Turkey–China Relations in the Context of Xinjiang: An Analysis of Political Discourse in Turkey

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between the Turkish political elite's discourse on Xinjiang and the broader political context of Turkey-China relations from 2009 to 2024. Despite growing economic ties, the Uyghur issue remains a point of friction due to Turkish public and political sentiment. The study questions how elite political discourse frames the Uyghur issue relative to foreign policy toward China. Employing Discourse Network Analysis (DNA) on 74 political statements, the research identifies five core themes: Human Rights/Uyghur's Rights, Kinship, Silence Towards Uyghur's Issues, Chinese Integrity, and Relations with China. DNA reveals a structural split in Turkish politics, with a dual discourse: an identity-based moral frame by the opposition, and an interest-based pragmatic frame by the ruling party and government. The key finding is the divergence between opposition rhetoric and official state messaging. The opposition uses identity-based, Pan-Turkic, and human rights rhetoric for domestic mobilization, while the state focuses on economic stability and bilateral relations with China. Within the domestic political debate, the Uyghur issue functions mainly as a political tool rather than a foreign policy priority. This study shows how middle powers balance domestic and geopolitical pressures, with economic interests shaping moral discourse.

Keywords:

1. Introduction

The relationship between the Turkish people and China is complex, marked by conflict and cooperation over territorial and ethnic issues. Historical entities such as the Huns, the Kokturks, and the Uighur Khanate fought the Chinese empires. The region, then known as East Turkestan, was renamed after its annexation by China in the 18th century and is now located in western China. It briefly gained independence in 1933 and 1944 but was controlled by China after 1949. In 1955, Beijing established the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) (in this article, it will be addressed by its internationally recognized official name or shortly Xinjinag) (Kolçak & Ercan, 2020; Furtun, 2010). During the Cold War, Turkey's relationship with China was strained: Turkey, aligned with the anti-communist bloc, viewed "Red China" with suspicion, reducing engagement. Turkish media emphasized disputes to boost nationalism, escalating hostility beyond ideological differences (Yang & Xie, 2021/2022). Post-Cold War, relations improved; early 1970s talks laid the groundwork, with Turkey recognizing XUAR and adhering to the "One China" policy. In the 1980s, relations expanded as both opened to the world (Erendor & Kaiypova, 2022). Diplomatic ties began in 1971 following China's UN recognition,

and relations have evolved through four periods, most recently improving (Colakoglu, 2015). Early on, divergent policies hampered relations: China focused on Central Asia, Turkey on the West. Recently, Turkey increasingly seen China as a partner amid friction with Western allies (Kurt, 2019). The Syrian crisis and the Arab Spring also indirectly affected the relationship, particularly regarding the Uyghur issue (Erendor & Kaiypova, 2022). Overall, the relationship has involved mutual image-building and policy reflection of internal political and strategic needs (Yang & Xie, 2021/2022).

Despite these diplomatic and economic connections, the Turkish public has generally maintained a negative perception of China. This sentiment was particularly exacerbated by the Urumqi events in 2009, which resulted in significant casualties among both Uyghurs and Han Chinese, and subsequent revolts and attacks after 2013, which received extensive media coverage in Turkey (Makerras, 2014). Data from this period shows a considerable decrease in positive attitudes toward China between 2005 and 2010, with the lowest positive rating recorded in 2009, the year of the Urumqi unrest (Üngör, 2022). However, a counter-trend emerged after the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, where the Turkish government received support from China against the revolters, leading to a subsequent increase in positive views (Chen, 2019).

Therefore, this article addresses the complex and often contradictory nature of Turkish elite debate regarding foreign policy toward China. The main research question guiding this study is:

- How do Turkish political elites balance the domestic political discourse on the Uyghur issue with the imperative to maintain and develop bilateral ties with China after the year 2009?

This study makes a significant original contribution to the literature by providing a systematic, network-based analysis of the Turkish political elite's discourse on the XUAR. Unlike previous studies that rely on general media analysis, this paper offers a granular understanding of the political narrative by focusing exclusively on the official speeches of Turkish politicians.

The methodological approach utilizes the Discourse Analysis Networker methodology developed by Phillip Lefield to analyze a corpus of political speeches. The findings are then mapped in Visone to visually demonstrate the nature and structure of Turkish political discourse on China regarding the XUAR conflict. Specifically, the analysis is structured around two sub-questions:

- How do Turkish politicians portray the Uyghurs' status in China?
- How are the Turkish–Chinese relations and the Uyghur issue linked in the Turkish political discourse?

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section presents a conceptual framework and reviews existing literature on Sino-Turkish relations, focusing on identity-based solidarity, interest-driven strategic pragmatism, and normative advocacy. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the methodology and data, describing how Discourse Network Analysis (DNA) is used. The results are then organized around five key themes: Human Rights/Uyghur Rights, Kinship, Silence Toward Uyghur Issues, Chinese Integrity, and Relations with China. The article concludes by examining how Turkey–China relations are framed across the political spectrum, emphasizing the discursive divergence between domestic political rhetoric and official government discourse.

Central to this analysis is the fact that the Uyghur issue and the alleged oppression in XUAR remain the most prominent drivers of China's negative image in Turkey. This narrative is often fueled by a perceived lack of transparent information exchange and the deep-seated ethnic kinship Turks feel toward the Uyghurs. Consequently, the status of Uyghurs under Chinese rule strongly shapes public and political debate over bilateral relations, creating a persistent point of friction. While economic ties have strengthened, official messaging and elite rhetoric demonstrate an ongoing tension over how to address the Uyghur issue relative to broader strategic goals (Shichor, 2009; Karaca, 2013; Ekrem, 2017).

2. Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

The academic literature on Sino-Turkish relations, particularly in the context of the XUAR, reveals a complex and evolving dynamic. This section organizes the existing scholarship into three core concepts for the subsequent analysis: identity-based solidarity, interest-based strategic pragmatism, and normative advocacy. By grounding these themes in established research, this framework provides the analytical differentiation necessary to understand the "dual discourse" of Turkish political elites.

2.1 The Identity-Based Solidarity

In IR theory, identity is a socially constructed set of meanings that defines a state's interests (Wendt, 1992). In a metaphorical sense, kinship extends family bonds to political groups (Haugevik, 2019). In Turkey, kinship connects

national identity with foreign policy, justifying emotional engagement in China's "internal affairs" by depicting Uyghurs as soydaş, or ethnic kin. Scholarly analysis shows kinship is particularistic, rooted in shared blood, which sets it apart from the universalist approach of human rights. While China describes the unrest in XUAR as "terrorism," Turkish rhetoric often focuses on protecting identity and culture. The historical and cultural ties to the Uyghurs, often referred to as the "Uyghur factor," have consistently complicated bilateral relations, particularly following significant events such as the Urumqi incidents (Ekrem, 2017; Erturk, 2016b). The broader context of the Uyghur question is also frequently discussed in Turkish literature (Kul, 2017). This study identifies four distinct layers of identity often confused in political discourse:

a. Ethnicity emphasizes shared descent and language, framing Uyghurs as 'ethnic kin' (Kul, 2017), making their status in China a domestic political issue in Turkey (Erturk, 2016b).
b. Religion centers on Islamic faith, portraying Uyghurs as oppressed Muslim brothers (Asgarov, 2019)
c. Nationalism prioritizes the sovereignty of the Turkish state, viewing the issue through the lens of Turkish national interest (Furtun, 2010);
d. Pan-Turkism promotes the idea of cultural and political unity among Turkic peoples, which Beijing primarily concerns itself with regarding Turkish "separatist" support (Schihor, 2009).

The issue of ethnic conflict in XUAR is a central theme in the literature. Colin Mackerras (2014) discusses the 2009 and 2013 incidents, arguing that Chinese counter-terrorism measures have exacerbated already difficult ethnic relations between Han Chinese and Uyghurs. While China frames the unrest as terrorism, Western journalism often remains skeptical of these claims. He suggests that China may be overreacting by labeling ethnic unrest as terrorism. Beijing's skepticism stems from viewing Turkey as a center of Pan-Turkism, leading to doubts about whether Turkey still supports Uyghur separatism, despite Turkey's efforts to prove otherwise (Schihor, 2009). Conversely, the impact of the Uyghur issue on bilateral ties is largely mediated by public and political discourse.

Additionally, the literature addresses alleged human rights violations, cultural oppression, and systemic assimilation. Although it often overlaps with kinship, it remains analytically separate because it relies on universalistic norms rather than particularistic connections. The literature emphasizes concerns about safeguarding Uyghur identity and culture amidst Chinese policies (Mackerras, 2014; Kolcak & Ercan, 2020). Rooted in international law, this discourse portrays the issue as a violation of fundamental rights that should concern the global community, independent of ethnic affiliations (Yanarocak, 2015). It stems from Turkey's historical and moral duty to support its kin in accordance with universalist principles while simultaneously maintaining its particularistic ties. Unlike universal rights, this is often framed as Turkey's unique responsibility as a "protector" of the oppressed, bridging identity and ethics (Yang & Xie, 2021/2022).

2.2 Interest-based Strategic Pragmatism

An interest-based perspective highlights geopolitics and economic stability over identity, focusing on Turkey-China trade, investment, and the 'Silk Road' (BRI). To theoretically justify Turkey's pragmatic approach, this study references middle power foreign policy literature. Middle powers are defined by their position in the international system, where limited hard power compels them to pursue flexible, coalition-focused, and rhetorically adaptable foreign policies (Furtun, 2010; Sahakyan, 2021). When dealing with major powers like China, middle powers often face a dilemma between systemic pressures—such as trade reliance or foreign investments—and domestic normative expectations, including identity ties or public opinion (Ergenc, 2015; Isik, 2020). To manage this tension and avoid significant geopolitical risks, middle power governments tend to adopt strategic ambivalence—employing pragmatic messaging externally while allowing domestic actors to express identity-based solidarity (Furtun, 2010; Yildirim, 2021).

In this context, Turkey's pragmatic approach to China, especially post-2016 coup, views China as an alternative to Western partners (Zan, 2009; Ergenc, 2015; Chen, 2019). China is seen as a source of resources for Turkey's growth and independence from the West, while Turkey serves as China's gateway to Europe. Despite the Uyghur issue, economic ties are vital, with China potentially boosting XUAR and Turkey's infrastructure through psychological and strategic links (Gnerre, 2023; Honghui, 2016). Kaya (2013) doubts a strategic alliance due to trade imbalance and differing goals. Conversely, Ergenc (2015) and Isik (2020) see mutual dependency in economics, with China needing Turkey for the BRI and XUAR stability, and Turkey relying on China for economic stability and Eurasian integration.

Consequently, Turkey acknowledges China's sovereignty over XUAR and frames the issue as an internal matter for the PRC. Therefore, sovereignty corresponds to the "One China" policy. This aligns with the literature discussing how Turkey avoids antagonizing major powers by respecting territorial integrity to ensure its own security interests. Furtun (2010) posits that Turkey, as a middle power, cannot afford to antagonize a major power like China. He advocates for Turkey to take a stance against terrorism in the region while simultaneously safeguarding Uyghur culture and identity.

The literature shows that the state sometimes adopts "anti-terror" language to align with Chinese framing, often as a diplomatic tactic to moderate criticism of Turkey's domestic issues (Erendor & Kaiypova, 2022; Boztepe, 2016; Mackerras, 2014). Some scholars note that China has strategically highlighted the Kurdish issue in Turkey, which, in turn, makes Turkey's concern over the Uyghurs appear to be a matter of double standards (Erendor & Kaiypova, 2022). Despite the difficulty for Turkey in supporting China's anti-terrorist actions, the uneven economic relationship and fierce competition between the two nations introduce an element of uncertainty (Zan, 2009).

2.3 Normative Advocacy

This theme highlights the tension between the two previous perspectives, distinguishing discourse rooted in universal human rights from that based on particularistic identity. It responds to the reviewer's concern about the lack of differentiation between "moral" and "identity-based" claims. Asgarov (2019) highlights that the way the issue is framed in public discourse significantly affects its perception. China has actively sought to counter negative narratives by strengthening its use of soft power in Turkey, with Boztepe (2016) noting that all of China's media initiatives in Turkey are guided by this strategy. Furthermore, the Uyghur issue underscores the media's capacity to disseminate information that can immediately influence public opinion, the political class, and diplomatic relations, undeniably impacting Turkey's ties with China (Yanarocak, 2015). The opposition's use of the Uyghur issue in domestic politics, often leading to motions being rejected by the ruling coalition, is a recent example of this tension (Aydınlık, 2024).

The discussion includes critiques of government inaction and cautious reasoning. The government justifies its restraint as "responsible diplomacy," asserting that a middle power cannot jeopardize its strategic interests for symbolic gestures (Furtun, 2010). Conversely, opposition groups use this theme to undermine the government's pragmatic approach, portraying "silence" as a betrayal of national and moral responsibilities (Asgarov, 2019).

Schihor (2009) explains that the two nations developed specific negative images of each other during the Cold War, leading to post-Cold War competition in Central Asia. Turkey's pursuit of a multipolar world order and its "Eurasian vision" have been perceived by China as a security threat (Hovsepyan, 2023). Yildirim (2021) notes that the rigid boundaries established during the Cold War persist, and the Uyghur issue remains unresolved due to differences in political views.

Ergenc (2015) attributes the inconsistency in Turkey's media coverage of China to diverse actors influencing public opinion and the Western orientation of Turkish academia. She suggests that improving relations requires not only high-level decisions but also changing the framing of China. Chinese actors have localized tactics to boost China's reputation, responding to Turkish media needs. Klimes (2021) examines CCP efforts to create a united front in Turkey to influence opinion on XUAR and its ethnic groups. These efforts seem to be working, as recent surveys show more Turks view China as a potential ally (Üngör, 2022).

3. Methodology

To investigate the central research questions, specifically, how Turkish political elites frame the Uyghur issue and how this discourse relates to Turkey's bilateral ties with China, this study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design centered on Discourse Analysis (DA). DA is a powerful analytical tool for examining the relationship between language (both spoken and written) and social practice, allowing the uncovering of underlying frames and assumptions that shape political behavior (Johnstone, 2002; Paltridge, 2012; Phillips & Hardy, 2002).

This study's empirical foundation is a corpus of 74 political statements representing a broad, balanced cross-section of the Turkish political landscape from 2009 to 2024. This time frame was selected to capture the evolution of the discourse following the critical 2009 Urumqi events and subsequent key developments in Sino-Turkish relations. The sampling followed a purposive sampling strategy, focusing on statements that achieved high visibility in the Turkish media landscape. Collected from various mainstream Turkish news agencies and media outlets (eg., Anadolu Agency, TRT Haber, Cumhuriyet, and Hürriyet), the dataset encompasses official communications and public speeches from both ruling coalition actors (the Justice and Development Party [AKP], the Nationalist Movement Party [MHP], the Presidency, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and key opposition parties spanning nationalist (IYI Party, BBP, Zafer Party), secular-center (CHP), Islamist (Yeniden Refah, Saadet), and pro-Kurdish (HDP) orientations. Primary actor representation was heavily concentrated among major political figures and executive leadership, complemented by systematic coverage of parliamentary opposition critiques to capture cross-ideological narratives.

The analysis proceeds in two stages: qualitative coding and quantitative network mapping. Initially, the 74

statements were transcribed and subjected to a rigorous qualitative discourse analysis. The qualitative analysis followed an iterative, abductive coding protocol applied to 880 coded sentence units across the 74 political statements. Initial open coding was performed directly on the text, assigning initial thematic tags as new discursive patterns emerged. Each statement was coded for:

- Actor: The specific politician or political organization.
- Concept: The specific claim or thematic frame being invoked.
- Agreement/Disagreement: Whether the actor supported or opposed the concept (though for this study, the focus remained on the presence of the frame).

To maintain consistency across the dataset, a second review pass consolidated, standardized, and grouped these initial codes into five core thematic categories based on their semantic and conceptual relationships:

- Human Rights/Uyghur Rights: Coded when statements framed the situation in Xinjiang through universal normative or legal standards. Sub-codes differentiated between Physical Violence (e.g., references to *kamp* [camps], *işkence* [torture], *soykırım* [genocide], or physical oppression) and Political/Cultural Violence (e.g., *sistematik baskı* [systematic oppression], cultural assimilation, or restrictions on religious practice).
- Kinship (Pan-Turkism/Ethnic Ties): Coded when actors explicitly invoked ethnic, cultural, or historical ties to the Uyghurs using terms such as *soydaş* (ethnic kin), *kardeş* (brothers), *doğu türkistan* (East Turkestan), or referenced shared Turkic heritage and Pan-Turkic identity.
- Silence Towards Uyghur Issues (Inaction): Coded when actors specifically addressed government restraint or diplomatic caution. This included opposition critiques accusing the state of *sessiz kalmak* (remaining silent) or *görmezden gelmek* (ignoring the issue), as well as government counter-framing justifying cautious engagement as *sorumlu diplomasi* (responsible diplomacy).
- Chinese Integrity (Sovereignty): Coded when actors invoked state sovereignty, territorial integrity, or official diplomatic frameworks. Keywords included *tek Çin* (One China), *toprak bütünlüğü* (territorial integrity), *egemenlik* (sovereignty), and explicit framing of anti-separatism/anti-terrorism
- Relations with China (Bilateral/Economic Ties): Coded when statements focused on bilateral economic, strategic, or trade ties. Key terms included *kuşak ve yol* (Belt and Road Initiative / BRI), *ticaret* (trade), *ekonomik işbirliği* (economic cooperation), and strategic partnership.

The stability of the codebook was confirmed by re-examining the initial coded units and comparing them with the final category definitions, ensuring consistent application across all 880 sentences. Initially, open coding was used to develop the initial codebook directly from the text. Subsequently, these codes were grouped into five core thematic categories, followed by a thorough re-review of all 880 sentences. This step verified that the same operational rules were applied uniformly from statement #1 to #74. For sentences that were discursively ambiguous, they were assessed against the primary actor's main claim to ensure correct sub-category placement.

Finally, to respect the empirical scope of Discourse Network Analysis (DNA) software developed by Philip Leifield (Leifield, P., 2016), this design measures only public elite framing, actor positioning, and discursive co-occurrence, not unobserved state policy actions or internal decision-making motivations. The DNA tool facilitates the systematic coding of each statement by linking the actors (the politician or organization making the statement) to the concepts (the codes/themes identified in the qualitative stage). This process transforms the qualitative data into a quantitative, relational dataset. This study constructed two-mode networks (linking actors to concepts) and one-mode projections (linking actors who share concepts, or concepts that appear together). The network structure allows for the identification of:

- Central Actors: Politicians or parties most frequently engaging with the issue.
- Dominant Discourses: themes most frequently invoked.
- Coalitions and Cleavages: Groups of actors who share similar discursive positions (i.e., frequently co-mentioning the same concepts).

The final step involves visualizing the discourse network using Visone. We utilized degree centrality to measure the prominence of themes and the Fruchterman-Reingold algorithm for layout, which clusters nodes that share more connections. This provides a clear, empirical representation of the structure of the Turkish political discourse on the XUAR conflict.

By combining qualitative content analysis with the quantitative rigor of Discourse Network Analysis, this methodology allows for a nuanced understanding of the political framing of the XUAR issue in Turkey. The analysis will conclude by assessing the consistency between the identified political discourse and Turkey's actual behavior and policy actions in its bilateral relations with China.

4. Findings

The analysis of 74 political statements from 2009 to 2024 reveals a complex, often contradictory discourse in Turkey regarding the XUAR issue. This discourse is characterized by a fundamental tension between identity-based concerns, rooted in ethnic kinship and human rights, and the pragmatic pursuit of economic and geopolitical interests with China. The Discourse Network Analysis (DNA) enables systematic mapping of this complex discursive field, revealing the central themes, key political actors, and their alignment around specific narratives.

4.1 The Five Discourse Categories

The qualitative analysis of the political statements identified five core thematic categories, or frames, that structure the Turkish political discourse on the XUAR issue. These categories serve as the primary nodes in the subsequent network analysis:

Table 1: Thematic Mapping

Conceptual Pillar	Thematic Categories (DNA Nodes)	Description
Identity – based Solidarity	Kinship; Human Rights - Physical Violence and Political Violence (Particularistic)	Focuses on ethnic, cultural, and religious ties. Frames Uyghurs as "kin" and emphasizes Turkey's unique moral duty to protect them.
Interest-Based Pragmatism	Relations with China; Chinese Integrity	Prioritizes bilateral economic (BRI), political, and strategic partnerships. Acknowledges China's sovereignty and territorial integrity.
Normative Advocacy	Human Rights (Universalist); Silence/Inaction	Focuses on universal human rights violations and international law. Includes critiques of government "silence" versus "responsible diplomacy."

4.2 The Structure of the Discourse: A Network of Competing Frames

The overall structure of Turkish political discourse on XUAR is best understood as a network of interconnected yet distinct thematic frames. Figure 1 visualizes the relationships between these categories, where edge thickness represents the frequency of co-occurrence.

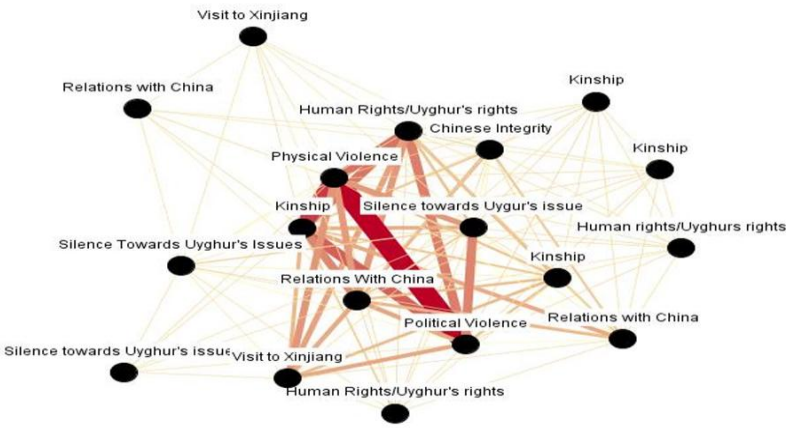


Figure 1: Thematic Network of the XUAR Discourse

The network reveals that the discourse is not monolithic. The most central and densely connected themes are Kinship and Human Rights, indicating that the "Identity-Based Solidarity" pillar remains the dominant lens for most political actors. Statements frequently refer to Uyghurs as "our brothers" or "our kin," expressing concerns over "systematic assimilation." For instance, one opposition leader stated, "We cannot remain silent while our kinsmen in East Turkestan are subjected to cultural genocide."

Conversely, the theme of Relations with China is most strongly associated with Chinese Integrity. This reflects the "Interest-Based Strategic Pragmatism" pillar, where the discourse prioritizes diplomatic pragmatism and respect for China's sovereignty. This inherent tension between identity-driven advocacy and interest-driven diplomacy is the defining feature of the Turkish political landscape.

4.3 The Actors in the Discourse

The analysis of the political actors involved in the XUAR discourse reveals a clear division within the Turkish political field. The corpus of 74 statements was sourced from the following key actors:

Political Actor/Organization	Type	Discursive Role (General)
AKP (Justice and Development Party)	Ruling Party	Interest-Based, Pragmatic
CHP (Republican People's Party)	Main Opposition	Normative Advocacy, Universalist
IYI Party (Good Party)	Nationalist Opposition	Identity-Based, Critical
MHP (Nationalist Movement Party)	Coalition Partner/Nationalist	Identity-Based, Cautious
HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party)	Opposition	Normative Advocacy, Universalist
BBP (Great Union Party)	Nationalist Opposition	Identity-Based, Critical
Zafer Partisi (Victory Party)	Nationalist Opposition	Identity-Based, Critical
Yeniden Refah Partisi (New Welfare Party)	Islamist Opposition	Identity-Based, Critical
President/Presidency	Government	Interest-Based, Pragmatic
Foreign Ministry	Government	Interest-Based, Pragmatic
Other Government Officials	Government	Interest-Based, Pragmatic

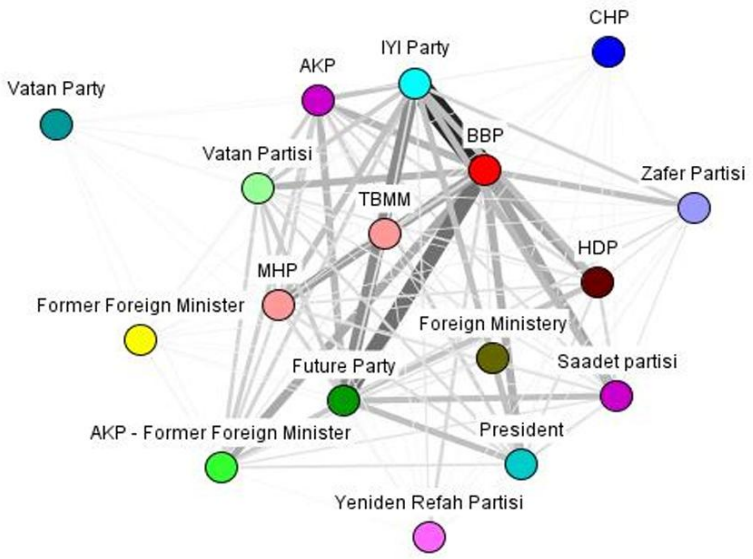


Figure 2: Network of Political Organizations

Figure 2 maps the network of political organizations, showing a dense cluster of nationalist opposition parties (IYI, BBP, Zafer) that share a consistent discourse critical of China. These actors are the primary carriers of the Identity-Based Solidarity frame, frequently invoking "Kinship" and "Ethnic Ties" to mobilize their base.

In contrast, the ruling AKP and governmental bodies occupy a more central but less densely connected position. This reflects a "dual-track" discourse. While the AKP occasionally engages with identity themes to satisfy its conservative base, its statements are significantly more likely to align with Interest-Based Strategic Pragmatism, emphasizing "Chinese Integrity" and the "Strategic Partnership."

The HDP (People's Democratic Party) and the CHP (Republican People's Party) are also active in the discourse, though with less density than the nationalist parties. Their discourse tends to be framed more universally in terms of human rights, rather than exclusively through the lens of ethnic kinship.

4.4 Thematic Alignments

Figure 3 provides a two-mode network that directly links the political actors to the thematic concepts they invoke. This visualization clarifies each party's specific discursive positions and demonstrates the coalitions of agreement and disagreement on different aspects of the XUAR issue.

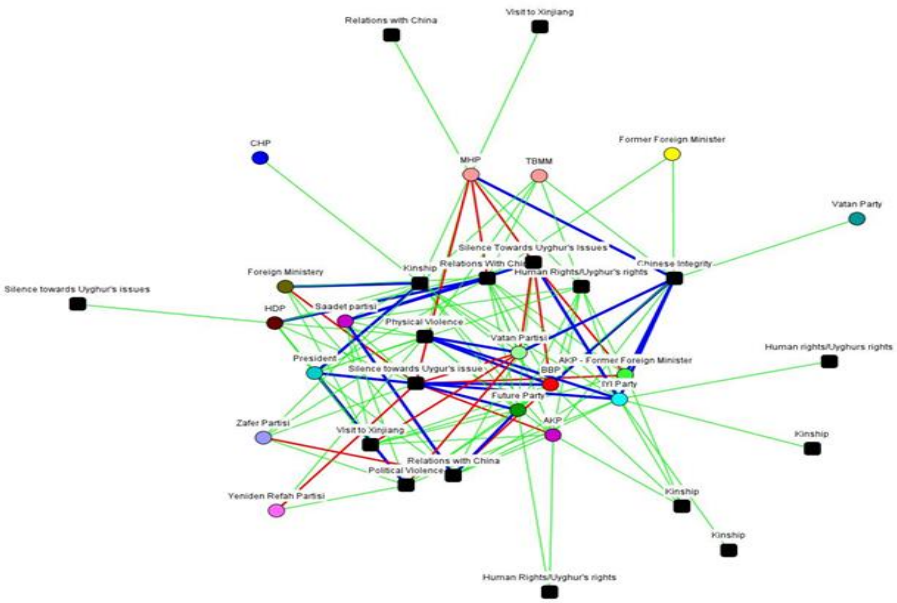


Figure 3: Combination of Organizations and Categories

The map demonstrates that opposition parties form a strong coalition around Identity-Based Solidarity. Their discourse is confrontational, emphasizing that "the cries of our brothers cannot be ignored." Meanwhile, the government (AKP, President, Foreign Ministry) aligns with Interest-Based Pragmatism, framing their approach as "mutual benefit" and "respect for territorial integrity." A government official noted, "We are sensitive to the issue, but our relationship with China is vital for national interests."

The theme of Silence Towards Uyghur Issues (Normative Advocacy) serves as a critical point of contention. Opposition actors use this to criticize the government for "selling out" kinsmen for economic gain, labeling it a "betrayal of national duty." The government, however, reframes this "silence" as "responsible diplomacy," arguing that as a middle power, Turkey must prioritize strategic stability over symbolic gestures.

The DNA reveals a deeply divided landscape structured around the conflict between identity-based and interest-based frames. While the opposition utilizes Identity-Based Solidarity as a tool for domestic mobilization, the ruling elite

navigates a complex space by balancing nationalist credentials with the geopolitical imperatives of Interest-Based Strategic Pragmatism. This results in a "dual discourse" where universal Normative Advocacy is often secondary to the primary tension between ethnic kinship and economic interest.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The Discourse Network Analysis of statements by Turkish political elites regarding the XUAR reveals ongoing and significant tensions in how Turkey's policy toward China is publicly framed. The findings indicate a dual discourse, with the political landscape divided between an identity-driven moral stance and an interest-driven pragmatic approach. This supports the complex dynamic noted by Colakoglu (2015) and others, who identified a shift towards viewing China as an alternative partner, alongside ongoing divergent policy interests. This division forms a structural cleavage that influences how the Uyghur issue is politically utilized in Turkey (Duerkop, 2020). The discussion goes beyond a simple summary, interpreting this structural division through three core conceptual pillars: Identity-Based Solidarity, Interest-Based Strategic Pragmatism, and Normative Advocacy.

5.1 The XUAR Issue as a Domestic Political Tool

The DNA indicates that the most vigorous discursive activity is driven by Identity-Based Solidarity, mainly serving as a discursive resource for domestic political competition. Opposition parties such as the IYI Party and BBP predominantly employ an identity-based framework, characterized by frequent pairings of the Kinship and Human Rights categories (see Figures 2 and 3 in the Findings). This discourse leverages Pan-Turkic and religious links between Turks and Uyghurs (Schihor, 2009) to rally public support and depict China's actions as moral and ethnic violations. The prominence of this cluster within the network suggests a cohesive, uniform narrative among these actors, who discursively position themselves as the primary custodians of Turkish national and ethnic interests.

Turkish groups are highly concerned about the ongoing human rights violations in XUAR, as noted by Kolçak & Ercan (2020), a concern also emphasized by international organizations (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2022). Repeated references to Political Violence amplify the moral urgency of this issue. This perspective aligns with the literature on middle-power foreign policy, which underscores the influence of identity and historical connections in moral positioning (Asgarov, 2019; Yildirim, 2019). Importantly, for the opposition, framing the Uyghur issue provides a high-visibility platform for rhetoric-based critique of government policy on nationalist and moral grounds, without committing the party to operational foreign policy trade-offs.

The theme of Normative Advocacy is used to establish a political fault line. The opposition effectively leverages the Uyghur issue to influence public opinion and shape diplomatic relations (Asgarov, 2019; Yanarocak, 2015). They frame the government's silence on Uyghur concerns as "betrayal," aiming to undermine pragmatic government policies by appealing to identity-based sentiments. Boztepe (2016) notes that China responds to this with soft power strategies. This indicates that the XUAR discourse is fundamentally a structural division that impacts how the issue is used politically in Turkey (Duerkop, 2020).

5.2 Government Rhetoric: Interest-Based Strategic Pragmatism

Contrasting sharply with oppositon rhetoric, the state's foreign policy is driven by Interest-Based Strategic Pragmatism. This interest-centric framing, primarily led by the AKP and the government, connects 'Relations with China' and 'Chinese Integrity.' The ruling party's emphasis on the "Chinese Integrity" framework underscores the strategic significance of China's soft-power initiatives (Boztepe, 2016) and the Sino-Turkish alliance (Chaziza, 2016). Focused on economic collaboration (Gnerre, 2023) and China's resources for Turkey's growth (Chen, 2019), this communicative strategy emphasizes mutual benefits. The Uyghur issue is discursively treated as a domestic concern requiring diplomatic delicacy, reflecting a shift toward engaging non-Western partners, in which economic interests often take precedence over normative critique (Chen, 2019; Gnerre, 2023).

A key theoretical perspective identifies the "Sovereignty Exchange' within this pragmatic dialogue. The literature notes that China strategically invokes Turkey's Kurdish issue to highlight perceived double standards (Erendor & Kaiypova, 2022). The Turkish government's connection to Chinese Integrity and statements such as "We respect the territorial integrity of all countries, including China, and expect the same in return" serve as a direct discursive response. By stressing "territorial integrity," official Turkish rhetoric reflects an implicit framework of reciprocal non-interference in diplomatic dialogue. The ruling party's framing of its cautious approach as "responsible diplomacy" aligns with Furtun's

(2010) view that a middle power like Turkey often frames its stance to avoid antagonizing major powers.

5.3 The Inconsistency: A Domestic-Foreign Policy Gap

This study highlights a key finding: a notable gap exists between competing political discourse, creating a 'Discursive Rhetoric Gap'. While opposition parties and political elites often promote a highly critical, morally charged narrative, the foreign policy executed by the ruling party remains mainly pragmatic, focusing on maintaining economic and strategic ties (Beydullah, 2019). This difference suggests that discussions about XUAR in politics mainly function as tools for domestic political rallying and competition, rather than directly reflecting foreign policy consensus across the elite spectrum.

The ruling party's discourse reflects a careful balancing act in elite communication. It must acknowledge strong public sentiment rooted in kinship and human rights to maintain nationalist legitimacy, while also incorporating elements of the Chinese narrative, such as respect for territorial integrity, to justify its cautious and pragmatic rhetorical approach. This strategic ambivalence exemplifies middle-power diplomacy as it addresses complex geopolitical issues (Ergenc, 2015; Isik, 2020). The weak connection between Relations with China and Kinship/Human Rights in the overall network (see Figure 1) shows that the absence of a shared strategic outlook remains a significant hurdle within political debate. Instead of unifying these elements, the discourse divides them between opposing political groups, making a cohesive narrative unlikely as long as domestic politics remain highly polarized over core values (Phillips & Hardy, 2002).

The highly sensitive, identity-focused discourse acts as a significant tool for the opposition within domestic politics. However, within the corpus analyzed, this rhetoric operates alongside a parallel, pragmatic narrative maintained by government actors. As a result, the Uyghur issue remains a controlled point of contention in official discourse, strategically managed by the ruling elite to prevent it from dominating the broader diplomatic and economic agenda, especially Turkey's involvement in the BRI.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study used Discourse Network Analysis (DNA) to chart the Turkish political elite's discussions of the XUAR issue, revealing a core structure shaped by ongoing tension between ethnic-moral solidarity and geopolitical-economic pragmatism in public messaging.

The main theoretical contribution is to highlight and analyze the 'Discursive Rhetoric Gap', which manifests in how Turkey communicates its middle-power positioning. The Turkish example demonstrates a distinct division in elite communications, where opposition discourse is heavily influenced by domestic and ethnic framing, while government messaging remains consistently aligned with economic and strategic pragmatism.

The analysis emphasizes the enduring impact of Pan-Turkism on Turkish political rhetoric, which remains a significant tool for public mobilization despite the government's rhetorical efforts to moderate biletarel tensions. It also highlights How Turkish discourse incorporates rhetorical concessions on territorial integrity, mirroring key themes in China's diplomatic framing.

Future research should target three key areas: firstly, conducting a quantitative analysis of how this dual-track discourse influences Turkish public opinion over time; secondly, comparing how other nations with strong ethnic ties to the Uyghurs, such as Central Asian states, navigate the same discursive tension; and thirdly, exploring How state-level foreign policy actions map onto these identified discursive networks over time. The ongoing discursive tension indicates that the Uyghur issue will likely remain a significant, albeit complex, aspect of the public debate surrounding Sino-Turkish relations into the future.

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7.1 AI Usage Statement

The author declares that artificial intelligence tools were used during the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, AI-assisted tools were used for language editing, grammar correction, and clarity improvement. The intellectual content, analysis, interpretation of results, and final approval of the manuscript remain the sole responsibility of the author.

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