

Uncertainty and Ambiguity: Turkey's Perception on the Rise of China¹

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Abstract: *This paper aims to analyze how China's rise is perceived by minor powers in the world system. Taking Turkey as the case study, the paper focuses on major issue areas such as bilateral trade and business between Turkey and China, and the issue of Eastern Turkistan (Xinjiang problem). This research concludes that unbalanced trade relationships and fierce competition in textile exports between Turkey and China are causing uneasiness on the Turkish side. Nevertheless, this has not changed Turkey's perception about China's rise as an opportune chance. Politically, it is possible for Turkey to seek opportunities to cooperate with China in many aspects to promote Turkey's interests. China should also realize that it is impossible for Turkey to be openly supportive of China's anti-terrorist policies in Xinjiang, where most of the inhabitants are regarded as "fellowmen" by Turks.*

Key Words: *Eastern Turkistan; the rise of China; Turkey*

I. Introduction: Controversies over China's Rise

Today, both in and outside China, the majority of the commentaries around the topic of "China's rise" — whether in the policy, pundit, or academic circles — assumes that China is indeed rising (economically, politically, and militarily, not to say culturally), just as G. John Ikenberry has recently said, "the rise of China will undoubtedly be one of the great dramas of the twenty-first century. China's extraordinary economic growth and active diplomacy are already transforming East Asia, and future decades will see even greater increases in Chinese power and influence."³

Ironically enough, while everybody is talking about China's rise, a clear definition of "rise" itself has yet been produced.⁴ More interestingly, for the

¹ This paper is a revised version of a draft presented at the *The Seventh Metu Conference on International Relations*, June 18-20, 2008, Ankara, Turkey. The author would like to express many thanks to Miss Ceren Ergenç of Boston University, who encouraged him to write this paper.

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³ G. John Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2008.

⁴ There is no consensus on how to define or measure a rising power. See the essays in Felix Berenskoetter and M.J. Williams eds., *Power in World Politics*, Routledge, 2007; and Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, "Power in International Politics," *International Organization*, winter 2005, pp. 39-75.

Chinese people, the concept of "China's rise" is completely an exotic conception, which was first used by Westerners in the early 1990s soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Chinese Professor Xuetong Yan describes it in this way: "The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. A year later, debates on China's power status began to emerge."⁵ As a seemingly accepted reality, in the 21st century, the rise of China has received extensive attention both in China and abroad.⁶

To understand social phenomena, at least two aspects need to be investigated: the phenomenon itself and people's perceptions about it. Considering the fact that too many studies have been done about the rise of China, this paper assumes that a research over these perceptions and perspectives has equal importance for the understanding of China's rise in a much broader sense. Then, naturally and simultaneously, a question needs to be answered: how has the rise of China been evaluated by different people?

To put it simply, from the perspective of the Chinese people, all the existing perceptions about China's rise could include two categories: positive and negative. In the positive sense, the rise of China will benefit global development, while the negative understanding could be generalized as the "China threat" thesis, which is most popular in America and Japan, which have evidently felt the pressure of a rising China.⁷ So far, the most comprehensive research on "foreigners' perceptions on China's rise" was done by Xuetong Yan of Tsinghua University.⁸ Professor Yan made a deep and extensive analysis about this matter from the following aspects:

A. Can China rise?

This question was raised in 1992, when the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War ended. The first group of people who drew the world's attention to the possibility of China's rise were economists of the World Bank and IMF, which tried to measure China's strength according to the Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) calculation, through which China's economy (GDP) became much larger than previously estimated. Although in the early 1990s most scholars agreed with the method of using currency exchange rates to evaluate China's power status, the PPP calculation had changed the world's conventional perspective about China, and raised the question that China's traditional power status was susceptible.

For those who believe that the rise of China is occurring, the reasons for the

⁵ Xuetong Yan, "The Rise of China and its Power Status," in *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 1, 2006, p. 5.

⁶ A search through www.google.cn with key words of "China rise" generates 157,000,000 results.(2008-06-13)

⁷ Haixiang Zhang, "The Global Spread of China Threat Theory," *XinBao* (Hongkong), January 12, 17 and 18, 2006.

⁸ Xuetong Yan, *International Environment for China's Rise*, Tianjin: Tianjin People's Publisher, 1998. See Chapter one "How Foreigners Look upon China's Rise."

possibility of its rise are: first, the continuous rapid growth of China's economy is incomparable, although recently constrained by the global financial crisis; secondly, China's overall national strength would make it a comprehensive power.

B. Difficulties for the rise of China

There are four main obstacles to China's rise: the burden of its heavy population; a lack of natural resources; China's relatively low educational level; and problems of political stability.

C. The impact of China's rise to the world.

This is a problem that attracts the most discussions about China's rise. Some believe that the rise of China will bring about new unstable factors in Asia. This is the thesis of the "China threat". Others think that the rise of China will not necessarily threaten world peace and development.

D. How should the world respond to China's rise?

The Bush administration's foreign policy to China has been "(comprehensive) engagement," which means to "pull" or drag China into the US-dominated international order, with the purpose of integrating a more powerful China and making it perform according to the existing liberal order.⁹ Some Western politicians and scholars suggest a strategy of containing China; however, this has not been accepted by any country as an official policy. Neighboring countries of China, including Japan and states of South-east Asia, which fear China's possibility of using military methods to solve regional conflicts, prefer to adopt a policy of "balance of power," which means keeping the US forces as a counterbalancing power in Asia. Pakistan, Russia, the Central Asian Countries and perhaps some African countries, which hope to benefit from the rise of China, take a stance of cooperating with China. In Europe, although often with some unpleasant episodes, France and Germany also tend to work together with China in many aspects.

In China, nobody took the rise of China seriously until the 1990s when "China threats" prevailed. For some Chinese scholars, in a sense, China's rise has become something like the "goal of the state." But an investigation of the use of "China's rise" in the context of China shows that, in most cases, "rise" is just a synonym of "development," "rejuvenation," "modernization process" and "lift-off". In the strict sense, the expression of "China's rise" in China is just a metaphor without specific definitions. In the texts of the official documents of Chinese government, seldom could people find the wording of "China's rise." Generally speaking, for most Chinese, they are feeling excited with such a new discourse like "China's

⁹ Professor G. John Ikenberry's latest article is a new reflection of this mentality.

rise," without knowing about whether this new image may bring about a fundamental change in the relationship between China and the outside world, which is a main concern of the international society. This gap between perceptions in and out China implies the divergence between Chinese and foreigners' understanding on the rise of China.¹⁰

Nevertheless, this paper has no intention to participate in the debate over "whether China is really rising" or how to evaluate China's power status.¹¹ It is clear that, so far, most of the arguments on China's rise are proposed by Americans who are sensitive to their state's global hegemony as a super power, while minor powers' perceptions on the same subject, to a larger extent, have been overlooked. This paper analyzes how China's rise is perceived by minor powers in the global system. Taking Turkey as the case study, this paper will focus on bilateral trade, business relation, and political relations between Turkey and China.

II. Background: Bilateral Relationships between Turkey and China

In order to understand Turkey's perception on China's rise, it is important to provide a historical background on the China-Turkey relations.

It is well known that, historically, the Turkish people now living in Anatolia were once a neighbor of the Chinese people. In the Chinese historical records, Turk was called *tu'jue*, a barbarian tribe that had established a big empire (later divided into two khanates-the *Western Tu'jue* and the *Eastern Tu'jue*) next the north-western borders of China in the 7th century. The Turkish history textbook goes further to identify Huns as the ancestors of *Tu'jue*.¹² After a series of furious wars with the Chinese Tang Dynasty (618-907), the Turkic empires were defeated and then collapsed, which was followed by an unprecedented western-forward movement of Turks. So far, both Turkish and Chinese political leaders have agreed that the

¹⁰ See Jun Niu, "China's rise: between dream and reality," *Guo Ji Jing Ji Ping Lun*(*International Economic Review*), Issue 6, 2003.

¹¹ Professor Xuetong Yan has done a good job in this field, see his "The Rise of China and its Power Status."

¹² Both in Turkey and China, and like many other countries in the world, history writing is a field full of nationalist enthusiasm. Not to speak of the Kemalist nationalism period, history writing was taken up as a political duty for partisan historians of the time. *Turkish History Thesis (Türk Tarih Tezi)*, which symbolizes the climax of Turkish nationalism in Atatürk's Turkey, was formulated by Kemalist historians in the late 1920s and early 1930s. According to this *Thesis*, the earliest human being in the world history was born in Central Asia, i.e. the homeland of Turks; the earliest people settled in Central Asia were Turks; Turks belong to the white race; Turks created higher civilization in Central Asia; being attacked by a sudden and tremendous change of climate, large parts of Turks were forced to migrate out of Central Asia, thus they brought civilization to other peoples around the world; as a natural result of this process, Turks who came from Central Asia were the first natives of Anatolia. *Tarih I*, Istanbul: Kaynak Yayınları, 2001 (1932). For a general description of the *Thesis*, see Afet İnan, "Atatürk ve Tarih Tezi," in *Belleten*, Vol. 3, Ankara: 1939.

relationship between the two nations goes back to at least 2,000 years.¹³ However, for more than one thousand years, it seems that there was no direct and close connection between Turks in West Asia and Chinese in East Asia. Considering that history is often a confusion-maker, it is better for studies about contemporary issues to avoid tangling with this “hornet’s nest.”

In regard to the period of modern history, after the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, an official relationship was built between Kemalist Turkey and the Nationalist (the Kuomintang) China. As a symbol of this friendly relationship, in the 1930s, the Chinese president of the time Chiang Kai-shek once sent a picture of himself with his own signature to Atatürk, which is now kept well in the Museum of Atatürk Mausoleum (Anatıkabir). What is worth pointing out here is that in the early 20th century Turkey was once a model for Chinese reformists, revolutionaries and even early Communists.¹⁴ After the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949, the diplomatic relationship between Turkey and Kuomintang’s Taiwan continued until the early 1970s.

During the high period of the Cold War, as a firm ally of the US, Turkey once sent a brigade of 2,000 soldiers to the battlefield of the Korean War, during which they once fought furiously with the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army. In this way, the first direct confrontation between the two nations in modern times started. But the far-reaching result of this war is that, mutually, the two nations had left each other a negative image. On the side of China, Turkey’s image of being a “running dog” of imperialist America was affirmed; particularly, the Menderes government was condemned from time to time by the Chinese official propaganda machine in this way.¹⁵ On the side of Turkey, according to Çağdaş Üngör, the narratives on the Turkish participation in the Korean War, including war memoirs, journalistic accounts, and newspaper articles, “became an early influence in setting the new parameters for understanding the East Asian countries and particularly ‘Red’ China.” Besides, Üngör argues that “the depiction of the Chinese soldier as the evil enemy, pitiable war prisoner, or a naïve (brainwashed) believer in Communism helped to build a long-lasting image of this little-known land and people in

¹³ Barış Adıbelli, *Osmanlıdan Günümüze Türk-Çin İlişkileri*, İstanbul: IQ Kültür Sanat Yayıncılık, 2007, see the citations from Turkish and Chinese leaders’ speeches on the title page of this book. But for some scholars in China, with the purpose of refuting Pan-Turkism, *Tu’jue* is regarded as a tribe that was historically born and also historically died out after the East and West Turkic Empires were defeated by Tang Dynasty in the 7th century. In this way, the relationship between the two nations of course will not be that long. Zongzheng Xue, *History of Tu’jue* (Tu’jue shi), Beijing: The Social Science Publisher of China, 1992.

¹⁴ See Zhenghua Dong, “Chinese Views of Atatürk and Modern Turkey,” in Ankara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi ed., *Uluslararası Konferans: Atatürk Ve Modern Türkiye*, Ankara Üniversitesi Basımevi, 1999, pp. 669-675.

¹⁵ As Chairman Mao once put it: “In today’s world, the biggest imperialist country is the United States, and its running dogs could be found in many other countries. ...the sort of Chiang Kai-shek, ...and Menderes as running dogs of imperialist, either have been or will be overthrown by people of their own country.” According to the report of *People’s Daily*, May 10, 1960.

Turkey." In sum, "narratives of the Korean War brought the official decision to enter the war into sentimental extremes by their usage of religious fervor, a sense of holiness and heroism, as well as their strong commitment to anti-Communist discourse."¹⁶

Due to understandable reasons, the governing elites of Turkey maintained a strong position of Anti-Communism during the Cold War period. As guardian of Turkey's secular institution, even the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) once encouraged the spread of Islamic education to counter the propaganda and ideological influence of Communism.¹⁷ For China, especially in the high Communism period of the 1960s, it even publicly declared support to the development of Anti-American movements in Turkey. As the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, *People's Daily* also gave its support to Turkey in one of its editorials.¹⁸ Thus, it is understandable that even today many Turks still hold a "Red" image of China.

The establishment of official/diplomatic relationship between the Turkish Republic and People's Republic of China was as late as 1971.¹⁹ The background to this new development is worth noting. The beginning of the 1970s saw a trying situation in Washington with the American army locked in the hot war with Vietnam, while the Soviet Union seemed to be becoming stronger. Under these circumstances, under the leadership of President Richard M. Nixon, the United States began to change its long-running adverse position toward China. The new American policy in 1972 toward China led many countries to establish relationships with the People's Republic of China. Among these, Turkey, as an important partner of the US, also changed its standpoint toward China.

Bilateral relations between Ankara and Beijing improved with several reciprocal high-level visits of statesmen from the two countries, as a host of low-level visits of members of parliaments, delegations from respective ministries, and other state agencies.²⁰ In addition, numerous agreements have also been

¹⁶ Çağdaş Üngör, "Perceptions of China in the Turkish Korean War Narratives," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3, September 2006, pp.405-420.

¹⁷ See Étienne Copeaux, *Türk Tarih Tezinden Türk-İslam Sentezine*, Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1998.

¹⁸ *People's Daily*, May 5, 1960.

¹⁹ On August 4, 1971, with a signed protocol between Turkey's ambassador in Paris Hasan Esat Işık and his Chinese counterpart Huang-chen, the diplomatic relationship between Turkey and China was established. When Turkey established diplomatic relations with People's Republic of China in 1971, the first Nihat Erim Government was in office and Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs was Osman Olcay.

²⁰ High Level Bilateral Visits Between Turkey and China are the following: President level: Kenan Evren (December 1982), Süleyman Demirel (May 1995), Li Xiannian (March 1984), Jiang Zemin (April 2000); Prime Minister level: Turgut Özal (June 1985); Zhao Ziyang (July 1986); Zhu Rongji (April 2002); Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (January 2003); Level of Minister of Foreign Affairs: İsmail Cem (February 1998); Qichen Qian (September 1990); Tang Jiaxuan (February 2001); Abdullah Gül (February 2005, now president in office). According to the "Chinese Embassy in Turkey," see: <http://www.chinaembassy.org.tr/chn/ztgx/t191491.htm>

signed on various subjects.²¹

III. Turkey's Perceptions on China's Rise: Trade and Politics

In regard to the rise of China, few Turkish scholars or politicians have denounced it. Especially for politicians and those serious Turkish researchers of international politics, when the rise of China is mentioned, they all attach enough importance to this topic. Those farsighted observers in Turkey have started to investigate different kinds of possibilities that a rising China will bring to Turkey at present and in the future. This paper will mainly focus on the field of economical and political dimensions of bilateral relationships between Turkey and China.

In regard to the official level, i.e. in the Turkish government propaganda, Turkey regards the rise of China as an opportune chance. Recently, Turkey's ambassador to China Mr. Oktay Özüye said to a Chinese magazine:

*"The policy of reform and open has been practised for nearly 30 years in China. As many other countries in the world, with deep admiration, we are watching the development and rise of China. In Turkey, both politicians and businessmen regard the rise of China as a chance instead of a threat. So, we are actively working hard to look after chances of cooperation with our Chinese partners. We cherish the hope that we can cooperate with China in the fields of construction, counseling, tourism, joint-stock companies and technology, etc."*²²

Following similar logic, after recognizing the importance of China's rise, Turkey needs to know about China better. We can find similar ideas repeated recently by Turkey's Minister of Education. In 2006, this Minister said that Turkey needs experts who master the Chinese language well. This will be beneficial to a growing Turkey-China relationship, and it also helps a lot in the Turks' understanding of the rising China, both a politically and economically big country. Turkey is preparing to teach Chinese in some high schools. There are 15-20 Turkish students going to China for study every year. The Minister added that in the Turkish program of a "thousand students abroad within 5 years," China is included.²³ The first Confucius School in Turkey was built in the year 2007 in the Middle East Technical University. The task of the Confucius School is to provide

²¹ See *Ülke Raporu: Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti (ÜRÇHC)*, Etüd-Araştırma Servisi, 2006, pp. 24-26.

²² "To be a good role of bridge between west and east: an interview with Turkey's ambassador to China-Oktay Özüye," *Business Weekly*, October 26, 2007.

²³ *Guangming Daily*, Beijing: October 25, 2006.

teaching of Chinese language and to help the Turkish students to know about China and its culture in various aspects.²⁴

A. Dimension of trade

So far, the conception of China's rise has been always a topic about the rapid development and huge growth of China's economy.²⁵ Turkey's understanding about China's rise is also mainly concerned about the economic relationship between the two countries. There are mainly two problems in the field of trade relations. The first is the imbalance of trade. The second is about the fierce competition between Turkey and China in the field of similar industrial sectors.

The development of business and trade is rapid between Turkey and China. According to a "China Report (2005)" prepared by Ankara Trade Office (Ankara Ticaret Odası-ATO), China's economic force is advancing on the Turkish market with a speed of "jet plane."

*"10 years ago, among the countries with which we did most of the imports, China was the eighteenth. In 2005, it has climbed to the fourth. Before 2002, among the top ten countries with which we do imports, you cannot find China. In 2003, with 2.6 billion (USD) of exports to Turkey, China is the eighth. In 2004, it is the sixth with 4.5 billions. One year later, China is the fourth. Turkey's import from China becomes 6.8 billion with an increasing rate of 53%. In the same year, the sum of our import from China occupies 6% of our total imports."*²⁶

The lopsided tie of trade and business between the two sides has made the Turkish side uneasy. Sinan Aygün, the Chairman of ATO once mentioned that in the field of high-technology China had also started to dominate Turkey's market and this should be a worrisome development. Aygün continued to say, "In 2005, according to the figures of imports, all the sectors of Turkey are under Chinese invasion. And this situation will get more gloomy in 2006 ... all kinds of goods

²⁴ According to the *Xinhua Net* (2007-06-05).

²⁵ A report once put it: "Over the past 20 years, and after a long period of isolation, China's role in the global economy has increased sharply. Its GDP has grown at an average annual rate of over 9 percent, while its share of world trade has risen from less than 1 percent to almost 6 percent. As a result, China is now the sixth-largest economy (at market exchange rates) and the fourth-largest trader in the world. Not only have its exports gained significant market share abroad, but its rapidly rising imports have supported the strong performance of neighboring economies and contributed to the recent strength in world commodity prices. China's economic weight and its integration into the world economy are likely to continue increasing rapidly, as the necessary structural reforms (including in the financial and enterprise sectors, labor markets, and social safety nets) are implemented. While the effect on the world as a whole is likely to prove positive, the impact could vary considerably across countries, industrial sectors, and socioeconomic groups." See Nikola Spatafora, Yongzheng Yang and Tarhan Feyzioğlu, "China's Emergence and Its Impact on the Global Economy" in *World Economic Outlook*, IMF: Arip 16, 2004.

²⁶ http://www.tele.com.tr/blog_comment.asp?bi=340 (2008-06-01)

from China were poured into the Turkish market ... I would like to remind our people that in 2006 Turkish economy will be finished by China."²⁷

The speed of trade development between Turkey and China could be well indicated in the following chart.



According to the above source, the Chinese challenge to Turks in the field of high-technology is something new for Turkey. The traditional competition between Turkey and China has centered around their similar production structures.²⁸ In a report on China made by a Turkish Research Center, the problems between Turkey and China are focused on the inevitable competition between the two countries' textile sectors.²⁹ This is the basic origin of "China Threat" thesis in Turkey. The same report mentioned that even with a short distance between Turkey and Europe, the Turkish textile products cannot compete with that of the Chinese on the European market, since China has a much lower labor cost than Turkey has.

In an interview during his visit to China in 2006, Turkish Minister of Internal Affairs Kursad Tuzmen said that an analysis about the mutual exports between

²⁷ http://www.tele.com.tr/blog_comment.asp?bi=340 (2008-06-11)

²⁸ According to the Global Trade Negotiations homepage "Turkey Summary" (2004), Turkey's principal exports are textiles and clothing, followed by agricultural products, iron, steel and machinery.

²⁹ *Ülke Raporu: Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti(ÜRÇHC)*, Etüd-Araştırma Servisi, 2006.

Turkey and China will show people some interesting issues. In terms of 2005, Turkey's export to China was only about 500-600 million dollars, while China's export to Turkey was 7.6 billion dollars. That is to say, when Turkey exports one product to China, China is selling 10 products to Turkey. He continues, "I think this is a situation that the Chinese side should take care about, since this kind of a trade deficit is unsustainable. We have mentioned this problem of imbalance on trade to the Chinese official during our earlier talks. We hope to show our potentiality to China because China will be the biggest country of trade and producing area."³⁰ Tuzmen blamed China's higher custom rates: "To put it simply, our custom rate is very low due to our agreement with the European Union. Ours is 3%-3.4%. On the contrary, when the same products come to China, the custom rate is as high as 20%-40%. Although now a member of WTO, in order to protect the domestic industries, China still maintains higher custom rates. However, China is debasing its custom rates. It takes time."³¹

When these Turkish officials mentioned the imbalance of trade between Turkey and China, they never gave up their hope for the future, since they believed that the bad situation would be changed over time. Tuzmen said, "In my opinion, the most important thing we have to do right now is to increase the total amount of our trade. For a big trade partner, 7 or even 10 billion dollars of trade deficit does not matter. China's total amount of trade may have exceeded 1000 billion dollars, while Turkey's is more than 200 billion. So, for Turkey and China, the amount of bilateral trade is very small."

Generally speaking, the hope of Turkey rests upon the potential of the Chinese market. Turkey has to take its part from the Chinese market with 1/5 population of the world. In the early period, Turkish President Kenan Evren said, "If every Chinese buys one of our oranges, we will be rich."³² Today, as Tuzmen would say, "Another market that we hope to exploit is about balance of payment, which is the industry of tourism. Now, there are 15 million Chinese going abroad for tourism per year, but there are only 80 thousand coming to Turkey. This is a very small number. In regard to some other countries, there are more than 2 million tourists coming to Turkey every year. We are happy to invite Chinese friends to travel to Turkey. This could help to solve the problem of balance of payment."

However, for some Turkish merchants and businessmen, they have different ideas. The Turkish government felt pressure from Turkish businessmen who were uneasy with the increasing Chinese presence on the Turkish market. Normally, the Chinese merchants would take the passport of public affairs (POPP), which is

³⁰ <http://business.sohu.com/20061007/n245659154.shtml> (2008-06-11).

³¹ Ibid.

³² "Türkiye-Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti Ekonomik İlişkileri İçin Bir Yol Haritası," *Asya Pasifik'te Gündem*, Bahçeşehir Üniversitesi: Asya Pasifik Araştırmaları ve Uygulama Merkezi, Sayı 7, August 6, 2007.

exempt from a visa and allows the Chinese to stay one month in Turkey according to an agreement between Turkey and China since 1989. However, according to reliable sources from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, some Chinese businessmen with POPP were recently refused to enter Turkey by Turkish border policemen. This is a reaction to Turkish businessmen's pressure to their government. According to the Turkish sources, Turkey's small and medium sized enterprises complained that they felt threatened as Chinese businessmen flocked to a fair, held in Turkey's largest southeastern city Gaziantep in May 2008.³³

B. Dimension of politics

In the political sense, almost all the discussions around the rise of China point to the future. As a minor power in the international system, Turkey has to (re)think about and (re)adjust its relationship with newly rising powers. The reasonable response is how to evaluate and use the chance of China's rise, since there seems to be no doubt that China's rise will certainly change the map of the US-dominated world order.

This conception of China as the prospective challenger to the US hegemony and a rising power incrementally expanding its influence in world politics is prevalent in Turkey. R. Kutay Karaca asserts that "the only country which can intrepidly challenge and position against the unilateral world order that the US has recently formed is China." To Mehmet Ögütçü, China is as important as, perhaps more important than, the US, the EU, and Japan for Turkey due to its present-day position and its future potential. For Deniz Ülke Arıboğan, "it will be a grave mistake if [Turkish] foreign policy makers insist on maintaining a Euro-American approach without taking into account Far East Asia as a region of future international importance." Hasret Çomak expressed as early as 1996 that "increasing cooperation and providing new chances of cooperation with this country (China), which is expected to become the superpower of the world by 2025, is an indispensable opportunity for Turkey."³⁴

Turkey's policy transformation to China is well reflected in its complex attitude to the Xinjiang problem (Doğu Türkistan in Turkish) of China. Turkey used to be a base for the exiles of Xinjiang and a firm sympathizer for the Uyghur people's resistance to the Communist government of China. However, with the development of bilateral relationships, also as a response to the rise of China, Turkey began to restrain its support to their "fellowmen" in Xinjiang. For example, following the visit of Turkish President Süleyman Demirel to China in 1995, the

³³ *Turkish Daily News*, May 24, 2008.

³⁴ Eyüp Ersoy, "Turkey-China Political Relations," see: [http://www.chinacircle.biz/turkey-china-political-relations/turkish-chinese-political-relations\(2008-05-30\)](http://www.chinacircle.biz/turkey-china-political-relations/turkish-chinese-political-relations(2008-05-30)).

Turkish government issued a confidential circular signed by Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz. The circular, pointing out that the Chinese government was uneasy about the activities of associations established by Turkey's citizens of Uyghur origin, demanded any minister or civil servant not to participate in the meetings of these sorts of associations.³⁵

On the other hand, there are also people in Turkey who are against this policy transformation. According to some scholars, the Turks who try to avoid talking about the Xinjiang issue of China and those who restrained Turkish people's claiming for rights of their "fellowmen" often defend themselves with two excuses:

First, the bilateral economic development could not be caused to stop. Whereas, in terms of total amount of imports and exports, Turkey is behind China, Germany, France, US, Russia and even Italy. China is not only a big market where goods could be sold, but also an economic giant which could throw all our products into the world markets. Besides, they never understand economic nationalism. In other words, for China, Turkey —just like Japan— is only a leaping board (sıçrama tahtası) to the European Community, a market with plenty of chances. So, the excuse that 'China is ready to buy everything we sell, we must not lose China' is just an ignorant and fruitless premise. Secondly, the domestic affairs of a friend country should not be interfered. This is the most illogical excuse.³⁶

Another Turkish observer said:

*"The volume of trade between China and Turkey is very comic. We are selling 300 million dollars of goods, while they (Chinese people) are selling 7 billion dollars of goods to Turkey. This is the trade picture. Then I asked a deputy of a very popular political party [in Turkey]. When I asked why you offered a medal to Jiang Zemin, he replied: 'my friend, it is just a medal.' This kind of reply might depress us."*³⁷

Obviously, the people who are against Turkey's new policy to China only confined their concern on the issues of cultural and ethnical ties between Turkish and Uyghur people, and on the economic relationships between China and Turkey. They are blind to Turkey's interests in other aspects which are connected with China.

But some Turkish observers with a broader vision on the bilateral relationship

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Nuraniye Hidayet Ekrem, "Türk-Çin İlişkilerinin Gelişmesi," in *Uzak Doğu-Pasifik Araştırmaları Masası*, August 22, 2006; also see Necip Hablemitoğlu, "Türkiye-Çin İlişkilerinde Gözardı Edilen Bir Boyut: Hükümet-Çin-Doğu Türkistan," <http://www.hakimiyetimilliyeye.org/index.php?news=610> (2008-05-30)

³⁷ <http://www.merhabagazetesi.com.tr/eski/arsiv/2006/05/28/g5.htm> (2008-06-05).

between Turkey and China did realize the importance of a rising China in various aspects for Turkey. They well understand that China is a permanent member of the UN Security Council. These observers would agree that it is commonly accepted that China will exceed the US during 2030-2050, and will become a super power in the world. Then, for the international interests of Turkey, these observers suggested that it is naturally important to develop a good relationship with China.

For Turkey, it also has its own problems like Kurdish terrorism and separatism of the PKK and North Cyprus problem. On these two important issues, Turkey also needs China's support on the international platform.³⁸ In the field of military endeavors, Turkey also wants to share some technology with China especially in the aspect of missiles, since Turkey is a country that is settled in the world's most unstable area where neighboring countries have missiles.³⁹

In Turkey's diplomacy, Central Asia has great importance. Having strong ethnical, cultural and historical ties with each other, in the post-cold-war period, Turkey has become an ideal model for the development of Central Asian countries and a place with various attractions. In the field of economic development, free trade, and security, Turkey and Central Asia have made great progress and this will continue to happen in the future. For Turkey, the emergence of new countries in Central Asia brought many possibilities, since Turkey's geopolitical position as a bridge between East and West is crucial for this area, especially in regard to investment, trade and conveyance of abundant energy. So, Turkey has to give enough emphasis to its interests in Central Asia.⁴⁰ And it is at this very point that Turkey has to face the rise of China.

With the rise of China, regional security and energy security are becoming more and more important for it. The emergence of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a crucial step to meet these security needs. Also, it could be regarded as a natural development of China's rise.

A Turkish strategist believes that Turkey has to approach the SCO and develop a good relationship with it.⁴¹ As an exchange, what Turkey could offer is the position of a bridge and its cooperation with China in the field of anti-terrorism. Especially in the latter aspect, according to this strategist, Turkey is important in cooperating with China to counter its terrorists in Xinjiang. In this way, Turkey will present its importance in SCO and get China's understanding and return in other aspects.

³⁸ A Turkish observer once warned those who support Xinjiang that China may exploit Kurdish issue as a revenge to Turkey. "China's Kurdish policy is changing," in *Turkish Daily News*, February 28, 2006.

³⁹ Nuraniye Hidayet Ekrem, "Türk-Çin İlişkilerinin Gelişmesi," in *Uzak Doğu-Pasifik Araştırmaları Masası*, August 22, 2006.

⁴⁰ Ian O. Lesser and Graham E. Fuller, *Balkanlar'dan Batı Çin'e Türkiye'nin Yeni Jeopolitik Konumu*, Istanbul: Alfa Basım Yayım Dağıtım Ltd., 2000.

⁴¹ Yunus Akgür - Ertan Çakıroğlu, "Şanghay İş Birliği Örgütü," *KÖKSAV E-Bülten*, 29 Nisan 2008.

IV. Conclusion

Unbalanced trade relationships and fierce competition in textile exports between Turkey and China are causing uneasiness on the Turkish side. Nevertheless, this has not changed Turkey's perception about China's rise as an opportune chance. Politically, as a minor power on the world stage, Turkey also has no intention or capacity to contain the rise of China. Rather, it is possible for Turkey to seek opportunities to cooperate with China in many aspects to promote Turkey's interests. China should also realize that it is impossible for Turkey to be openly supportive of China's anti-terrorist policies in Xinjiang, where most of the inhabitants are regarded as "fellowmen" by Turks.

The assumption of this paper is that minor powers' perceptions on China's rise should be also taken as seriously as those of the major and superpowers', especially considering that the rise of China still has a long way to go. For a country like Turkey, it has its own advantages to negotiate and cooperate with China. China has perhaps not politically realized the importance of Turkey as a bridge between Europe and Asia; but needless to say that China's political influence in the Middle East is still very weak.⁴²

Although the mutual perceptions between China and Turkey remain in the state of *uncertainty and ambiguity*, sooner or later, it could be safely argued that, with the increasing growth of the Chinese power, China will have to develop and further its relationships with Turkey. So at present, Turkey's perceptions on the rise of China and the future between Turkey and a rising China are of great importance, especially considering that China and Turkey have "win-win" interests in many aspects, although the two countries have not fully understood each other's potential strength.

⁴² China, although rising, is still weak. For example, in the field of energy security, China's link to the so-called radical states (like Iran, Sudan) is not primarily an ideological or strategic choice but the result of that country's relative weakness and lack of a technological edge. See Barry Rubin, "China's Middle East Strategy," in *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 1, March 1999, p. 52.