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## Introduction Turkey and Africa: Motivations, Challenges and Future Prospects

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### Abstract

Turkey's presence in Africa has experienced significant growth over the last two decades. In recent years, Turkey's expanding African outreach has transformed media narratives and generated a surge of scholarly studies on Turkey's involvement in Africa. Turkey's renewed focus on the continent and its commitment to establishing an equal partnership with African nations came after years of neglect. Previously, Turkey's relationship with African countries followed a cycle of ups and downs. The interest in Africa was largely driven by short-term foreign policy considerations, such as breaking Turkey's international isolation and securing diplomatic support from African nations. Understanding how Turkey's carefully crafted discourses resonate with African countries in the face of competition from other external actors is a challenging task. Despite the existence of a rich and extensive literature on how external players engage with Africa, Turkey's role and the long-term impact of its involvement have often been overlooked. This special issue aims to contribute to the existing literature by exploring different dimensions of Turkey's multifaceted Africa policy, including its engagement in the security landscape, the African arms market, humanitarian efforts, and public diplomacy initiatives.

2021 has been a very busy year for Turkey's relationship with Africa. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited three African countries, namely, Angola, Nigeria and Togo, in October and concluded various agreements of cooperation on mutual investments, hydrocarbons, mining and renewable energy with those countries. Although it is not Erdoğan's first Africa tour—he paid more than 50 visits to African capitals under his tenure both as prime minister and president—the trip has drawn tremendous media attention. It is not only because of Turkey's growing footprint across the continent along several diplomatic avenues but also because the visit included talks about the sale of Turkish-made unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), or in more popular terms, Turkish drones, which gained increasing popularity in African markets. Shortly after this 4-day West Africa tour, Turkey hosted the third Turkey-Africa Economic and Business Forum with the participation of 3,000 business people. Turkey also hosted 38 African countries

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including 16 heads of state/government at the Third Turkey–Africa Partnership Summit held in İstanbul on 16–18 December.<sup>1</sup> The summit produced a joint declaration where parties agreed to focus on three main areas of cooperation: ‘peace, security and justice’, ‘human-focused development’ and ‘strong and sustainable growth’.<sup>2</sup>

Speaking at the Summit, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan recalled that the year 2005 marked a new stage in Turkey–Africa relations and noted: ‘While we have embraced each other once again with our African brothers and sisters . . . We have always rejected contemptuous, peremptory, and excessively orientalist perspectives towards the continent’. Turkey has dramatically expanded its involvement in Africa over the past two decades; however, Turkey–Africa engagement received little attention when the Turkish government declared 2005 as ‘the Year of Africa’. It was not a hot topic in the headlines, yet, those few journalists who wrote on the subject were mostly critics highlighting the need to focus on Turkey’s path to the EU (European Union) membership and urged the government to abandon its policy of opening to distant geographies. Turkey’s increasing African outreach transformed media narratives and also led to a surge of scholarly studies on Turkey’s engagement in Africa in recent years.

It should be noted here that Turkey’s re-emergence in the continent and its commitment to an equal partnership with Africa came after long years of neglect. Turkey’s relationship with African countries was previously characterized by a cycle with sharp ups and downs. The policy interest towards Africa was driven by short-term foreign policy considerations including the need to break Turkey’s international isolation and to secure Africa’s diplomatic support. Turkey regularly courted African votes on international fora, especially on the UNGA (United National General Assembly), at times when relations with its traditional allies were at their lowest point.<sup>3</sup> When Turkey approached African countries in mid-1960s or in late 1970s, African countries were deemed as valuable political allies that could back up their foreign policy actions through their considerable voting strength. Following Turkey’s transition to liberal economy in the early 1980s, they also emerged as important trade partners providing vast opportunities for Turkish companies. Turkey’s search for foreign policy alternatives continued throughout the 1990s when the ultimate effects of the post-Cold War changes compelled Turkish elites to redefine their foreign policy priorities. However, it was not until the late 1990s that policy-makers adopted a policy of outreach beyond Turkey’s immediate neighbourhood. This foreign policy activism continued under the AKP (Justice and Development Party/Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) government that assumed power in early 2000s. Having the necessary financial resources and political willingness to pursue such an assertive foreign policy, the AKP also had the support of conservative business associations for expanding Turkey–Africa economic exchanges.

As Ankara sought for a larger influence across the continent, it gradually expanded its soft power engagements. Turkey’s soft power push into Africa including humanitarian activities, religious and cultural diplomacy efforts, scholarships and trade exchanges allowed it to emerge as an important player in the continent. Recent developments reveal that Turkey is now willing to play a larger role in the military domain as well. Until very recently, Turkey’s involvement in Africa’s security landscape was mostly in the form of military training or modest troop contributions to UN peacekeeping missions. With Libya being an exception, Turkey does not have a history of military intervention in Africa, while it has long avoided becoming entangled in Africa’s conflicts. This is also

reflected in Turkey's foreign policy rhetoric towards Africa, where political elites constantly underline their good intentions, comparing themselves with the colonial powers who penetrated the region with imperial intentions throughout history. Still, Turkey does not have higher ambitions for an enhanced military presence across the continent; however, Turkey's arms deals signed with several African countries especially in the last few years raised concerns among Africa's established partners.

In this sense, Turkey in Africa might fall into the category of a rising power given that it plays to its own strengths and invests in areas where it has a comparative advantage.<sup>4</sup> Turkey's use of multilateralism to promote its foreign policy lines resonates in African countries that have long advocated for a comprehensive reform of global governance institutions, especially the UN Security Council. Turkey's motivations for engagement with Africa also pertain to its quest for a higher status and influence in international politics where Turkey 'would like to win together, succeed together and walk together with Africa'.<sup>5</sup> This official discourse towards Africa frames Turkey as a benevolent partner motivated primarily by humanitarian concerns, while policymakers often highlight that an asymmetrical, hierarchical or neo-colonial approach does not characterize Turkey's relationship with Africa.

It is challenging to fully understand how such carefully crafted discourses appeal to African countries as Turkey competes with other external actors for an influence in the continent. Although Turkey's increasing African engagement comes amid increasing economic woes, its interest attracted increasing attention. Despite the fact that there is a rich and extensive literature concentrating on how outside players are engaging with Africa, Turkey's role and its involvement's long-term impact in the continent was often overlooked. This special issue aims at contributing to the extant literature and exploring different dimensions of Turkey's multifaceted Africa policy including its engagement in the security landscape and African arms market, humanitarianism, and public diplomacy initiatives.

### Articles in this special issue

The special issue offers an extensive account of Turkey's multifaceted foreign policy towards Africa. Each author approaches the issue from a different angle and examines Turkey's alliance building strategies in different countries, by focusing on its soft and hard power capacities and foreign policy priorities. Focusing on issues ranging from humanitarian aid to maritime security, the special issue provides the readers with a comprehensive overview of Turkey's policy aims in Africa.

The first article by Dr Brendon J. Cannon and Dr Federico Donelli focuses on re-evaluating Turkey's national role conception and its foreign policies in Africa. They offer a comprehensive historical analysis of Turkey's actions in Africa by stressing Turkey's multifaceted interests in the region as well as its domestic political dynamics throughout the last decades. The authors put specific emphasis on the AKP era, starting from the early 2000s and analyse the ever-evolving policy shifts through providing an account of the political economy of Turkey's defence sales, education and construction efforts in Sub-Saharan Africa. This theoretically guided chapter serves as an introduction to the

other articles in the special issue given that it contextualizes Ankara's African engagement historically.

The second article by Dr Ali Onur Tepeciklioglu, Dr Elem Eyrice-Tepeciklioglu and Dr Can Karabıyık examines the impact of Turkey's embassies on trade with Sub-Saharan Africa. Their methodology includes a panel data set and covers 28 African countries from the period of 2002 to 2020. The authors examine whether the opening of an embassy has an impact on the expansion of exports to these countries. Their findings conform to the earlier empirical studies exploring the link between diplomatic representations and export flows and suggest that the opening of new embassies in Africa has a significant impact in promoting exports to those countries. Analysing if the opening of a foreign mission in a given country is also a policy relevant issue because it provides insights into if those new embassies are economically reasonable. These two articles complement each other and provide an excellent overview of AKP's diplomatic initiatives and strategies in the region, with a specific focus on Sub-Saharan Africa.

The third article by Dr Jens Heibach and Dr Hakkı Taş adapts a critical approach and contributes to the literature by encouraging the reader to think outside the box of soft-hard power binary. The authors suggest that these concepts are inadequate to understand Turkey's all-round strategies in Sub-Saharan Africa, and they offer a thorough analysis that focuses on the democratization-autocratisation nexus. Drawing from theoretical frameworks surrounding these topics, they argue that the Turkish case not only demonstrates that soft and hard power capacities can be transverse in different contexts, but this case also illustrates the extent to which asymmetrical relationships facilitate the use of one attraction or coercion as a mechanism for forming diplomatic relationships that cover economic, political and social engagements.

Following nicely on this discussion, the fourth article by Dr Yunus Turhan focuses on the Turkish humanitarian assistance strategies during the pandemic. The author examines Turkey's volatile aid behaviour in the region from 2020 to 2022 by paying attention to the recipient's economic, political and religious standpoint. The findings indicate that humanitarian aid can be considered as part of Turkey's soft power paradigm and complements Ankara's strategic partnership in the continent. While Turkey's humanitarian engagement with Africa has been relatively well documented, further research is required on its aid trajectory during crisis times such as the still ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Although we know very little about how Turkey's humanitarian outreach resonates with African countries, we might well argue that its involvement in this area has not attracted much criticism.

The fifth article by Professor Francois Vreÿ and Dr Mark Blaine, Captain (Navy), contributes to growing debates on Turkey's role in world politics as a middle power. The authors indicate that Turkey's growing presence in Africa entails hard and soft diplomatic endeavours and Turkey employs different sets of policy instruments to pursue these newly established foreign policy goals under the AKP rule. One of the least explored diplomacy avenues used by Turkey refers to the use of maritime diplomacy. While contemporary Turkish foreign policy endeavours are overshadowed by the 2022 Russia-Ukraine military conflict and its spill-over into the Black Sea, Turkey also includes elements of maritime diplomacy in its overall politico-economic initiatives to engage African countries. In addition, Turkey's maritime initiatives show coercive and cooperative features as the country flexed its maritime capabilities vested in the Turkish

Navy, the coast guard, as well as elements of Turkish merchant marine. From potential naval coercion to marketing Turkish defence products, assisting with anti-piracy and food security, as well as flying the flag, Turkey invested in and brought Turkish maritime ways and means to the fore to support its Turkish-Africa diplomatic programmes.

The sixth article by Dr Çağlar Kurç also adapts a security perspective and delves into Turkey's arms sales to Africa. The author interprets Turkey's need to export arms to the African market as part of its multi-track diplomacy efforts in the region and demonstrates that Turkey's strength in Africa depends on its exports of the high quality and cheap weapons systems. While research has been done on Turkey's mixed soft and hard power engagements with Africa, we know less about Turkey's growing share in the African arms market. With interest especially towards UAVs and other military equipment peaking, the issue of Turkey's expanding defence ties with Africa will gain more currency in the relevant literature.

The final article by Mehmet Ozkan and Serhat Orakçı explore the significance of Africa-Turkey summits in shaping Turkey's Africa policy and its relationships with African countries. By comprehensively examining all declarations made during these summits, their study intends to evaluate Turkey's foreign policy discourse concerning Africa. Additionally, the article analyses Turkey's implementation of its Africa policy and assesses the achievements it has made on the continent, focusing specifically on the outcomes of the summits.

Overall, the articles provide a critical view over Turkey's engagement in African countries at different levels ranging from political to economic, cultural and military ties. They refer to the theoretical gaps in the existing literature and allow us to reflect more on the achievements and challenges of its Africa policy. The special issue also provides a long-term assessment of Turkey's strategic partnerships in the continent, by not only demonstrating the increasing interactions during the AKP period but also explaining the lack thereof under previous governments before 2000s. The authors engage with discussions surrounding Turkey's strengths and weaknesses in its foreign policies targeting African countries. Rather than taking policy discourses for granted, the authors aim at showing the real impact on the ground in the continent. Each author also poses important questions that pave the way for future debates surrounding these issues as Turkey's interest in Africa will stay on the agenda and will continue to receive increasing attention from academics, experts as well as politicians.

## Notes

- [1] The summit was two years overdue but Ankara's diplomatic efforts worked out to secure a new date from the African Union in order to hold the summit before the end of 2021.
- [2] Draft Declaration: Enhanced Partnership for Common Development and Prosperity, Third Africa-Türkiye Partnership Summit, 16-18 December 2021, İstanbul, Türkiye.
- [3] E. Eyryce Tepeciklioğlu and A. O. Tepeciklioğlu, 'Introduction: Contextualizing Turkey's Africa Policy', in E. Eyryce Tepeciklioğlu and A. O. Tepeciklioğlu (eds.), *Turkey in Africa: A New Emerging Power?* Routledge, London and New York, 2021, p. 3.
- [4] Eyryce Tepeciklioğlu and Tepeciklioğlu, op. cit.

- [5] Turkey–Africa Forum, ‘Deepening Turkey-Africa Partnership: Trade, Investment, Technology & Logistics’, <http://turkeyafricaforum.org/>

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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