



ANALYSES

The Rise of Turkey in Africa

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Since its 2011 intervention, Turkey has completed a considerable number of development projects in Somalia.
[Reuters]

The face and the fate of African continent in the 21st century is changing fast and its network of foreign relations is becoming more complex as new actors are interacting with African countries. Besides the Western powers, nowadays, China, Japan, India and Russia along with Middle Eastern regional powers such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel are all seeking to create an area of influence over Africa's sources, markets or strategic locations by offering low-cost loans, financial investments or finished products. Therefore, Africa has become the new star of summits and forums which are usually considered a necessary tool to boost interaction with Africa.

As indicated by academics like Pádraig Carmody, the new complexity of African countries' foreign engagements might now be framed within the concept of the "new scramble for Africa," resembling the 19th century colonial scramble for Africa, or the "new cold war." resembling the US-Soviet rivalry during the Cold War era. [\(1\)](#) Either way, the reality of Africa's attractiveness to different powers will remain a fact requiring much discussions.

As a neighbouring country to the continent, Turkey's influence is not very far from Africa. In fact, Turkey has been seeking to strengthen its influence in the continent through Africa tours, summits and forums. Expecting to play a more active role on the global stage, Turkey sees important potential and opportunities for cooperation with Africa. Because of that, Turkey has followed a certain Africa policy since 2005, and in the last decade, its presence in the continent has become more visible

than ever. It has even hosted three Africa summits, the most recent of which was on 16-18 December 2021. Therefore, this paper examines Turkey's presence in the continent and dynamics of Turkey-Africa interaction.

Africa's Rise and Global Actors in the Continent

Africa is an enormous continent where poorest nations of the world paradoxically live on the richest resources. The continent has vast deposits of oil, gas and minerals like cobalt, gold and diamond as well as agricultural products like palm oil, cacao, tea, coffee and vanilla, which are all necessary raw materials for industrial productions. Therefore, increasing demand for industrial supply creates extra pressure on Africa's resources, especially as some Asian powers' intense engagement with Africa started in the mid-1990s.

Accommodating more than 1.3 billion people, the continent is very dynamic in nature, and its market size expands parallel to the rise of its demographics and the purchasing power of its middle classes. In this regard, pejorative perception of Africa has become more positive in the recent period worldwide. Global companies seek new selling strategies in a way that best suits the African market; and companies like Google are investing more in the digitalisation of the continent. The continent is definitely seen as a new technology hub. In this vein, entering the market and selling more products to Africans are important objectives of global companies. As the African market attracts more attention, Africa gets more actors.

Following of all this is the "Rising Africa" narrative that points to the increasing influence of Africa on the global stage in terms of both politics and economic performance. For some, it is just a myth because of the reality that millions of people are still struggling with poverty and the lack of basic services and live in unfortunate conditions. But for optimists, "Rising Africa" is a pure reality and reflects the transformation of the continent in a more positive way on many levels. Here, we are going to discuss the reality of this narrative. However, one thing is certain: it attracts global powers that use it to shape their foreign policy towards Africa.

Africa's diversity in its foreign relations somehow creates contradicting perspectives. For example, China is seen as a giant investor; but on the other hand, it is considered a neo-colonialist utilising the debt trap strategy. In fact, Angola, Ethiopia and Kenya are all struggling to pay back their loans to China. These countries face the challenge of paying with oil or leaving important sea or air ports to Chinese investors. In another case, to attract more Israeli investors, African countries seem willing to disregard Israel's unlawful policies against immigrants and Palestinians. However, despite serious risks, today, we witness that the United States, European powers, India, China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Russia, Brazil, Turkey, Israel, Iran, Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are all applying certain African policies to increase their presence in the continent whether in trade and

business or political and cultural affairs. Therefore, the presence of multiple players creates an environment in which the interests of Asian, Western Middle Eastern powers sometimes conflict each other.

Turkey's Rise in Africa

If Africa's rise is a reality, it is also a fact that Turkey is rising in Africa. Nowadays, we are witnessing quite a dynamic and intense interaction between Turkey and African countries in terms of trade, business and diplomacy despite the existence of competitors. Today, Turkey is a more visible actor in Africa and Africa has had a unique position in Turkey's multi-dimensional and proactive foreign policy in the last 15 years. Turkey is seeking to increase its influence in the continent more by using every channel of diplomacy, trade, investment, education, health, security and military cooperation along with soft power tools like culture and history. [\(2\)](#)

Accordingly, Africa is more visible now in Turkey as well and African business people, students, tourists and immigrants are storming Turkey in large numbers. Somali, Sudanese, Libyan, Egyptian, Tunisian, Algerian, Senegalese and Nigerian communities in the big cities of Turkey have become more visible nowadays. Moreover, the number of African embassies in Ankara has gone from 10 in 2008 to 37 in 2021. This obviously invites us to view current Turkey-Africa affairs from a multi-dimensional angle instead of a single point of view.

Turkey's history in the continent goes back to the 16th century when the Ottomans first arrived in North Africa. Later, Ottoman territory expanded across the shores of the Red and Mediterranean seas and towards the Sahel region. The Ottomans remained a ruling power in Africa for four centuries and established five separate administrations in Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Eritrea. However, in 1912, Ottoman forces retreated from the continent, leaving its stronghold administrations to European colonial powers. Although it is quite rich, the Ottomans' historical legacy in the continent still remains unexplored by academics. In addition, during the Republican era, Turkey focus shifted to the West.

If we put this long Ottoman period aside, modern Turkey's current engagement with Africa officially started in 2005 after Turkey declared 2005 "the year of Africa" and adopted a new concrete policy of "opening up to Africa." Since then, we have been witnessing Turkey's diplomatic venture in the continent because, according to the Turkish foreign ministry, relations with Africa constitute one of the key foreign policy objectives and opening new diplomatic missions enhances Turkey's relations with the continent. Today, Turkey is represented by 43 active embassies across the continent, a significant increase from a mere 12 two decades ago. As a matter of fact, Turkey is the fourth most represented country in Africa after the United States, China and France.

Also, Turkey was granted observer status by the African Union (AU) in 2005 and later became a strategic partner in 2008 with its first Turkey-Africa summit in Istanbul in the same year. Focal points in the Istanbul summit were a “common future,” “cooperation” and “solidarity” between the participating parties. Moreover, both Turkey and African partners have agreed to implement a concrete programme of action based on equality, mutual respect and reciprocal benefits. (3) The second summit between Turkey and African states was held in Equatorial Guinea’s capital, Malabo, in 2014 in accordance with the Istanbul Declaration’s follow-up mechanism, which demarcated that summits are to be held every three years and ministerial review conferences every three years. In Malabo, the Joint Implementation Plan for the period of 2015-2019 was accepted by the participants.

Nevertheless, Turkey’s Africa policy is not limited to periodical summits. Official visits to African countries play an important role in developing Turkey’s cooperation with Africa too. In this regard, Turkish President Erdoğan has visited 30 different African countries, including war-torn Somalia, a couple of times in the last 15 years. This is usually considered a record for a non-African leader. (4) After a two-year interruption due to the coronavirus pandemic, he started his Africa tour once again from Angola, Togo and Nigeria in October 2021.

Economic cooperation and trade relations are one of Turkey’s priorities in the continent. To promote trade relations between Turkey and African countries, Turkey organises Turkey-Africa economic and business forums periodically in partnership with the AU in order to regulate and develop trade relations between Turkey and the continent. The first forum gathering trade and economy ministers from 42 African countries and over 2000 businessmen was held in Istanbul in 2016. The second forum was held in 2018 under the theme, “Investment on the Sustainable Future Together.” In the same year, and on a more regional level, to deepen Turkey’s economic and trade relations with West African countries, Turkey established the Turkey-ECOWAS Business and Economic Forum. (5) Turkey’s latest economic and business forum was held in Istanbul in October 2021.

Turkey’s Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEIK) has 45 business councils in African countries in order to promote bilateral trade and mutual investment. Turkey’s total trade volume with Africa has expanded from 3 billion dollars in 2003 to 26 billion dollars in 2021. Turkey’s foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa is close to 10 billion dollars. Turkish private companies are also monitoring Africa for investment and business opportunities. For example, Turkey’s flag carrier, Turkish Airlines (THY), now flies to 61 different destinations in 40 African countries across the continent.

Turkey-Africa cooperation in the field of energy shows signs of increase as well. Turkey imports oil and LNG from African markets. Algeria has become the fourth largest gas exporter to Turkey and Nigeria-Turkey bilateral trade constitutes 90% of Turkey’s LNG imports from Nigeria. (6) In 2017, oil- and mineral-rich Chad announced its invitation to Turkish companies for oil extraction in the

country. Similarly, Somalia invited Turkey to explore oil in its seas. Additionally, Turkey signed a maritime deal with the UN-recognised Government of National Accord in Libya allowing for the creation of an exclusive economic zone from Libya's northeast coast to Turkey's southeast coast and the exploration of oil.

Turkey considers agriculture a strategic sector in which it can improve its relations with African countries as well. In this regard, in 2017, Turkey organised the first Turkey-Africa Agriculture Ministers Meeting and Agribusiness Forum in the city of Antalya and inked deals with six African countries in the fields of agriculture, fishery and livestock. 40 ministers of agriculture from 54 African countries participated alongside the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) and the African Union Commission. Food security, nutrition, financing and credit opportunities, agroindustry and development issues were discussed by the parties in order to improve Turkey-Africa cooperation. (7) It is common for implementation projects of Turkey's official development agency, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency's (TIKA) offices in Africa to provide agricultural tools, seeds, fertilisers and pesticides to local farmers in order to improve their agriculture capacity.

Aid for development and humanitarian affairs is also a highly essential pillar of Turkey's presence in the continent because there is a big development gap between Africa and the rest of the world. For example, access to clean water and electricity is still a big issue for millions of Africans. In this regard, Turkey pays special attention to development projects in the continent. TIKA has coordination offices in 22 African countries and Turkish non-governmental civil society organisations (NGOs) are very active as development and humanitarian aid providers in Africa. These institutions fund school, madrasas, hospitals and clinics of different sizes.

Turkey's support for development projects is well-revealed by the case of Somalia. Despite internal conflicts and a deadly famine, Turkey intervened in Somalia in 2011 with humanitarian concerns. Since then, Turkey has completed a considerable number of development projects in Somalia. For instance, Turkey's largest military training centre and the largest embassy compound are located in Somalia's war-torn capital, Mogadishu. Also, Turkish companies manage Mogadishu's main sea and air ports, and 80% of Somalia government revenue is generated by these ports. (8) Furthermore, Turkey contributed 2.4 million dollars to Somalia's IMF debt relief. Turkish armed forces train Somali national troops in Mogadishu and Turkey. The Turkish and Somali Ministries of Health run the biggest hospital complex in the Horn of Africa together, the Erdoğan Training and Research Hospital.

However, Turkey's health diplomacy in the continent goes beyond Somalia. The Turkish and Sudanese Ministries of Health run a regional hospital complex together in Darfur, which was also

constructed by TİKA. Mitiga Military Hospital in Libya's capital, Tripoli, run by Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) is also another example of Turkey's support for the health sector in the continent. [\(9\)](#)

The education sector has become a considerable component of Turkey's support for African youth development. Through the state-run Maarif Foundation, Turkey runs 175 schools in 26 countries in the continent. In recent years, Turkey has also increased scholarship opportunities for free higher education for African students. According to open sources, approximately 15000 African students have obtained full scholarships from the Turkish state since 1992. As an alternative to European higher education destinations, students from African countries prefer universities in Turkey. According to data from the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), 5259 African students benefitted from Turkish scholarship programmes between 2010 and 2019, while 1147 African students received scholarships in 2019 alone. [\(10\)](#) Similarly, Turkey's Yunus Emre Institute (YEE) has ten cultural centres in the continent offering language training courses and cultural exchange programmes.

Turkey established the continental office of Anadolu Agency (AA) in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. This move was an attempt to de-Westernise media dependency of Turkey, since Turkish media usually imports news and images about Africa from Western media channels such as BBC, CNN, France 24, AFP and Reuters. Today, Turkish newsmakers located in Addis Ababa as well as Dakar, Nairobi, Johannesburg, Cape Town, Khartoum and Abuja produce media content distinctively. Additionally, AA organises training programmes for African journalists on journalism and online media that combine practice and theory.

Turkey's venture in the continent has extended to security and military cooperation as well. Libya and Somalia are the countries where Turkey's armed forces (TSK) implement training programmes for armed personnel while Turkey's troops joined peace-keeping missions in the Central African Republic and Mali. One of Turkey's greatest achievements in peace-building and security sector was building a military training centre called TURKSOM in Mogadishu for 50 million dollars in order to train Somalia's national army alongside the African Union Mission in Somalia's (AMISOM) peacekeeping forces fighting against al-Shabab. According to Turkey's ambassador to Mogadishu, so far, more than 15000 Somali military forces were trained by Turkish military personnel since the centre started operating in 2017. Moreover, Turkey provides special commando training for some units in the Somali army in Isparta. [\(11\)](#) In 2018, Turkey announced its support of \$5 million to the G-5 Sahel force comprised of five nations battling terrorism and trafficking in the Sahel region. Later, G5 Sahel and Turkey signed a defence deal in Istanbul during Turkish International Defence Industry Fair. [\(12\)](#)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Turkey continued supporting Africa by sending fleets of planes carrying medical items to various countries in the continent including South Africa, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, Mozambique, Botswana, Namibia, Rwanda, Eswatini, Zambia, Angola and South Sudan. (13) In this regard, Turkey has sent fleets of cargo planes carrying masks, ventilators and other medical items required in order to combat the coronavirus. For local mask production, TIKA has sent sewing machines and fabrics to Mozambique and Eswatini. (14) Despite restrictions related to the pandemic, several Turkish NGOs were also active in providing Covid-19 aid to African countries.

When we look at the last two decades, it seems that Turkey's new foreign policy towards Africa can be divided into two stages: In the first stage starting in 2005, Turkey implemented African Initiative Policies to introduce itself to the continent. In the second stage, which started after 2014, it aimed to strengthen its institutions and partnership in Africa throughout Africa Partnership Policies. (15) Just recently, Turkey hosted its third Turkey-Africa summit, which shaped Turkey's path in the continent from now onward.

As a strategic partner to the African Union since 2008, Turkey's approach to Africa is usually shaped by mutual declarations accepted in two Turkey-Africa summits. Therefore, Turkey is advancing in Africa according to the Joint Implementation Plans accepted and signed by both parties during the summits. There has been a strong correlation between Turkey's implementation practices and how summit declarations frame Turkey's contribution.

Indeed, throughout Republican era, Turkey has only shown good performance in Africa under the rule of the AK Party, which came to power in 2002. However, Turkey's approach to Africa is by no means completely successful and without obstacles. There are considerable challenges facing Turkey's Africa policy posed by domestic and international issues. Firstly, Turkey's internal political and economic stability plays a crucial role in the continuation of Turkey's engagement with Africa as development and humanitarian aid are still Turkey's stronghold in the continent. Moreover, powers like France, Russia, China and the UAE challenge Turkey's strong presence in Africa for their strategic concerns.

Although there are challenges, the main indicator of Turkey's Africa policy is the interaction that has been developing reciprocally throughout the last decade. Although Turkey's presence in Africa is becoming more visible, African presence in Turkey is also drawing attention nowadays. For instance, 37 African states have embassies in Ankara, and thousands of African students study in Turkey. For work, education, trade and investment or tourism, Africans now prefer Turkey as a destination. Somali, Sudanese, Egyptian, Tunisian, Senegalese and even Nigerian communities expand day by day in Turkey. Thus, not only is Turkey rising in Africa but Africa is also rising in Turkey.

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