are Confucius Institutes within METU, Bosphorus, Okan and Yeditepe universities (a Confucius Institute within İzmir University of Economics is in construction phase) and also a Confucius School under Jale Tezer College. There are two Confucius Institutes in Greece. Looking at populations of 80 and 10 million respectively, these numbers are obviously small (Hanban, 2019).

Looking at student exchange programmes, in 2017-2018 academic year, while there are 2110 registered Chinese students currently receiving education in universities in Turkey (MNE, 2019), a precise number regarding Turkish student in China is not available.

Looking at touristic numbers, it is seen that number of tourists coming from China has been swiftly increasing. Looking at the data of Ministry of Culture and Tourism, while the number of Chinese tourists in Turkey is 61.882 in 2008, it reached 394.109 in 2018. In the first ten months of 2019, this number was 377.532 (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2019).

Foundations and associations such as The Turkish Chinese Friendship Foundation, Turkish-Chinese Business Development and Friendship Association, Turkish Chinese Businessmen Friendship and

Solidarity Association operate in order to improve China-Turkey relations. While these associations have great importance regarding their conferences and seminars and efforts to improve the relations between two countries, it is seen that some associations have been inactive for quite some time.

Undertakings of such associations are very important to endorse Turkey and its investment environment. It is possible to draw more investments from Chinese companies within BRI thanks to these kinds of undertakings. It is important that, regarding this matter, those inactive associations start working more actively and new associations are founded.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions**

Relations between Turkey and China are not on the coveted level due to negative prejudices, China's policy towards Uyghur citizens in Xinjiang Autonomous region, conflicted issues in international area and the fact that people of the two countries do not know each other.

BRI, put forward by China in 2015, differ from classical efforts towards establishing soft power with its assets like endorsing the popular culture, big infrastructure investments outside public diplomacy, partnership organizations and economic activities like relief programmes.

China and Turkey have nowadays started to become influential in global area thanks to their economies, populations and increasing political impacts. Turkey, within BRI, is very essential with regards to complete execution of the project due to its location. As much as BRI is a great opportunity, Turkey is also an indispensable country for China regarding the project. Improvement of relations due to the project and simultaneous improvement of Turkey's position and the relations are two complementing realities. From this point of view, it is important that Turkey become more active within BRI investments and improve its position by carrying out necessary regulations. In order for the peoples of Turkey and China to know each other, it is necessary to increase the number of Confucius Institutes and China and Chinese economy lessons must be included among elective courses especially in the universities.

Student exchange projects such as Erasmus must be carried out between the countries within BRI. It is necessary to popularize tourism activities between the countries and increase the awareness of important dates of Chinese culture like Chinese New Year.

BRI is a project that has economic, political and cultural impact on global level. It is necessary for Turkey to reposition itself in changing world conditions, consolidate its place within BRI and improve its relations with China. Two countries' insecurity towards each other and uncertainties in future expectations are the biggest problem in their relations. In addition to cultural methods and methods in public diplomacy area, projects like BRI are very important regarding soft power efforts.

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#### Kaynakça Bilgisi / Citation Information

Koçakoğlu, M. A. (2021). Belt and road initiative and Turkey China relationships through soft power concept. *OPUS-International Journal of Society Researches*, 18(39), 750-776. DOI: 10.26466/opus.831498.