

Pragmatic Institutionalism: The Rising Partnership between China and Turkey

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Abstract. In the first 20 years of the new millennium, China-Turkey relations experienced tortuous development. After 2020, with the continuous advancement of China's 'Belt and Road' Initiative and the everchanging international environment, the partnership between the two countries is experiencing a period of upswing. This research aims to study how the present condition of Sino-Turkish cooperation system has formed from a pragmatic institutionalism perspective, and to explore the areas in which cooperation between the two sides should focus on promoting. This research has theoretical value for the continuing development of pragmatic institutionalism theory, and also has practical value for the improvement of China-Turkey relations. Through analyzing the partnership between China and Turkey based on the pragmatic institutionalism theory and the actual situation of the cooperation between the two countries and finds that their cooperation conforms to the basic characteristics of pragmatic institutional cooperation, indicating that pragmatic institutional cooperation has between the main stream of Sino-Turkish partnership.

Keywords: Sino-Turkish relations; Pragmatic Institutionalism; The 'Belt and Road' Initiative.

1. Introduction

As two countries at the eastern and western ends of the ancient Silk Road, China and Turkey passed through a long history of economic and cultural exchanges. However, the differences in ideology, religion and culture have impeded the development of bilateral relationship between these two countries since the modern international system established. In 2010, China and Turkey established the 'Strategic Partnership' cooperative relation, but since then, the improvement of political relations between two sides has stagnated. After 2020, with the spread of COVID-19 pandemic and the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian War, Turkey has faced increasing diplomatic and economic pressures and severe regional tensions. Under the various burdens, Turkish government has begun to reconsider the importance of developing relations with China. As a new developing theory of international relations in recent years, Pragmatic Institutionalism attaches importance to the flexibility and practicality of the development of bilateral relations, which can provide some enlightenment for the further development of Sino-Turkish relations.

2. Method and Literature Review

International cooperation is one of the basic issues of the field of international relations research. The theory of Realism in international relations holds that under the influence of power, conflict is the basic characteristics of international relations; while the interdependence theory contends that, relations between countries have become dependent on economic, cultural and other intercourses, and many problems faced by countries, such as food and the environment, have become globalization problems that require the cooperation of all countries. In this condition, the trend of international cooperation will gradually exceed the trend of international conflicts [1]. On the basis of interdependence theory, neoliberal institutionalists believed that cooperation was universal, and under the reconciliation of various international institutions, the interests of countries are reconciled [2]. They pointed out that the international system is an anarchic international system, emphasizes the

influence and constraint of the international institution on state behavior, and institutional cooperation is the general way of cooperation between countries.

However, with the deepening of the tendency of globalization, the growing strength of third world countries, and the increasingly frequent frictions between emerging economies and developed capitalist powers, the traditional international cooperation system advocated by the theory of neoliberal institutionalism is facing severe challenges. As the cooperation between emerging economies becomes closer, new international cooperation institutions are emerging. Pragmatic institutionalism, proposed by Chinese scholar Wei Ling when studying China-Eastern European relations, points out that the development of bilateral relations should not be limited to strong binding rules and rigid institutional forms, but should be based on the principles of pragmatic agenda, voluntary participation and flexibility, and carry out flexible and efficient cooperation [3]. Unlike neoliberalism, which emphasizes legally binding rules, pragmatic institutionalism values the efficiency of institutions in practical cooperation, and emphasizes the use of diverse informal systems to achieve mutually satisfactory cooperation outcomes. The proposal of pragmatic institutionalism provides theoretical guidance for the establishment of institutional cooperation between countries with significant differences in social systems and political ideologies. Although the theory has not been used to study the relations between China and other countries other than Eastern European countries, Turkey is China's cooperation partner in the 'Belt and Road' Initiative (BRI), which provides an important opportunity for the two countries to carry out pragmatic institutional cooperation, and Sino-Turkish cooperation is also an important example in emerging economies. Therefore, this theory has strong guiding value for improving the partnership between China and Turkey.

Scholars have done a large number of researches on the development of Sino-Turkish relations, many early researchers have made analysis and suggestions about the development of their partnership by combing the historical context of the political and economic relations and discussing the basis of cooperation between the two countries [4-6]. In past ten years, the economic and trade ties between China and Turkey have deepened and the BRI proposed by China has made great achievements. Some scholars pointed that the rapid increase of trade and investment quantity would be the main impetus for the breakthrough of relations between the two countries after Turkey signed the Memorandum of 'Belt and Road' in 2015 [7]. And the targets and financial perspective of BRI became the main focus of some studies during this period [8]. As important as the economic field, Turkey's Foreign Policy Orientation and Turkish Public Opinion towards China also attracted some researcher's attention [9]. The vague attitude of Turkish Justice and Development Party government on the East Turkistan issue has changed to a focus issue in the field of political cooperation between the two countries [10]. Meanwhile, some scholars have comprehensively considered various economic and political factors, and proposed that the development of bilateral relations should focus on cooperation in all fields, including infrastructure connectivity, free trade, financial integration and people-to-people connectivity [11]. After the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic in 2020, the intercourses between the two countries in the field of public health increased, and the academia began to pay attention to the broader areas of cooperation between China and Turkey. Turkish scholars state that Turkish diplomatic policy is experiencing an inclination to the developing countries, especially to China in the post-western order world [12]. The researches on public opinion have increased significantly, Chinese scholars Li Huiqun and Xia Yongmin found that the in-depth coverage of China's epidemic prevention work by Turkish media during the epidemic has attracted high attention in Turkey and played a positive role in disseminating China's positive national image in Turkey [13]. Turkish researcher Öğr. Gör. Sait ŞAHİN drew a conclusion that the cooperation and investigation of Chinese Media in Turkey may provide opportunities to improve relations between these two countries [14].

The studies mentioned above mainly summarize the development status and make prospects of Sino-Turkish relations through the analysis of the realistic cooperations of the two countries in different fields. As a new emerging theory of international relations, pragmatic institutionalism has

not yet been applied to the study of Sino-Turkish relations. This article will innovatively from the perspective of pragmatic institutionalism to explore the pragmatic perspectives from which Turkey and China will further deepen their bilateral cooperation under the ever-changing international environment, so as to comprehensively promote the improvement of their partnership.

3. Sino-Turkish Relations from 1970 to 2020

The historical relation between China and Turkey is quite aged, the establishment of silk road started the commercial and culture interaction between them. But in 20th century, the international environment of cold war in 1950s and 1960s led to rare contacts between China and Turkey. The two countries established formal diplomatic relation in 4th August, 1971, which marks the beginning of their modern relationship. Later, impacted by the collapse of Bipolar Pattern and the intensive trend of Multi-Polarization at the end of the last century, China-Turkey relations once entered a ‘honeymoon period’, in which the political, economic and cultural exchanges between two sides increased rapidly. China and Turkey witnessed a golden period of development of their relations at the beginning of the new century. However, the rise of pan-Turkism and neo-Ottomanism in middle 2000s stopped the procedure, the diplomatic relationship between them has stagnated for more than ten years since China and Turkey established the ‘Strategic Partnership’ cooperative relation in 2010. After 2013, no further progress has been made in the partnership between the two countries.

The biggest barricade between the two countries is the attitude of Recep Erdogan’s government towards the "East Turkestan" separatists in Xinjiang, China. It has become an important estrangement affecting their relations since 2003. The connection between Turkey and East Turkestan roots in the Ottoman Empire period. After the establishment of PRC, Turkey became the source of ideologies of pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism which were widely spread in Xinjiang, which influenced some separatists’ terrorist activities [15]. At the official level, although Turkish government never announced their support of East Turkestan, their slightly sympathetic attitude towards it and even rumors of covert support for its activities have brought the dissatisfaction of China. Except the East Turkestan problem, Turkey's NATO membership and desire to join Europe make it more inclined to Western countries on the international stage. From the view of public opinion, the remnants of the Cold War ideology still have influence to the attitude of the Turkish government and ordinary people towards China, their rejection of China stems mainly from the huge differences in political ideology and social system. Under the impact of these factors, the international institutions of Neoliberal institutionalism which build by rigid treaties or laws can’t be constructed effectively, they have to look for other methods to carry out bilateral cooperation.

4. Opportunities Brought by BRI

4.1. ‘Belt and Road’ Initiative

As early as 2011, when the state leaders of China and Turkey met in Ankara, they both expressed their expectance to revive the ancient Silk Road. In 2013, Chinese government proposed an initiative to construct the ‘New Silk Road Economic Belt’ and the ‘21st Century Maritime Silk Road’ to open up the international market in the hinterland of Eurasia for Chinese enterprises, referred to as the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’. This initiative uses historical and cultural symbols of the ancient Silk Road successfully to show its proposal of creating an effective regional cooperation platform and promoting political mutual trust, economic cooperation, cultural exchanges between the Eastern and Western parts of the Eurasian continent. BRI adheres to the pragmatic cooperation concept of joint consultation, joint construction and mutual benefits. Turkey was one of the first countries to respond to and join the BRI Cooperation Framework, in October 2015, China and Turkey signed an agreement on connecting Chinese ‘Belt and Road’ Initiative and Turkish ‘Middle Corridor’ Initiative, initiating cooperation between the two countries under the framework of pragmatic institutions.

4.2. The Economic achievements under BRI

Although China and Turkey did not have close political intercourse in past decade, China's 'Belt and Road' Initiative provides a significant opportunity for the two countries to consolidate economic ties. After BRI was proposed, China has already become Turkey's second largest trading partner. From the perspective of commodity types, the two countries have strong complementarity, Turkey mainly exports textiles and mineral raw materials to China, and imports electronic products, mechanical and electrical products and daily necessities from China [16]. According to the statistics from the General Administration of Customs of China, China-Turkey trade volume was US\$34.23 billion in 2021, increased 42.2% than 2020. Among them, China's exports to Turkey were 29.19 billion US dollars, a year-on-year increase of 43.5%; Imports from Turkey amounted to US\$5.04 billion, a year-on-year increase of 35.1%. It is worth paying particular attention to a fact that Turkey's trade with China has been in deficit for a long time, and the Turkish market is extremely dependent on Chinese goods. This phenomenal can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Turkey's exports and imports to China (in US\$, hundred million)

Year	Exports	Imports	Trade deficits
2010	31.69	119.42	87.74
2011	31.24	156.14	124.9
2012	35.11	155.85	120.74
2013	44.86	177.47	132.61
2014	37.05	193.05	156
2015	29.44	186.08	156.64
2016	27.85	166.9	139.04
2017	37.83	181.22	143.38
2018	37.57	177.89	140.32
2019	34.97	173.24	138.27
2020	37.31	203.46	166.15
2021	50.49	291.52	241.03

Source: General Administration of Customs of China

According to statistics from the Chinese Embassy in Turkey, in the first five years after the implementation of BRI, Chinese investment in Turkey increased by 120%, mainly in the fields of telecommunications, finance, transportation, mining, energy, manufacturing and agriculture. Chinese capital plays an important role in Turkey's upgrading of these industries, and this role will be even more significant in the environment of the epidemic and uncertain regional turmoil since 2020. Apparently, Turkey has realized the great opportunity to mitigate the finance burden in the economic cooperation under the framework of BRI, and has reconsidered the necessity of developing the deeper partnership with China.

4.3. Causes Analysis

Pragmatic Institutionalism contends that the driving force for long-term cooperation between the two countries is the common interests of both sides. China and Turkey have different factor endowments to develop their own advantageous industry, which forms their complementary commodity structures in trade and provide basic conditions for reciprocal bilateral trade. The complementary trade is an excellent way for both countries to develop their own industries and enrich their markets. Additionally, a pragmatic agenda, voluntary participation and flexibility are the basic characteristics of pragmatic cooperation. Since BRI was proposed, economic and trade intercourse between the two countries have attached importance to stabilizing the inherent cooperative ties on the basis of reciprocity, and all explorations of cooperation in new fields have been premised on the practical results; The partnership in this framework is fair and voluntary, emphasizing the role of the subjective will of grassroots participants, while the guidance at the national level is not coercive;

Moreover, both the level, form and scale of cooperation have strong flexibility, which satisfies the psychological demands of individual units participating in bilateral trade and investment and greatly improves the enthusiasm of grassroots participants. The huge common interests of the two countries and the characteristics of pragmatic agenda, voluntary participation, flexibility embodied in specific trade cooperation have enabled the economy connections between China and Turkey to develop under their stagnant political relations, and providing a basis for them to carry out further pragmatic institutional cooperation.

5. Changes since 2020

Since 2020, with the dramatic changes in the international situation, Turkey has become aware that the West is at odds with its interests on many international problems, including refugee and regional security issues [17]. As a result, Turkey has gradually shifted its overall diplomatic strategy and began to seek to develop relations with more third world countries, this trend has been particularly evident under the condition of economic depression influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war.

In 2020, the unexpected coronavirus epidemic directly impacted Turkey's import and export trade and tourism, which had a great impact on the two pillar industries of domestic manufacturing, manufacturing and tourism services, and the hindrance of the development of these two industries led to the decrease of Turkey's total economic output and the decline of residents' living standards. The GDP of Turkey in 2020 was \$719.95 billion, down 5.5% from 2019, and net national income per capita was \$7147, down 5.6% from 2019. Turkish government had to manage the problems of the huge fiscal expenditure caused by public health affairs and the deficiency in revenue caused by economic depression simultaneously, the fiscal deficit exceeded 5% of GDP in 2020. To solve the finance problems, Turkish government issued additional currency and its domestic inflation rose sharply. Although the economic situation picked up in 2021, the Russian-Ukrainian war that broke out in early 2022 once again cast a shadow over Turkey's economic development. Russia is Turkey's 10th largest exporter and 2nd largest source of imports; Ukraine is Turkey's 20th largest exporter and 13th largest source of imports, and the war between the two countries has further increased the pressure on Turkey's domestic market and exacerbated price rises. According to the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, more than 6.8 million Russian and Ukrainian tourists visited Turkey in 2021, accounting for more than a quarter of all foreign tourists in Turkey in 2021, and the decline in tourists due to the war in 2022 is undoubtedly a blow to Turkey's tourism industry. Under the severe burden in economy, China's importance as Turkey's main economic partner is becoming increasingly prominent. China provides a huge foreign market for Turkish producers, gives Turkish consumers various consumption choices, and also provides a huge source of tourists for the battered Turkish tourism industry. Deepening economic relations with China is of great significance to the recovery of Turkey's national economy. As a proponent and practitioner of BRI, China has been stretching out an olive branch to Turkey in the cooperation of economy and trade. It can be seen that China-Turkey relations are currently facing an important period of opportunity by the lead of pragmatic institutionalism.

6. The Prospect of Pragmatic Institutions

Pragmatic institutional cooperation is the core content of Pragmatic Institutionalism theory. At present, the 'Belt and Road' Cooperation Framework is a good institutional background for China and Turkey to continue pragmatic institutional cooperation in next stage. The structure of cooperation under the BRI framework is loose and not binding, but it can still be called an international institution from the definition of it. The development of pragmatic institutional cooperation is of great significance to China and Turkey, which not only stabilizes and expands the current cooperative relationship, but also provides a foundation for deepening the political relations between the two

countries. In which areas to establish pragmatic institutional cooperation is the main issue that the two sides should pay attention to at present.

Economic cooperation, especially the trade cooperation, is a fundamental sphere under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. Deepening trade intercourses and establishing a more extensive and free trade policy is a profound consensus reached by China and Turkey, and it is also the primary direction for continuing to carry out pragmatic institutional cooperation. In March 2021, the foreign ministers of China and Turkey met in Ankara, the capital of Turkey, and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu expressed his hope to further strengthen economic and trade cooperation with China, especially expand exports to China, and deepen their strategic partnership on this basis. On November 1, 2022, the Turkey-China Business Conference was held in Istanbul, both sides agreed to accelerate the interaction of Chinese 'Belt and Road' Initiative and Turkish 'Middle Corridor' Initiative, strive to get more new achievements, build a new platform for digital economy and green economy and achieve a higher level of mutual benefit result. The two countries have fully realized that cooperation in the economic and trade field is naturally reciprocal and flexible, expanding the economic and trade cooperation will be the main direction to lead the in-depth development of bilateral relations.

Consensus-building in specific fields is a significant aspect of pragmatic institutional cooperation. Many issues such as climate, environment, public health, and counter-terrorism have become issues that need to be faced by the international community, the consensus between China and Turkey in these fields will greatly promote the political mutual trust between the two sides and lay the foundation for the deepening of their diplomatic relations. Among these fields, the cooperation of public health deserves special attention. On April 8, 2020, Xi Jinping and Recep Erdogan, the state leaders of China and Turkey had a telephone conversation and reached an important consensus on strengthening partnership between the two countries in jointly fighting the coronavirus epidemic. Since then, China and Turkey have cooperated on epidemic prevention and control on many occasions, and organized exchanges and visits of experts in the field of public health to exchange experiences. By June 2021, China has provided more than 9.6 million novel coronavirus vaccines to Turkey, and more than 2 million Turkish people have received vaccines from China. This is conducive to the improvement of Chinese national image and Sino-Turkish friendship.

Promoting cultural exchanges between the two sides is also one of the basic prerequisites for continuously promoting bilateral pragmatic institutional cooperation, which is conducive to promoting friendship between their peoples and laying the foundation of public opinion for official relation. Since the 'Belt and Road' Initiative was proposed, the two sides have greatly promoted mutual understanding between the people of the two countries through the holding of cultural years and the establishment of the bilateral People-to-People Friendship and Cooperation Dialogue, created a positive atmosphere of public opinion in the two countries, and ensured that folk intercourses and official diplomacy work in the same direction.

7. Conclusion

China and Turkey are both countries with great economy potential in the 21st century, enhancing the cooperative partnership between the two countries is of great significance to the diplomatic strategy and economic development of both sides. Since the establishment of official relations between China and Turkey 51 years ago, the partnership between the two countries has gone through a tortuous way. Although the resurgence of neo-Ottomanism and neo-pan-Turkism has long influenced the diplomatic strategy of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party and has long cast a shadow over the diplomatic relations between China and Turkey, under the guidance of the "Belt and Road" initiative, bilateral pragmatic institutional cooperation has led to increasingly close economic and trade connections between the two countries in the past decade. After 2020, under the impact of the epidemic and the influence of the international environment, the dependence between China and Turkey has further deepened, and the partnership between the two countries is

facing a great period of opportunity. With economic and trade cooperation as the core, multi-level and wide-ranging pragmatic institutional cooperation has greatly benefited the two countries in the past decade and injected strong impetus into the development of political relations between the two countries. Since 2020, China and Turkey have interacted with each other at or above the ministerial level as many as 24 times, with a trend of going more frequently, the signs of warming political relations between them have become increasingly obvious. The rising partnership between China and Turkey over the past 10 years has been a process of cooperation guided by pragmatic institutionalism theory. Although the study of China-Turkey relations in the field of this theory has just started, its fruitful practical results have already demonstrated the vigorous vitality of the pragmatic institutions and its complement to the traditional institutions. It can be predicted that continuing to adhere to pragmatic institutional cooperation will still be the main policy direction for the future development of Sino-Turkish relations.

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