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Building closer ties with China: the Turkish Foreign Minister visits Beijing

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On 3–5 June, Turkey's foreign minister Hakan Fidan visited the People's Republic of China (PRC), the first such visit by a representative of Turkish diplomacy in 12 years. The issues he discussed with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi included political cooperation and the international situation, as well as the prospects for resolving the conflict in Gaza. The Turkish side revealed that the war in Ukraine was also addressed. Other topics included trade, transport routes such as the Middle Corridor and the Belt & Road Initiative, as well as Turkey's potential membership in BRICS. Ankara reaffirmed its support for China's territorial integrity and sovereignty. At the end of his visit, Fidan travelled to Kashgar and Urumqi in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, where he appealed to the Chinese government to protect the cultural rights of this ethnic minority.

A week before Fidan's arrival to China, the Turkish energy minister Alparslan Bayraktar also visited Beijing to discuss energy cooperation, including the option of China building a second nuclear power plant in Turkey. In the coming days, the Chinese minister for culture and tourism Sun Yeli is expected to visit Ankara to discuss opportunities for boosting tourism.

Commentary

- The Turkish ministers' recent visits to China can be viewed as a manifestation of Ankara's readiness to revive bilateral relations. The two countries have not hitherto maintained overly intensive political contacts. Both Turkey and China are interested in increasing their political and economic presence in Central Asia and Caucasus regions, especially given Russia's weakening influence in this area due to the war in Ukraine. Thus, the intensification of bilateral contacts most probably intends to define areas of cooperation and potentially synchronize their political efforts. Building closer ties with China would also enhance Ankara's position in its contacts with Moscow, and more broadly the West, as Beijing would be presented as an alternative political and economic partner in such areas as trade, potential Chinese investments in Turkey and transport cooperation. At the same time, Turkey is still strongly tied politically, militarily and economically to the West, so Fidan's visit to China should not be interpreted as Ankara making a definitive turn towards Beijing or a shift in its relations with its Western allies.
- The consultations concerning the conflicts in Ukraine and the Gaza Strip are at present the most important political issues for the Turkish government. Ankara is seeking

support for its visions for resolving each of them. The talks in Beijing were aimed at legitimising its proposals and supporting its ambitions to act as a mediator on the international stage. For China, the visit by the Turkish minister at the beginning of June, coinciding with the 35th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, represents a diplomatic success, since most Western countries usually avoid official contacts with Beijing on this occasion. The Chinese authorities are aware of Turkey's deep ties with the West and that, at best, Beijing can only count on Ankara's neutrality in the growing conflict with the US, for which it will strive to guarantee such an outcome. The persecution of Uyghurs in China, typically a contentious issue in Turkish-Chinese relations, was downplayed during Fidan’s visit. No statements that could have been controversial for the hosts were made during the visit, which suggests that Turkey does not intend to burden bilateral relations with this issue.

- Economic cooperation is an appealing prospect. Ankara hopes to reduce its trade deficit by increasing the number of Chinese tourists visiting Turkey and boosting exports of agricultural and food products. Potentially, the most important area of cooperation is the coordination of efforts aimed at developing trade routes running through Central Asia, given Turkey’s growing ambitions to become a transit hub between the EU and China. Additionally, Ankara is interested in having China building a nuclear power plant in Turkey, as this would create an alternative to Russian, South Korean and American offers.