



PERSPECTIVES

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A Risky Gamble: Official Turkish Delegation to Inspect Troubled Xinjiang

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: An [official Turkish visit to the troubled northwestern Chinese province of Xinjiang](#) to assess reports of a brutal crackdown on the region's Turkic Muslims could shape Turkey's challenge to conservative Gulf states' leadership of the Islamic world and complicate Muslim silence about the most frontal assault on their faith in recent history.

A visit to assess the situation in the northwestern Chinese province of Xinjiang was agreed to in talks with Chinese leaders when Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan raised the issue during a recent visit to Beijing.

Erdoğan appeared to set the tone for the visit by declaring that it was possible to "[find a solution to this issue that takes into consideration the sensitivities on both sides.](#)"

Walking a fine line, Erdoğan went on to say that "those who exploit the issue...by acting emotionally, without thinking of the relationship that Turkey has with another country, unfortunately end up costing both the Turkish republic and their kinsmen."

For its part, China seemingly sought to frame the Turkish visit, with the state-run *China Daily* newspaper quoting Erdoğan as telling Chinese leaders that "it is a fact that [the people of all ethnicities in Xinjiang are leading a happy life](#) amid China's development and prosperity."

Turkey has in the past sought [unsuccessfully to mediate tensions in Xinjiang](#) in part by agreeing with Beijing on an investment program in the Chinese region.

For Turkey, the visit amounts to a risky gamble.

A Turkish confirmation of the extent of the crackdown would position Erdoğan as a leader willing to defend Muslim causes that other leaders have chosen to ignore, much as he attempted last year to take the lead on denouncing US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

Earlier this year, Turkey briefly appeared to be willing to take on the Xinjiang issue when its foreign ministry harshly condemned Chinese policy, but has largely remained silent since.

In response to the criticism, China temporarily closed its consulate in the Mediterranean port city of Izmir, [warned Chinese residents and travelers to Turkey to "be wary"](#) and pay attention to their personal safety," and threatened further economic retaliation.

If Turkey, on the basis of the visit, were to endorse China's assertion that it is countering extremism by offering voluntary vocational training to Turkic Muslims, it would be granting a significant victory to China given Turkey's ethnic and cultural ties to the Xinjiang Muslim community.

It would project Erdoğan as just one more Muslim leader who for economic and commercial reasons was willing to cold-shoulder co-religionists in a time of need.

An endorsement would group Erdoğan with men like Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, who, earlier this year during a visit to Beijing, [recognized China's right to undertake "anti-terrorism" and "de-extremism" measures](#), as well as [Pakistani PM Imran Khan](#) and [Indonesian president Joko Widodo](#), who professed to be unaware of the situation in Xinjiang.

Trying to balance Turkey's position as a safe haven for Turkic Muslims while maintaining close ties to China, Turkey last month said it had [granted 146,000 residence permits to members of various Turkic communities](#), including an estimated 35,000 Uyghurs.

"You don't need to worry. I want you to know that we will use every chance in favor of you to provide that you will reach tomorrow as citizens of the Republic of Turkey, brotherly and sisterly," interior minister Suleyman Soylu told a dinner at the breaking of the Ramadan fast.

China has attempted in the past to convince foreign diplomats and [journalists](#) of its version of events by taking them on guided tours of Xinjiang, but these efforts have produced moderate results at best.

How Turkey handles the visit to Xinjiang is likely to resonate in major parts of the Islamic world.

The delegation's conclusion is likely to come as [pressure plays out on the Sudanese military by Saudi Arabia and the UAE](#) to revisit several Turkish contracts concluded with ousted president Omar Bashir, including the development of Khartoum Airport and a port on Suakin Island.

The port project would put Turkey too close for comfort to the Saudi Red Sea coast and challenge the UAE's effort to dominate East African ports.

Turkish criticism of China could also complicate efforts by Central Asian governments to ignore Xinjiang even if ethnic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, [Uzbeks](#) and other Central Asians are among the detainees there, sparking anti-Chinese sentiment in former Soviet republics.

Kyrgyz president Sooronbai Jeenbekov, meeting Chinese president Xi Jinping a day before leaders of the eight Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) countries gathered in Bishkek last month, described the situation in Xinjiang as an ["internal \(Chinese\) matter."](#)

The SCO is made up of Russia, China, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India, and Pakistan.

A critical Turkish stance could further aggravate problems, at least in Kyrgyzstan, stemming from China's [promotion of a non-competitive Xinjiang-based company competing for a major infrastructure project](#).

China's insistence that TBEA, a little-known contractor with at best modest experience in building and repairing power stations, be granted a US\$386 million contract to refurbish Bishkek's aging plant has landed former Kyrgyz PM Sapar Isakov in court on corruption charges.

TBEA was awarded the contract despite lower bids by a competing Chinese company and a Russian company with an established track record.

It was not clear to what degree the push for TBEA was driven by an effort to line the pockets of corrupt officials and/or geopolitical objectives. China sees Central Asia and Pakistan as key drivers of economic development in Xinjiang.

Said Yang Shu, head of the Institute for Central Asia Studies at Lanzhou University in northwestern China, commenting on Chinese strategy: "For countries that have good relations with China and have similar problems, it is easy for both to reach consensus on the Xinjiang issue. For other countries,

explanations will not have much effect... But [overall, it's better to do it than not to do it.](#)"

After vacillating between silence and criticism, the Turkish visit is likely to determine where Turkey really stands.

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