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# Can Turkey play the Shanghai card? China's take on Ankara's Eurasian security endeavours and what it means for Europe's security architecture

*by Jan Gaspers, Mikko Huotari and Thomas Eder*

**As Turkey's relations with the EU and NATO have hit an all-time low, Ankara has stepped up its rhetoric on seeking closer cooperation with the China- and Russia-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). 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. For Europe's foreign and security policy community, Ankara's cosyng up to the SCO and China's stance on the matter both raise a range of critical questions: What is Beijing's stake in Turkey's SCO ambitions and what does this tell us about the Chinese view on European and transatlantic security cooperation? What challenges does Turkey's SCO rapprochement pose to the existing European security architecture? Finally, how should Europe respond?**

## **Turkey's relations with the EU and NATO have turned sour**

Following the failed military coup of July 2016 and the harsh response of the Turkish government, Turkey's political standing in European and transatlantic security cooperation is at an all-time low. The complicated relationship Turkey has had with the European Union (EU) ever since it first expressed interest in joining the Union in the 1960s has taken a marked turn for the worse over the past few months, with both sides pointing fingers over the handling of the post-coup relationship. Turkey's position within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has also become increasingly complicated. For some time, Turkey has been disappointed by the back seat NATO has taken with regard to managing mounting regional instability on Turkey's doorstep. Difficult relations with the Obama administration in the United States (US), especially after the coup attempt, and recent disappointment over the 'Muslim ban' of the Trump administration have further reduced Ankara's appetite for close transatlantic cooperation. NATO membership seems to have been downgraded from being the epitome of Turkey's commitment to the Euro-Atlantic security community to being a tool that is first and foremost valuable when it comes to underscoring Turkey's political stability and thus its attractiveness as an investment destination. After all, steady economic growth has been a major source of legitimacy for the Erdoğan administration.

NATO members have also assumed a much more reserved stance towards their ally Turkey. The failed coup and its aftermath have eroded the trust the US has put in Turkey, and it remains to be seen whether the Trump administration will have any interest in cooperating with Turkey – or other European allies for that matter – within the NATO framework at all. At the same time, leading EU and European NATO members, such as France and Germany, are likely to adopt a much more guarded stance towards Turkey with regard to EU accession negotiations and within the North Atlantic Council.

## **Turkey is looking at the SCO as a security cooperation alternative**

In light of the increasingly bumpy relationship with the EU and NATO, the Turkish government has started to seriously consider security cooperation alternatives. However, the options seem severely limited. Turkey was a co-founder of the Economic Cooperation Organization and the Turkic Council, but these organisations are now largely defunct. Past attempts to establish closer ties with the Arab League have yielded limited results, and the option is now effectively off the table as Ankara repeatedly put its money on the wrong horses during the 'Arab Spring', leaving Turkey's Middle East policy in disarray.

Given the limited nature of the options, Turkey has turned to Eurasian security integration and specifically the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which was founded in 2001 and has since been co-led by China and Russia.<sup>1</sup> The SCO's security cooperation agenda revolves primarily around border management and counter-terrorism, but its members also conduct annual joint military exercises ('peace missions'). As early as 2012, Turkey became an SCO 'dialogue partner'. Since 2013, Ankara has repeatedly expressed interest in attaining SCO observer status or even joining as a full member, and President Erdoğan made his latest public reference to the idea of full SCO accession as recently as November 2016.

Turkey's cosying up to the SCO should ring some alarm bells in the EU and the US. Turkey continues to hold significant strategic value for Europeans and Americans when it comes to tackling a wide range of regional security challenges. For EU member states, it is paramount that the refugee deal struck with Turkey in March 2016 to end the irregular migration of mostly Syrian asylum seekers holds firm. With both sides accusing the other of having broken that deal, Turkey is now threatening to cancel it altogether, and any Turkish moves towards a new strategic alignment might further reduce the need to please Brussels. Turkey also hosts a range of important NATO military facilities that are of vital strategic importance when it comes to the Alliance's ability to project force in the Middle East. Moreover, Turkey is one of the few remaining conduits for the West for communicating with Russia about strategy in Syria, even though the extent to which Turkish and wider transatlantic strategic interests on this issue really align is increasingly questionable.

Western concerns about Turkey's flirtation with the SCO might be further increased by the fact that the timing for seeking closer ties with the SCO could hardly be better, as the organisation has just embarked on an expansionary course, with Pakistan and India both set to join next year. As a next step, Moscow is pushing for the entry of Iran once sanctions have been lifted. Looking beyond Iran, the much-publicised rapprochement between presidents Putin and Erdoğan in recent months may point to Russian openness to the idea of making Turkey the next target for SCO expansion. However, in contrast to how the matter is often portrayed in Turkish and Western media, Russia is not the single most important player when it comes to defining Ankara's future role in Eurasian security integration.

## **Turkey's SCO ambitions play into China's hands, but a lack of strategic trust limits Beijing's enthusiasm for greater SCO-Turkey cooperation**

The SCO is a consensus-based organisation and China arguably remains its most influential player. After being hesitant for some time, Beijing has lately come to embrace SCO expansion in an attempt to complement its ambitious 'Silk Road' geo-economic initiative. China's leaders have also confidently decided that SCO expansion to South Asia is more likely to help catalyse Chinese influence in this region than dilute its power within the organisation. China's evolving SCO policy is thus embedded in a broader effort to expand its regional influence by constructing a multi-layered and flexible regional security architecture. Also part of this is Beijing's attempt to revive the previously dormant pan-Asian Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building in Asia (CICA), of which Turkey is also a founding member, and to establish new mini-lateral formats, such as a counter-terrorism coordination mechanism with Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan.

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<sup>1</sup> Present day member states are China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. In June 2016 India and Pakistan signed a memorandum on accession to the SCO. Further states from the region have observer status, e.g. Iran.

While Beijing's official stance on the expansion of the circle of SCO members and observers is generally welcoming, the integration of India and Pakistan into the organisation remains Beijing's key priority for now. Partly for that reason, Beijing has greeted Turkey's SCO ambitions with strategic restraint. Other even more fundamental inhibitors relate to the nature of Chinese-Turkish bilateral relations, China's vision for the SCO in Eurasian geo-economics and Beijing's strategy of risk avoidance. Accordingly, commenting on Turkey's renewed interest in the SCO last November, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs remained non-committal, only noting 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.

From a Chinese perspective, since 2010 Turkey-SCO relations have evolved against the backdrop of a deepening bilateral strategic partnership with Ankara, which has seen major progress in economic relations in particular. Meanwhile, security relations have remained limited and complicated, not least due to tensions regarding the handling of Uighurs and a failed multi-billion Turkish procurement of a Chinese missile defence system in late 2015. Most Chinese strategists remain sceptical about Turkey's commitment and prospects for full SCO membership despite what they see as an extraordinary opportunity for developing broader Turkey-SCO and China-Turkey relations. Chinese observers also refute the notion that Ankara's interest in the SCO automatically means that Turkey will switch from the Western camp into the Eastern camp. From Beijing's perspective, Erdoğan's SCO rhetoric mainly serves as a bargaining chip in talks with NATO, the US, and the EU. Chinese experts also tend to see Turkey's flirtation with the SCO as driven mainly by Ankara's rapprochement with Russia. Overall, Chinese analysts seem sure 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 strong indications that in the foreseeable future the Chinese leadership will seek to avoid a confrontational approach towards the West, which would involve using Turkish SCO ambitions to actively undermine existing transatlantic and European security frameworks. China has remained largely neutral in response to the outspoken, confrontational, anti-Western stance that both Moscow and Tehran want the SCO to take. Beijing wants to establish the SCO as an effective vehicle for stabilising its strategic back yard rather than an anti-Western ideological club. In fact, for now, Beijing sees no fundamental contradiction between deepening Turkish-SCO relations and letting Ankara keep its NATO membership and EU membership aspirations. However, in the long-run, China would certainly welcome a consolidation and expansion of the SCO's influence and a slow erosion of the effectiveness of US-led security alliances.

Short of supporting full Turkish SCO membership, Chinese leaders will prioritise deepening cooperation in trade and energy relations, and grooming Turkey as a key node of China's land and maritime Silk Road trade routes. Despite misgivings about alleged Turkish support for the Uighurs, considered by Beijing to be terrorists, its leaders might eventually intend to use the SCO as an instrument to nudge Turkey towards counter-terrorism cooperation on Chinese terms in the Central Asia-Caspian region. Chinese experts also closely observe Turkey's role in the Middle East and Syria, seeking to strengthen communication and cooperation with Ankara to help Chinese decision-makers adapt their Middle East policy. At the current stage, however, there is still a fundamental lack of strategic trust between both sides. Beijing sees Ankara's "Look East" policy as still immature and conflicted.

Against this backdrop, China's position on a possible Turkish bid to become an SCO observer will be open but cautious, pointing to defined procedures, a step-wise approach, strict criteria and a lengthy review process. It is also not unlikely that Beijing would rhetorically support a Turkish SCO membership application (while remaining uncommitted), as it would allow for tactically sounding out international reactions and for promoting China's 'anti-alliances' narrative, as well its 'layered' approach to constructing regional security architectures. In the long run, China's position will be very much shaped by circumstantial factors including Russia's shifting preferences and behaviour, as well as the materialisation of a more genuine and reliable Turkish turn to the East.

## Turkey's SCO aspirations underscore China's growing impact on European security affairs

Considering Beijing's currently rather guarded stance on SCO expansion at the expense of Western security frameworks, Turkey's integration into the SCO is unlikely to go beyond securing 'observer status' for now – no matter how hard Ankara might push for full membership. However, Beijing's stance on regional security alignments is set to evolve, which might open up new opportunities for Ankara in the medium to long term. In the meantime, the mere fact that Ankara seems more determined than ever before to seek closer ties with the SCO already poses significant challenges to the existing European security architecture and transatlantic security cooperation. Turkey's recent pre-occupation with exploring options for a closer relationship with the SCO does very little to revive its waning EU membership options. Central and Eastern European EU and NATO members will have been rather disheartened to learn that an EU membership candidate, or 'one of theirs' from NATO's point of view, is considering more systematic cooperation with a security organisation that has Russia at the core of its decision-making. After all, Russia is listed as a threat in the defence white papers of virtually all EU and NATO members. If Turkey were indeed to seriously consider joining the SCO in the future, a major rift within NATO would be almost inevitable and EU membership would become an even more distant prospect.

Looking beyond the normative challenges that Turkey's authoritarian security cooperation alignment could bring, closer Turkey-SCO cooperation also challenges European and transatlantic security cooperation in a more hands-on, operational way. The longstanding – and in an operational context often deeply problematic – inability of the EU and NATO to share specific classified documents because of diverging memberships illustrates rather well that multi-layered security arrangements can have severe shortcomings. If NATO-EU exchange of information remains difficult at times, it seems inconceivable that Turkey could reconcile the operational aspects of NATO membership – and indeed its occasional contributions to EU Common Security and Defence Policy missions – with closer SCO ties. In fact, several Russian officials have flagged that they would consider NATO and SCO membership incompatible from an operational point of view, actively encouraging Turkey to leave the Atlantic Alliance to pave the way for SCO membership. However, even the much more likely short- to medium-term scenario of Turkish observer status within the SCO would likely prompt NATO members to be much more reserved when it comes to sharing information with Turkey, especially if the latter 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 an important pillar of Europe's security architecture other than NATO and the EU, namely the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Currently, Turkey is a non-aligned country within the organisation that tends to side with EU member states – and occasionally the US and Canada – on a broad range of issues related to the OSCE's Politico-Military and Human Dimensions, including with regard to Eurasia. However, 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 perhaps not aligning with current Chinese visions for SCO development, Russia would have every interest in exploiting a strong SCO 'caucus' within the OSCE in its stand-off with the West over critical OSCE business, such as the situation in Ukraine.

In addition to the potential implications of Turkey's SCO ambitions for Europe's security architecture, there is also a fundamental point to be taken away from the critical role China plays in this matter: Europe's foreign and security policy community has only been slowly awakening to the fact that China is an increasingly global security actor whose security policies and activities have a direct bearing on European security interests. China is not only at the helm of a regional security organisation that could increasingly pose a challenge to NATO, the EU and the OSCE, but it also pursues a range of other policies that are increasingly felt in Europe. For example, Beijing's more prominent conflict resolution diplomacy, which often lacks coordination with European actors, could complicate EU efforts geared at promoting inclusive and sustainable peace in countries from Afghanistan through Syria to South Sudan. Looking at Syria more

closely, it is also becoming more difficult to ignore Beijing's substantial monetary and training support for Assad's troops, which affect conflict dynamics in the region and which also have direct knock-on effects in terms of migration for Europe. Europe is also more visibly affected by Sino-Russian security cooperation outside the SCO framework, with the annual joint military manoeuvres of the Russian and Chinese navies having recently taken place in the Mediterranean. The two countries also have to some extent aligned their missile defence postures, which are partly directed towards Europe and NATO.

For Europe and the wider transatlantic community, it will be vitally important to remain aware of these developments and abreast of other Chinese security postures and activities that might affect European strategic interests in the future. So far, 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. However, it is an important indicator of Turkey's growing estrangement from Europe's existing security architecture. Europe must therefore seek new ways of both constructive and critical engagement with Ankara. At the same time, Europe should consistently signal concerns to Beijing – as a major force in SCO decision-making – about the way Turkey's relationship with the SCO might affect transatlantic security cooperation and Europe's relationship with China in turn. It is up to the EU and NATO to devise a convincing approach to managing Turkey's tentative strategic realignment if they wish to shape China's still bounded but increasingly visible global security ambitions in a way that is conducive to European strategic interests.

*Jan Gaspers is Head of the European China Policy Unit, Mikko Huotari is Head of the Foreign Relations Program, and Thomas Eder is a Research Associate at the Mercator Institute for China Studies. This article reflects the personal opinions of the authors.*