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Iran, Turkey and China's Middle Eastern Pivot

Thanks to events in Russia and Syria, Turkey lost its rivalry with Iran to be China's Middle Eastern pivot. Here's how.

By H. Akin Unver

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For a long time, China's main foreign policy in the Middle East was non-intervention in the internal affairs of other sovereign states. That's why Beijing was able to establish cordial relations with Middle Eastern regimes that have grown resistant to American interventionism after 9-11. China's suspicion of its own internal opposition worked well with the way Middle Eastern autocrats dealt with their own internal dissent and this Westphalian "mutual understanding" emerged as the foundation of China's political overtures in the region.

The Arab Spring changed this dynamic. Middle Eastern regimes of limited legitimacy were brought down in a domino effect, changing established power relations and cooperation patterns, and presenting China with a dilemma: pursue its low-risk, low-payoff approach to the Middle East in this post-Westphalian dystopia, or opt for a more ambitious track in which the use of regional pivots and military interests prevailed?

Energy dependence determines the foreign policy activism of any industrializing country and China is perhaps the prime example of this rule. Egypt's political future is uncertain, Saudi Arabia and Israel are too close to Washington, Iraq is barely holding it together, and Syria is in

much worse shape. Nonetheless, China has invested heavily in Iraq since 2003, buying almost half of the country's oil production; it has established close trade, oil exploration, and construction ties to Saudi Arabia, and it is already the top buyer of Iranian oil as Beijing is expected to become the world's top net monthly buyer of oil in 2014. Beyond that, though, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, and Syria are too unlikely, weak, or pro-U.S. to be targets for potential Chinese pivots. However, two countries have emerged as possible candidates for Chinese overtures: Turkey and Iran.

Beijing and Tehran have taken their cooperation to another level since George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech in 2002, with trade volumes and Chinese investments rising substantially. The Syrian civil war has since created a triangular alliance between China, Russia and Iran due to Russia's interests in the Tartus naval base, its only Mediterranean proxy naval opening. China, in turn, brought both Iran and Russia into its own maritime theater by initiating a round of naval drills, expanding the scope of this new triangular relationship. The election of Hassan Rouhani as the seventh president of Iran in August, and the start of nuclear talks with Iran, have led to the legitimization of China-Iran relations internationally. To that end, Beijing has found it less costly politically to develop closer ties with the new Iran, which is now cooperating with the West in the nuclear arena. China can be encouraged that deeper ties to Tehran will not prompt a strong Western backlash.

While China might define Iran as one pivot into the Middle East, the last five years in China-Turkey relations could lead to the argument that Beijing was simultaneously, yet silently cultivating Turkey as another. In the last decade, China-Turkey trade skyrocketed from around \$1 billion in 2000, to \$19.5 billion in 2010. Even as of 2008, the Konya tactical air warfare center Turkey established with Israel for joint air exercises in 2001, was reallocated to joint Turkish-Chinese air exercises, where Chinese SU-27 and Turkish F-16 jet fighters would engage in joint flight planning training.

The expansion of China-Turkey relations over the last five years has been exemplified by Turkish President Abdullah Gül's 2009 China visit, the first presidential-level visit in 14 years. Although the Urumqi riots in Xinjiang and the death of two Uyghur-Turks a month later sparked a major backlash in Turkey, leading to a boycott of Chinese goods, reconciliation came in October 2010 with a round of cooperation agreements that dealt with economic cooperation and technical consulting areas. Although the Xinjiang issue continues to rankle, Turkey has nonetheless developed an enthusiasm for greater cooperation with China in recent years. Many young and ambitious Turkish bureaucrats undertake their master's or doctoral studies on China and there is a new cohort of qualified bureaucrats in Turkey's influential ministries, who see vast potential for cooperation between two countries.

Relations have also taken on a military character over the last decade, as Turkey pursued a more autonomous foreign policy from the West and pushed for greater strategic maneuvering space during the earlier months of Arab Spring movements. In April 2012, both countries signed a nuclear agreement, which asserted a willingness for deeper cooperation in the field of nuclear energy.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan meanwhile clearly wanted to situate his country closer to China, with an expressed intention to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Pleading with Vladimir Putin during the press statement of an official visit in November 2013, Erdoğan went on the record: “If we get into the SCO, we will say good-bye to the European Union.” Perhaps the best-known example of this strategic realignment was the Turkish decision to choose Chinese HQ-9 missile defense systems over its NATO and Russian counterparts, which has swollen into a larger strategic controversy putting into question Turkey’s commitment to NATO.

However, Turkey looks increasingly unlikely to continue rivaling Iran as China’s Middle Eastern pivot, and the primary reason is the trajectory of the Syrian civil war. Investing politically in the decisive removal of Bashar al-Assad, Turkey’s Syria policy since mid-2011 has focused on supporting any and all Syrian opposition groups. To that end, Ankara’s initial support for the Free Syrian Army (FSI) evolved as the Syrian opposition’s frustration with its inability to achieve quick victory led to the radicalization of the groups, and eventually the arrival on the battlefield of the Al-Nusra Front and Islamic Front variants. Ankara’s inadequate assessment of the extent of these groups’ demands and priorities created an erratic Syria policy in which some splinter groups Turkey supported have turned against it.

Iran on the other hand, inevitably invested in the protection of Assad regime to retain the northern wing of its “Shiite Crescent” extending into Lebanon through Syria, reaching into Hezbollah assets close to Israel. Proving the point recently, Yahya Rahim Safavi – Supreme Leader Ayathollah Ali Khamenei’s senior adviser – declared in a recent speech that “our frontmost line of defense is no more in [southern Iran], rather this line is now in southern Lebanon [on the border] with Israel.” Joining Iran, Russia has also sided with Assad due to the strategic value of Moscow’s sole naval opening, Tartus base in Syria, complementing arms sales, and construction interests. While China did not have any immediate military goals in Syria, the fact that its two partners – Russia and Iran – committed so much in favor of Assad has also rendered Beijing a party to the conflict.

Turkey’s miscalculation eventually created an unpalatable conundrum in Syria, whereby none of the border crossings along the long Turkish-Syria border are controlled by a group or organization allied to Ankara. There are either Syria Kurds fighting for autonomy, radical militant groups seeking to replace Assad for religious reasons, or Assad’s own army, which has grown into a nemesis for Turkey. The most recent developments on the battlefield are forcing Turkey to side with Washington and reaffirm its NATO commitment to shield itself from the instability in Syria. This means that Turkey will soon seek a rapprochement with Israel, and accept NATO missile defense architecture as the basis of its Western commitment. This means that Turkey will soon return to NATO from its ill-prepared foreign policy autonomy adventures and will have to limit its cooperation with China.

Turkey’s self-inflicted entanglements in Syria, where it was supposed to demonstrate its growing independence from NATO, paradoxically created a situation in which – along with Russia’s looming expansion in the Black Sea – Ankara needs NATO now more than it did at any time in

the last decade. And Tehran doesn't. Iran has also successfully contained Turkish overtures into Syria and thus is in a much stronger strategic position. That's why Turkish-Iranian competition to be China's Middle Eastern pivot has ended with an Iranian win. Turkish-China relations will of course remain productive in the foreseeable future, but Turkey has lost Beijing's immediate favors to Iran.