

China's Growing Interest in Turkey and the Middle East

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OE Watch Commentary

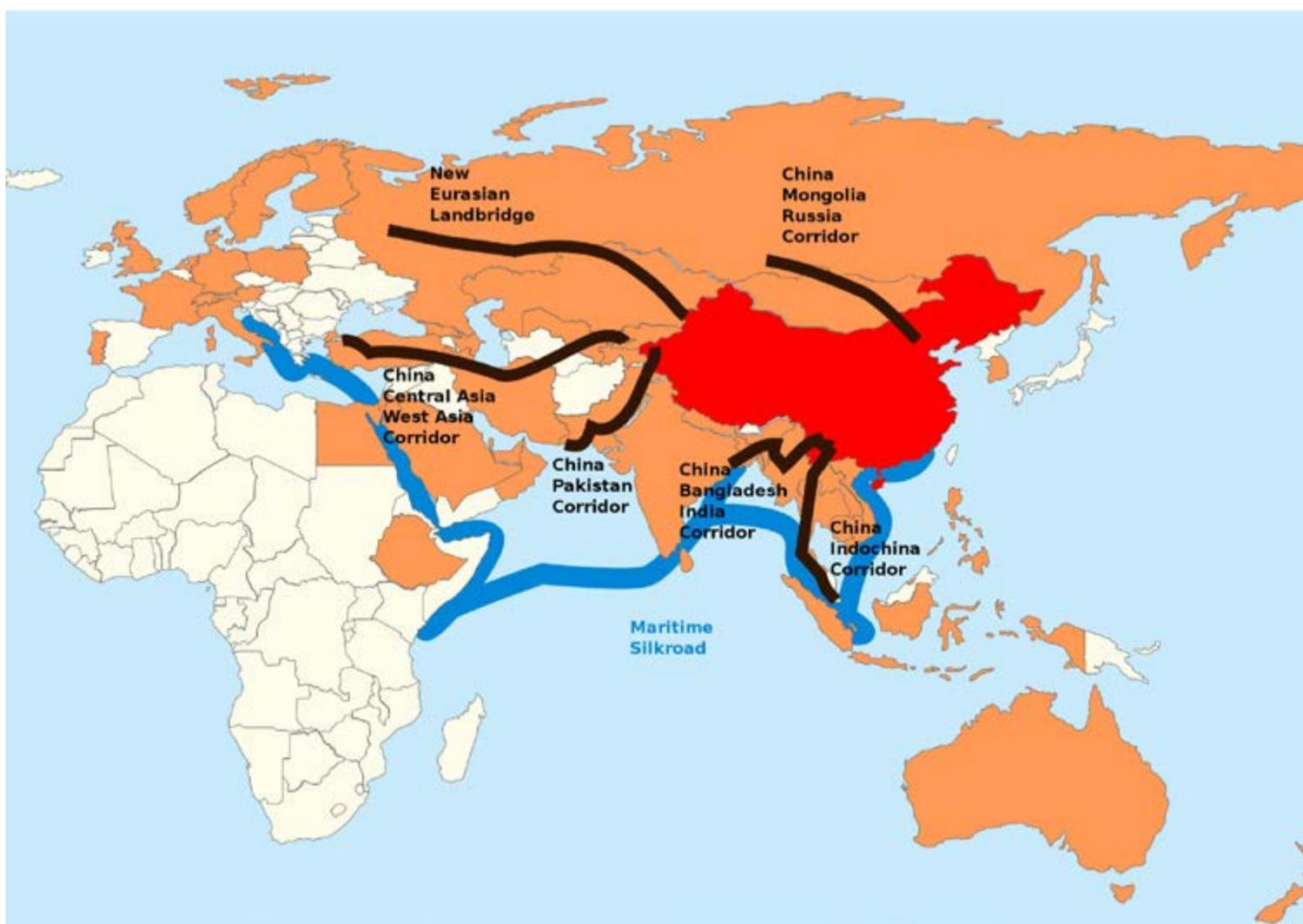
On 25 March 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held meetings with the Turkish President and Foreign Minister as part of his visit to several countries in the region. According to the first accompanying article by *al-Monitor*, a news site with analysts from the Middle East, China has shown increasing interest in the Middle East amid its growing rivalry with the United States. The visit occurring right after a tense first high-level meeting between China and the new U.S. Administration suggests it could be part of China's efforts to counter the United States' influence in the Middle East.

The author states that Wang's visit solidifies Turkey's importance in the Asia-Pacific power balance. Chinese and Turkish officials discussed importing the Chinese CoronaVac vaccine, enhancing trade volume, and cooperating under the framework of China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative. In this context, China sees Turkish cooperation as significant because Turkey links trade routes from China to Europe. Turkish officials hope that new trade routes will further boost the importance of Turkey in the region and in Beijing. The author notes that Wang and Turkish officials also discussed the peace process in Afghanistan. Recently, Russia and China proposed establishing a regional security dialogue platform to address security concerns in the region. As an extension of this, China will likely try to increase its profile in Afghanistan, and Turkey could be a significant partner there.

The second article from *Anadolu Ajansı*, Turkey's state-run news agency, states that this trip is an indicator that China is willing to play a larger role in the Middle East for a few reasons. First, China wants to ensure its energy supplies are secure as it purchases the biggest share of its oil from this region. Second, China wants to continue to improve its relations with the countries in the region to protect its trade interests and counter the United States. Third, China believes

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a stronger Iran can help China counterbalance U.S. influence in the region, which explains why China is deepening its alignment with Iran. China's investment in Iran and desire to make Iran another link for OBOR, providing logistical connections to the Middle East, will benefit Turkey as well.



One Belt One Road.

Source: Lommes, via Wikimedia, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:One-belt-one-road.svg>, Attribution: CC-BY-SA-4.0

Continued: China's Growing Interest in Turkey and the Middle East

Source: “Turkey, China assert rapprochement despite Uyghur protests, vaccine delay,” *al-Monitor* (a news site with analysts from the Middle East), 30 March 2021. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/03/turkey-china-assert-rapprochement-despite-uyghur-protests-vaccine-delay>

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From the broader optics of the US-China rivalry, Wang's visit confirms Turkey's role as an important player in the Asia-Pacific. Beijing feels the need to consolidate its relations with friendly countries to counter Washington's global campaign against China...

According to Cavusoglu,... the talks focused on ways to boost economic exchanges and cooperation against the coronavirus pandemic, including inoculation. Turkey was among the first countries to buy and use the Chinese CoronaVac vaccine, but the process has not been free of hitches.

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China's cooperation with Turkey as part of OBOR projects is likely to have been a major topic in Wang's talks with Turkish officials. Turkey is of strategic significance for China's economic corridors to Europe as it lies on trade routes extending from western China to Central Asia, the Caspian and Europe, mirroring the ancient Silk Road.

Turkish-Chinese ties have in recent years extended also to financial cooperation...

Turkey hopes that the deal Russia brokered to end the Azeri-Armenia conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh in November will also boost its prospects in trade with Central Asia and China. Among other terms, the deal calls for the reopening of some transport links in the region... The reopening of the routes, Turkey hopes, will boost its regional influence and significance in Beijing's eyes.

The peace process in Afghanistan was another topic on Wang's agenda in Ankara. China and Russia have recently proposed the creation of a regional “security dialogue platform” to address security concerns, including Afghanistan. Though the proposal is still premature, Turkey would be an indispensable partner in any effort by China to raise its profile in Afghanistan.

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Erdoğan's government appears bent on pursuing closer relations with Beijing amid its deep confidence gap with Turkey's traditional Western partners. But managing the rapprochement is likely to grow more difficult for Ankara as China's rivalry with the West intensifies.

Source: Zaki Shaikh, “China looks at Middle East to counter US domination,” *Anadolu Ajansı* (Turkey's state-owned news agency), 26 March 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/opinion-china-looks-at-middle-east-to-counter-us-domination/2189387>

The coming months may witness China steering its pursuits and influence in the Middle East.

...Wang's trip has conveyed that China is willing to play a broader role in the Middle East.

China looks to prevent Iran's collapse as it believes that such an eventuality will disturb balance against the US in the region. China is also keen to prevent the US from inflicting severe damage to Iran...

Energy will continue to be at the core of China's relations with the Middle East. This factor reigns paramount among Beijing's geostrategic pursuits in and around the region...

So far, China's approach had generally been cautious in the Middle East and limited to ensure the supply of energy to safeguard its geo-economic interest, investments, and trade. Beijing believes that with an expansion in economic relations, countries' dependency on China will rise in defense and security spheres.

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It may be in Turkey's interest that China now considers cooperation with Iran as a substantive part of its BRI agenda. The 25-year cooperation plan with Iran reflects that the Middle East is a strategic priority for China.

In the future, Turkey has much to gain if Iran serves well as a link providing logistical connections for energy transportation, commerce, trade, and tourism for its neighbors.

... [China's] objectives include making Iran a bridge to link South and West through Turkey and East and Central Europe via Central Asia.