



ENC ANALYSIS

Turkey and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization One Night Stand, Passing Flirt or True Love?

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Author: Dr. Nicola Contessi

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Nicola P. Contessi PhD, is an international affairs specialist with expertise in global governance, foreign and security policy, and international transportation. Contessi's full essay on Turkey and the SCO can be read in the book [Turkey's Pivot to Eurasia. Geopolitics and Foreign Policy in a Changing World Order](#) published by Routledge, ncontessi@gmail.com.

Summary

Turkey's attitude toward the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has been the subject of much speculation ever since it received the status of Dialogue Partner in 2012. Conjectures intensified one year later when, discussing Turkey's bid to join the EU, then still Prime Minister Erdoğan pleaded to Russian President Vladimir Putin: "Get us out of this suffering. We are willing to finalize a free trade agreement with Eurasian countries [i.e. the Eurasian Economic Union]. I talked about the Shanghai Cooperation Organization with [you] before. We care about it". Was Ankara drifting away from the Euro-Atlantic fold? Was it living up to the "multi-dimensional and multi-track foreign policy" it had declared 10 years earlier? Or was it merely a provocation, intended to improve its bargaining leverage in the lingering negotiations on EU membership?

An answer to these questions has been as elusive as Turkey has been ambiguous. Statements from Ankara tend to oscillate between the pursuit of observer status and full membership. However, though president Erdoğan's latest plea for closer ties with the SCO in November 2016 was perceived quite widely as if Turkey was seeking full membership, what appears to be at stake is still the observer status, first requested in 2013. Yet, in a December 2017 interview with Xinhua, Turkish Ambassador to China Abdülkadir Emin Önen said, "Turkey, a dialogue partner at present, already has a full-membership bid".

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No Lack of Interest

The past decade has seen Turkey gradually but consistently reorienting its geopolitical and geo-cultural references eastwards under the rule of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the former Prime Minister subsequently elected President. Domestically, the Turkish government has more decisively embraced authoritarian control since the events of Gezi Park in 2013 and the failed coup of July 15, 2016. Like in other countries of the region, Eurasianism has resurfaced as a distinct current within society: both as a home-grown opinion and partly through links to Alexander Dugin's Eurasianist movement. Internationally, Turkey has exhibited a growing willingness to coordinate on Syria with Moscow and Tehran and an all but open competition with the U.S. up to the recent rift with Washington.

Against this backdrop, Ankara may have three equally plausible orders of motivations to seek expanded involvement in the SCO –regardless of the actual nature of that involvement, at this point. First, the rediscovery of Turkic identity as distinct from the Western one, the consolidation of authoritarianism and the marginalization of Westernizing elites have shaken many of the underpinnings of the country's domestic governance and foreign policy. One could therefore argue that these shifts may entail a reconsideration of Turkey's multilateral affiliations and commitments in a sense more attuned to the transformed external manifestation of the identity of the state. As a [league](#) of mostly authoritarian governments, the SCO can provide a favorable environment for Erdoğan's Turkey, especially since the derailment of the latter's EU accession bid.

Second, Turkey may have made a rational calculation that deeper cooperation under the SCO framework would bring gains. The organization promotes collaboration in areas that Turkey considers to be strategic and brings together countries that have a considerable weight in those same areas, namely energy, transport and security. Ankara may thus anticipate the possibility of cutting some good deals.

Third, Turkey has repeatedly declared the ambition to position itself as a "central state" in the 21st century, and both China and Russia are strategic partners for its long-term goals. Deeper involvement within the SCO would be consistent with those goals. Especially since the admission of India and Pakistan in 2017, the organization has emerged as the main venue where key players decide the regional rules of the game. Ankara might now want a seat at the table in what –assisted by consensus voting– is shaping up as Eurasia's main concert, or at least allow it to hedge between East and West in a period of transformations.

Conversely, it is improbable that the prospect of economic cooperation with the Central Asian countries could be a driver given that Ankara can already count on the Turkic Council for that, and the SCO itself has morphed into an altogether different organization since its membership expansion.

Restraining Factors

Even though the SCO could be a conducive platform, entrenched historical and political realities pose challenges inhibiting a deeper involvement. Although Ankara has shared growing and increasingly important interests with Russia and China since the 1990s, it remains economically much more closely integrated with and even dependent on the West. In particular, [Europe](#) provides 75 percent of foreign direct investment and 56 percent of loans. Moreover, notwithstanding non-trivial and growing economic activity within its space, the SCO, unlike the EU, does not offer a common market or a free trade area.

In the security sphere, Turkey is [closely integrated with the Euro-Atlantic community](#) through binding institutional arrangements such as NATO. These ties, which Ankara is unlikely to break, are probably destined to disappoint any aspiration of engaging the SCO without making a clear choice. Even though the SCO has always officially denied an anti-NATO mission, Turkey's deeper involvement in the former would raise issues of political opportunity. Turkey hosts one of NATO's five commands in Izmir as well as a large U.S. overseas airbase in Incirlik, and represents the lynchpin of American strategy in the Middle East and the Balkans. Hence, [one expert](#), formerly a brigadier general in the Turkish Armed Forces, doubts that "Turkey's potential membership in the SCO – even the current status as dialogue partner – is compatible with its membership in NATO or its aspirations to become an EU member". [Another commentator](#) put it more bluntly: "if you are in the Western world, you cannot get along with China and Russia".

Pondering the Inscrutable

Whether the current membership would be comfortable with granting Turkey such recognition is a whole different question. When in 2013 –merely one year after becoming a Dialogue Partner— Ankara requested to upgrade that status to the level of Observer, it was declined. While, in the name of Turkic solidarity, the Central Asian "caucus" might not object in theory, China and/or Russia may have reservations. Sure enough, Russia – possibly backed by Iran, at the time already an observer – differed with Turkey over Syria. These differences emerged after Ankara allowed the deployment of NATO's advanced anti-missile defence radar in Kürecik near the city of Malatya and successively asked NATO to deploy Patriot anti-missile batteries in Eastern Anatolia.

Nonetheless, most Turkish analysts at the time appeared to actually doubt about Beijing. Although Turkey is a good client for Chinese companies, which regularly obtain infrastructure, telecommunications and mining contracts there, the Uyghur question remains a major irritant. Whereas Ankara refers to the Uyghur people as "the friendly bridge between Turkey and China", Chinese authorities [recurrently accuse Turkey](#) of harboring terrorists and permitting them a safe passage between Syria and China.

Erdoğan himself once referred to the July 2009 Chinese suppression of a rebellion in Urumqi as "savagery", even evoking a "genocide". Turkey, at the time a non-permanent member,

tried to bring the matter to the UN Security Council angering Beijing, which [accused Ankara of domestic interference](#). Then of course, there is the strong persuasion that Ankara is only flirting with the SCO to raise its price in the eyes of its Western allies to obtain advantages on that front.

Much water has passed under the bridge since that refusal and Turkey fell out and then back in with Russia, realigned with Russia and Iran in Syria updating its preferences on regime-change from a priority to a more distant goal and experienced an attempted coup. On the heels of these facts, Erdoğan once again petitioned to join the SCO in November 2016. Today, Moscow sees an opportunity in post-coup-attempt Turkey, and according to some, would be even ready to give it full membership. For Russia, Turkey means business: a major trading partner, the perfect client for Russian natural gas and a prospective transit route for further gas exports. Realistically, Turkish officials seem to understand this. Commenting on Ankara's election as chair of the SCO Energy Club, a Turkish diplomat [observed](#), "This is the main message sent to us by Moscow. This is how Russians view Ankara's membership in the SCO".

However, the military seems to be more sceptical. One retired Russian colonel and military journalist, sentenced that [without leaving NATO](#) Turkey could hardly join the SCO. Its position on Syria prior to July 2015 illustrates the kind of [fault lines](#) that could oppose Ankara and other SCO members on key strategic issues.

On the other hand, China [responded tentatively](#) to Erdoğan's second plea, stating that Turkey was already a dialogue partner and that China "attaches importance to Turkey's aspiration to further deepen cooperation with the SCO". A spokesman further affirmed China's [willingness](#) "to consult with other SCO members about the issue to seriously study it on the basis of consensus consultation". The Uyghur issue again loomed in the background as only one year earlier and just weeks before Erdoğan's official visit to China in 2015, Istanbul witnessed a series of [protests](#) against China, during which Chinese flags were set on fire near the Chinese Consulate-General and a Chinese restaurant was looted.

Conclusions and Outlook

In sum, it is arduous to predict whether Turkey may eventually obtain what Erdoğan claims it wants, though it's already hard to tell what exactly it wants. It is therefore not easy to answer the somewhat risqué but relevant question asked in the title. Both China and Russia are allergic to pan-Turkism –China probably more so today than Russia– and both may have misgivings about whether they can trust Erdoğan and the durability of Turkey's political commitments in the future. Besides, the SCO framework is flexible enough to allow fairly substantial participation even at more junior levels of involvement, something Turkey itself has experienced. For example, in 2017, it attained the chairmanship of the SCO Energy Club, the first time this was granted to a non-member. It was [Ankara's own proposal](#) that countries in SCO partnership status should serve one year terms at the helm of the Club, which paved the way for Turkey's unanimous election. Notwithstanding the numerous overtures, according to Murat Bilhan, the vice chairman of the Turkish-Asian Centre for Strategic Studies, Moscow and Beijing still seem to consider Turkey “as a Trojan horse of the West”. Even though Turkey has intensified official visits and other contacts with both China and Russia since 2016, it is likely that they will expect more substantial proof of loyalty on the Turkish part. Until then, they may well be happy enough prolonging interaction on terms of a variable geometry.