

## Turkey Looks to China for Security Cooperation Alternatives

*By Jan Gaspers and Mikko Huotari*

As Turkey's relations with NATO and the EU have soured, Ankara is cozying up to the China and Russia-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Turkey continues to hold significant strategic value for Europeans and Americans when it comes to tackling a wide range of regional security challenges, and this move threatens to erode transatlantic security cooperation. While Moscow is an important variable in Turkey's strategic repositioning, it is Beijing's reaction that will define Turkey's relations with the SCO in the years to come.

The United States and Europe should be consistent in signaling to Beijing that Turkey's relationship with the SCO could become a serious source of friction in the transatlantic relationship with China. At the same time, devising a convincing approach to managing Turkey's strategic realignment will be critical if the United States and Europe wish to shape China's still bounded but increasingly visible global security ambitions in a way that is conducive to transatlantic strategic interests.

April's referendum results left Turkish society deeply divided and the impending shift from a parliamentary democracy to a system characterized by one-man rule weighs heavily on Ankara's relations with the West. Discussions about whether the accession talks with Turkey should be shelved have not yet translated into tangible changes in EU policy. However, in many European capitals the expectation that Turkey would one day join the EU has vanished. And Ankara does not seem disappointed.

During the diplomatic standoff between some EU member states and Turkey in the run-up to the constitutional referendum, Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu threatened a strategic realignment, suggesting that, "If Europe keeps this up, they will lose many places, including Russia and us."<sup>1</sup> After the referendum vote, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan began using more moderate language, reflecting an awareness that Turkey's fortunes depend in part on stable economic relations with the EU. However, he also suggested that Turkey's position on EU accession might require reconsideration.<sup>2</sup>

Changes in Erdoğan's tone cannot conceal the deep normative divide and growing signs of strategic estrangement between the West and Turkey, which has reduced Ankara's political standing in European and transatlantic cooperation to an all-time low. Erdoğan's

<sup>1</sup> "Turkey's President Erdogan brands the Netherlands 'Nazi remnants' over barring foreign minister's visit," Newsweek, March 11, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Samia Nakhoul, Nick Tattersall, Orhan Coskun, "Erdogan says Turkey could reconsider its position on Europe," Reuters, April 25, 2017.



AKParty (AKP) had already lost most of its political capital with the EU following Ankara's response to the failed coup attempt in July 2016 and the spat over referendum campaigning in Europe in the spring of 2017. Ankara's push for another referendum on the death penalty could further deepen this divide. Disappointed with NATO's response to the rising regional instability on Turkey's border, Ankara has also reduced its attachment to transatlantic security cooperation to cost-benefit calculations rather than political conviction.

Lately, Ankara has looked more actively to the East for alternatives to Euroatlantic integration, focusing in on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Observers often point to the recent Turkish–Russian strategic rapprochement as an important indicator of the viability of Ankara's SCO ambitions. While Russia has doubtlessly been a key player within the SCO since its creation in 2001, it will be China that sets the tone for Turkey's future relations with the SCO and the transatlantic community.

Turkish suggestions that closer ties with the SCO might be traded in for NATO membership threaten to further erode transatlantic security cooperation. The United States and Europe should therefore clearly signal to Beijing that Turkey's relationship with the SCO could increase tensions between China and transatlantic partners. At the same time, devising a convincing approach to managing Turkey's strategic realignment will be critical to ongoing U.S. and European efforts to shape China's increasingly visible global security ambitions in a way that is conducive to transatlantic strategic interests.

## Ankara Turns to the SCO

The SCO serves China, Russia, and Central and South Asian member states as a forum for security cooperation, especially related to border management and counterterrorism, with training and exchanges on the latter being coordinated within the framework of an SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure. SCO members also regularly conduct joint military exercises, and they cooperate on cybersecurity matters. Though Turkey has been an SCO dialogue partner since 2012, which constitutes the most basic

form of association with the SCO, Ankara has used various high-profile opportunities to express interest in obtaining SCO observer status or joining the organization as a full member since 2013. President Erdoğan made his latest public reference to the idea of full SCO membership in November 2016.<sup>3</sup>

Western security analysts tend to refute the geostrategic significance of the SCO and rightly downplay its potential as a direct military competitor to NATO. Nevertheless, Turkey's cozying up to the SCO and implicit suggestions of a trade-in for NATO membership and European integration should ring some alarm bells in Europe and the United States. Ankara might feel less inclined to please Brussels institutions as the EU membership option crumbles away and disappointment with NATO Allies grows. There can be little doubt, though, that Turkey continues to hold significant strategic value for the West when it comes to tackling regional security challenges. For EU member states, it is paramount that the refugee deal struck with Turkey in March 2016 holds firm. Turkey hosts a range of important NATO military facilities that are of vital strategic importance to the Alliance's ability to project force in the Middle East. Turkey also remains one of the few remaining conduits the West has for communicating with Russia about strategy in Syria — even though the extent to which Turkish and wider transatlantic strategic interests on this issue align is increasingly questionable.

“ Turkey remains one of the few remaining conduits the West has for communicating with Russia about strategy in Syria.”

Turkey's timing for seeking closer ties with the SCO could hardly be better, as the organization has just embarked on an expansionary course. India and Pakistan joined the organization at the SCO Astana Summit on June 9, 2017. The SCO has started more intense discussions on expanding into the Middle

<sup>3</sup> Daren Butler, Nick Tattersall, Keith Weir, “Fed up with EU, Erdogan says Turkey could join Shanghai bloc,” Reuters, November 20, 2016.

East as well.<sup>4</sup> The strategic rapprochement between Moscow and Ankara could result in Russia actively helping Turkey take the next step toward SCO membership. However, unlike the way Turkish and Western media portray the situation, Russia will not be the single most important player when it comes to defining Ankara's future role in Eurasian security integration.

## Beijing's Limited but Growing Enthusiasm

The SCO is a consensus-based organization and China is currently its most influential player, not least because Beijing increasingly complements the organization with its ambitious economic initiatives in Eurasia. After a period of hesitance, Beijing has embraced SCO expansion as a logical addition to its expansive geo-economic Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Turkey, for its part, seems receptive to the lures of economic and security cooperation with China. During the opening ceremony of the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in mid-May 2017, Putin and Erdoğan were the first speakers to follow Chinese President Xi Jinping. Erdoğan told delegates that the world's economic center of gravity was shifting to the East and said that he would like Turkey's planned infrastructure expansion to be linked with the BRI.<sup>5</sup>

China's evolving SCO policy is also embedded in a broader effort to expand China's regional influence by constructing a multi-layered and flexible regional security architecture. The latter also includes the previously dormant pan-Asian Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building in Asia, of which Turkey is also a leading member, and new mini-lateral formats such as a counterterrorism coordination mechanism with Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan.

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs initially remained evasive on Turkey's interest in forging closer SCO ties, noting in response to Erdoğan's November 2016 statement that China values Turkey highly as a dialogue partner of the SCO and that it

would take a very close look at a potential deepening of ties.<sup>6</sup> A similarly guarded statement was made by a Foreign Ministry spokesperson in Beijing in March 2017 on the occasion of a visit by President Erdoğan.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, while China's official stance on the expansion of the circle of SCO members and observers is generally welcoming, Beijing still views Turkey's SCO ambitions with strategic patience. China is conscious of the challenges that integrating India and Pakistan into the organization will entail. The development of bilateral relations with Turkey poses another concern.

While Sino-Turkish relations have deepened on economic matters since 2010, security relations have remained limited and complicated. The handling of China's ethnic Uighur population and the fight against Islamist terrorism created notable frictions in the past, even though the issue has been less contentious recently. Xi told Erdoğan in a meeting on the sidelines of the Belt

and Road Forum that their respective countries should deepen counterterrorism cooperation, and Erdoğan suggested that BRI would help to eradicate this threat.<sup>8</sup> However, a failed multi-billion Turkish procurement of a Chinese missile defense system in late 2015 is indicative of the strategic distance that continues to

define relations between Ankara and Beijing. The AKP government originally pursued the Chinese offer for constructing Turkey's first long-range air and anti-missile defense system on grounds of price, short delivery times and, most importantly, favorable technology transfer conditions, snubbing both U.S. and European offers and worrying NATO Allies. Eventually, the talks with China faltered over technology transfer conditions that were less favorable

“  
**China's  
evolving  
SCO policy is  
embedded  
in a broader  
effort to  
expand  
China's  
regional  
influence**”

4 Jonathan Fulton, "China is trying to pull Middle East countries into its version of NATO," *The Washington Post*, June 21, 2017.

5 "Erdoğan emphasizes importance of adopting win-win approach in New Silk Road project," *Daily Sabah*, May 14, 2017.

6 Geng Shuang, "Foreign Ministry spokesperson's regular press conference," November 21, 2011, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China.

7 Hua Chunying, "Foreign Ministry spokesperson's regular press conference," March 13, 2017, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China.

8 Ben Blanchard, Robert Birsell, "China's Xi calls for greater counterterrorism cooperation with Turkey," Reuters, May 14, 2017.

than originally anticipated and because NATO began to temporarily contemplate a more active Middle East policy.<sup>9</sup> However, the latter failed to materialize and Turkey's defense minister only recently announced that Ankara was now at the final stage of negotiations with Moscow over purchasing the Russian S-400 missile system,<sup>10</sup> a deal that poses a similar challenge to NATO.

Most Chinese strategists also remain skeptical about Turkey's commitment and prospects for full SCO membership. They refute the notion that Ankara's interest in the SCO automatically means that Turkey will switch from the Western to the Eastern camp.<sup>11</sup> From Beijing's perspective, Erdoğan's SCO rhetoric mainly serves as a bargaining chip in talks with NATO, the United States, and the EU.<sup>12</sup> Chinese experts also tend to see Turkey's flirtation with the SCO as driven mainly by Ankara's rapprochement with Russia.<sup>13</sup> Overall, Chinese analysts suggest that Turkey's new balanced diplomacy does not amount to a complete reorientation of Turkish foreign policy but rather to an attempt to expand Ankara's strategic choices and autonomy.

There are indications that China's leadership will seek to avoid a confrontational approach toward the West in the near future and hence be disinclined to use Turkish SCO ambitions to actively undermine existing transatlantic security frameworks. So far, China has remained largely neutral in response to

“ **China has remained largely neutral in response to the openly confrontational, anti-Western stance that Moscow wants the SCO to take.**”

the openly confrontational, anti-Western stance that Moscow wants the SCO to take. Rather, Beijing seeks to establish the SCO as an effective vehicle for stabilizing its strategic backyard. Beijing also fails to see a fundamental contradiction between deepening Turkish-SCO relations and letting Ankara keep its NATO membership.

Beijing will continue to support rhetorically a Turkish SCO membership application in line with the mid-May 2017 statement by the Chinese Ambassador to Turkey Yu Hongyang that China is willing to discuss Turkey joining the SCO.<sup>14</sup> However, for now, China's overall approach will remain cautious, with Beijing pointing to defined procedures, a step-by-step approach, strict criteria, and a lengthy review process. This will give Beijing time to sound out international reactions and to promote China's anti-alliances narrative as well as its layered approach for constructing regional security architectures.

In the medium to long term, it is likely that China will shift its stance and seek to expand the SCO's influence, including into the Middle East.<sup>15</sup> It is also possible that Beijing wants a more ambitious, and ultimately confrontational SCO to undermine more actively U.S.-led security alliances. Whether or not China chooses this more venturesome path will be determined by various circumstantial factors, specifically Russia's shifting preferences. Beijing currently has no reasons for discarding a tactical alignment with Moscow on Turkish SCO prospects. Beijing's stance on Turkey's role in the SCO is also likely to become more firm as its relationship with Ankara evolves. Turkey's geostrategic location is a key aspect in achieving important components of China's BRI. China's economic interests in the Middle East have grown rapidly, and Beijing is well aware of Turkey's crucial role in the region. China's political elites also tend to seize small windows of opportunity like the one Turkey's current strategic disorientation provides.

9 Mustafa Kibaroglu, Selim C. Sazak, "Why Turkey chose, and then rejected, a Chinese air-defense missile," *Defense One*, February 3, 2016.

10 Tulay Karadeniz, David Dolan, Daren Butler, "Turkey at 'final stage' with Russia over S-400 missile system: Defense minister," *Reuters*, April 21, 2017.

11 Bo Zhang, "Research on the relationship between Turkey and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *Arab World Studies*, Issue 6, No. 6, November 2014.

12 Tao Zan, "Turkey to give up the EU for the SCO?" *Sina*, November 25, 2016.

13 Yanan Li, "Turkey glancing to the East and West, where to go?" *Pit.ifeng.com*, December 12, 2016.

14 Ecenur Colak, Seval Ocak Adiyaman, Dilara Zengin, "China agrees to discuss Turkey joining Shanghai group," *Anadolu Agency*, May 12, 2017.

15 Guang Pan, "Expert: SCO is entering the Middle east," *Xinhua*, February 4, 2017.



## Challenging the Transatlantic Security Architecture

Given Beijing's current hesitance, Turkey's integration into the SCO is unlikely to go beyond securing observer status for now — even if Ankara pushed hard for full membership. Still, Ankara's apparent determination to seek alternatives to NATO and closer ties with the SCO poses significant challenges to the existing transatlantic security architecture. Central and Eastern European countries are concerned that a NATO member would consider more systematic cooperation with a security organization that has Russia at the core of its decision-making. After all, Russia is listed as a threat in the defense white papers of virtually all NATO members. If Turkey seriously considered joining the SCO in the future, it would become a major source of distrust within NATO.

Closer Turkey–SCO cooperation would also pose an operational challenge to transatlantic security cooperation. The longstanding — and often deeply problematic — inability of the EU and NATO to share specific classified documents because of diverging memberships illustrates that multi-layered security arrangements can have severe shortcomings. If NATO–EU exchange of information remains difficult, it is inconceivable that Turkey could reconcile the operational aspects of NATO membership — and, indeed, its occasional contributions to EU Common Security and Defense Policy missions — with closer SCO ties. Several Russian officials have already flagged that they would consider NATO and SCO membership incompatible from an operational point of view, and actively encouraged Turkey to leave the Atlantic Alliance to pave the way for SCO membership. However, even the much more likely short-term scenario of Turkish observer status within the SCO would prompt NATO members to be more reserved when it comes to sharing information with Turkey, especially if Ankara failed to be fully transparent about its SCO dealings.

The extent of Turkey's rapprochement with the SCO might also change the balance of power and influence of liberal democracies in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Turkey is non-aligned in the OSCE but tends to side with EU

member states — and occasionally the United States and Canada — on a broad range of issues related to the OSCE's Politico-Military and Human Dimensions. Closer SCO ties could push Turkey more firmly into the camp of authoritarian Eastern European and Central Asian countries commonly lumped together in OSCE parlance as East of Vienna. While this will not align with the Chinese vision for the SCO, Russia would have every interest in luring Turkey into the East of Vienna camp in its standoff with the West over critical OSCE business, such as the situation in Ukraine.

In times of unpredictable politics in the United States and Europe, Turkey's SCO aspirations may not be the biggest concern when

it comes to protecting what European partners and NATO allies have built over the past 60 years. It is, however, arguably the most consequential effect of Turkey's growing estrangement from transatlantic security cooperation. Turkey is by no means the only country that is contemplating a pivot from NATO to the SCO. Over the last two years, Armenia, a NATO Partnership for Peace country, and Azerbaijan, a contender for NATO membership, have become SCO Dialogue Partners.

The wider dynamics in NATO's Eurasian neighborhood underscore that Ankara's estrangement from NATO and Europe is not solely a reflection of shifts in Turkey's political orientation. Turkey's strategic realignment illustrates a much more fundamental challenge to the transatlantic community. Turkey exhibits and spurs wider trends related to the erosion of transatlantic security cooperation and these developments show that NATO has to brace itself for new competitors in its traditional spheres of influence.

Now is the time for both the EU and NATO to devise new and better policies aimed at strengthening economic and political solidarity among their respective members and continue to argue confidently

“ **Turkey's strategic realignment illustrates a much more fundamental challenge to the transatlantic community.** ”

the benefits of pooling resources, specifically in the defense domain. The organizations and their members should reinforce public diplomacy campaigns and re-establish the credibility of enlargement and/or deeper economic integration perspectives for countries in Europe's neighborhood, specifically those that might otherwise be "lost." Addressing these issues will help re-establish the attractiveness and credibility of both the EU and NATO as successful regional integration models with a global appeal.

The U.S. administration and European governments should also be consistent in signaling to Beijing that Turkey's relationship with the SCO could become a serious source of friction in the transatlantic relationship with China. NATO and the EU hold full responsibility to devise a convincing approach to managing Turkey's strategic realignment if they wish to shape China's still bounded but increasingly visible global security ambitions in a way that is conducive to transatlantic strategic interests.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author alone.

## About the Authors

Jan Gaspers is head of the European China Policy Unit and Mikko Huotari is head of the Foreign Relations Program at the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) in Berlin.

## About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.

## About China Goes West

China's expanding role beyond its traditional strategic focus in East Asia has profound implications for Europe and the United States, whether the major expansion in Chinese outbound investment or its growing presence in the arc of instability that runs from China's western periphery to Europe's periphery. GMF's "China Goes West" project draws together analysis on issues ranging from the Belt and Road initiative and Sino-Russian relations to the West's strategic response. .

1744 R Street NW  
Washington, DC 20009  
T 1 202 683 2650 | F 1 202 265 1662 | E [info@gmfus.org](mailto:info@gmfus.org)  
<http://www.gmfus.org/>