

Turkey's African Strategy: Strategic Depth, Religious Diplomacy, and the Projection of Middle-Power Influence

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, Turkey has transformed its engagement with Africa from marginal diplomacy into a structured, multi-domain strategy of geopolitical projection. This article argues that Ankara's African policy constitutes a deliberate middle-power expansion model integrating statecraft, economic penetration, religious diplomacy, defense exports, and security partnerships. Far from episodic activism, Turkey's approach reflects a broader doctrine of strategic autonomy and global repositioning under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. By combining public institutions, private enterprises, and faith-based networks, Ankara has constructed a dense ecosystem of influence that capitalizes on Western retrenchment and African sovereigntist sentiment. While often framed as South-South cooperation, Turkey's African engagement increasingly intersects with hard security interests in the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and beyond. Its long-term implications extend to NATO cohesion, European strategic stability, and the evolving architecture of multipolar competition.

From Peripheral Engagement to Structured Strategy

When Erdogan assumed power in 2002, Turkey maintained only a limited diplomatic presence in sub-Saharan Africa. Within two decades, Ankara expanded its embassies across the continent, institutionalized Turkey–Africa summits, and dramatically increased trade and connectivity. This shift was not merely quantitative. It signaled a qualitative transformation: Africa became a testing ground for Turkey’s ambition to act as an autonomous global actor rather than a regional adjunct to Western strategy.¹

Although the “Opening to Africa” policy was initiated before the AKP government, it was under Erdogan that it acquired sustained political backing, bureaucratic coordination, and ideological framing.² Ankara positioned itself as a partner distinct from former colonial powers, invoking anti-imperial rhetoric while advancing national economic and security interests.

The result is a comprehensive engagement architecture—an interlocking network of diplomatic missions, aid agencies, educational foundations, commercial enterprises, religious institutions, airlines, and defense attachés.

The Architecture of Influence: State and Non-State Synergy

Turkey’s African policy rests on a hybrid model integrating public and private actors in a coordinated projection of influence.

Diplomatic and Developmental Instruments

The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) has financed infrastructure projects, hospitals, schools, and technical assistance initiatives across Africa.³ Simultaneously, Ankara has hosted regular Turkey–Africa Cooperation Summits, reinforcing political visibility and institutional continuity.

Turkish Airlines, now serving more African destinations than almost any other carrier, functions as a strategic enabler. Air connectivity underpins trade flows, educational exchanges, and diplomatic access. Connectivity, in this sense, becomes geopolitical infrastructure.

Education and Elite Formation

Turkey's scholarship programs have expanded dramatically. By 2022, tens of thousands of African students were enrolled in Turkish universities. ⁴ Educational mobility generates long-term affinity networks. Alumni frequently enter civil service, business, or political circles in their home countries—creating durable channels of influence.

The Maarif Foundation, established after Ankara's disagreement with the Gulen movement in 2016, assumed control of numerous overseas schools and expanded its educational footprint across Africa. ⁵ These institutions deliver curricula in Turkish and international languages, embedding cultural familiarity alongside professional training.

Education here is not peripheral; it is strategic social capital.

Religious Diplomacy as Strategic Infrastructure

One of the distinguishing features of Turkey's African engagement is the integration of religious institutions into foreign policy.

The Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) dispatches imams, supports mosque construction, coordinates theological exchanges, and funds humanitarian assistance. ⁶ Religious foundations linked to Sufi networks, such as branches of the Naqshbandi order, operate schools, dormitories, and social programs.

This religious diplomacy serves multiple objectives:

1. **Normative positioning:** Turkey portrays itself as a protector of Muslim communities worldwide.
2. **Counter-radicalization narrative:** Ankara presents its Hanafi-Sufi tradition as a moderate alternative to Gulf-sponsored Salafism.
3. **Elite penetration:** Religious training programs create transnational clerical linkages.

Critics may interpret this activism as ideological exportation. Yet strategically, it functions as influence embedded within identity structures—often more durable than commercial ties.

For many African societies, symbolic solidarity on issues such as Palestine enhances Turkey’s credibility. Erdogan’s public positioning resonates in what might be termed the “Islamic street,” reinforcing Ankara’s soft power appeal.

Economic Penetration and Commercial Expansion

Trade between Turkey and Africa has multiplied more than tenfold since the early 2000s, surpassing \$40 billion annually. ⁷ Turkish firms, especially in construction, textiles, energy, and manufacturing, have secured contracts in rapidly urbanizing markets.

Unlike China’s state-driven infrastructure model, Turkey’s expansion often involves small and medium-sized enterprises backed by diplomatic facilitation. This entrepreneurial diplomacy projects flexibility and speed.

Yet economic pragmatism also defines Ankara’s approach. Turkish engagement rarely conditions trade or investment on governance reforms. In environments where Western financing may require political conditionality, Turkey offers transactional efficiency.

Such pragmatism strengthens short-term access but may expose Ankara to reputational risks in fragile governance contexts.

From Soft Power to Hard Leverage

The most significant evolution in Turkey’s African posture is the gradual securitization of its engagement.

Military Presence and Training

Turkey established its largest overseas military base in Somalia in 2011, training Somali armed forces and contributing to state-building efforts. ⁸ Defense

attachés operate within numerous African embassies, and Turkish military academies host African officers for training.

Training relationships create institutional familiarity, interoperability, and long-term dependence.

Defense Exports

Turkey's indigenous defense industry, now meeting approximately 80 percent of domestic military needs, has emerged as a competitive exporter.⁹ Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), armored vehicles, and other systems have gained traction in African markets.

Arms exports are not purely commercial transactions. They establish logistical chains, maintenance contracts, and doctrinal alignment. In strategic terms, they embed Turkey within partner security architectures.

For governments seeking alternatives to Western or Russian suppliers, Ankara provides cost-effective, politically flexible options.

Strategic Context: Multipolar Competition and Western Retrenchment

Turkey's rise in Africa coincides with the relative decline of European influence in certain regions, particularly the Sahel. African governments increasingly pursue diversified partnerships consistent with sovereigntist and Pan-African narratives.

In this competitive environment, where China, Russia, India, Gulf states, and Turkey all seek influence, Ankara leverages a hybrid identity:

- Muslim-majority but not Arab.
- NATO member but strategically autonomous.
- Historically imperial yet not a colonial ruler in most of sub-Saharan Africa.

This positioning enables Turkey to present itself as a “non-Western partner” without abandoning its transatlantic affiliations.

Implications for European and Mediterranean Security

Turkey’s African expansion intersects directly with maritime and Mediterranean security dynamics.

The Horn of Africa, Red Sea approaches, and North African littorals connect strategically to the Eastern Mediterranean. A Turkish presence in Somalia or Libya cannot be divorced from broader naval and energy considerations.

Moreover, influence in Africa translates into diplomatic leverage within multilateral institutions. African states constitute a substantial voting bloc in the United Nations General Assembly.

For NATO, Turkey’s activism presents both opportunities and friction. A stronger Turkish defense industry enhances alliance capabilities. Yet unilateral security initiatives may complicate cohesion where strategic priorities diverge.

Sustainability and Strategic Limits

Turkey’s African strategy faces constraints:

- **Economic volatility:** Domestic financial instability may limit overseas investment capacity.
- **Overextension risk:** Expanding commitments strain military and diplomatic resources.
- **Perception management:** Religious activism may provoke backlash if perceived as intrusive.

Nonetheless, Ankara has demonstrated persistence. Its African policy is not episodic opportunism; it reflects structured ambition consistent with a doctrine of strategic autonomy.

Conclusion

Turkey's African engagement represents one of the most sophisticated middle-power expansion strategies of the 21st century. By synchronizing diplomacy, development, education, religion, commerce, aviation, and defense, Ankara has constructed an ecosystem of influence that extends beyond traditional bilateral ties.

This is neither humanitarian altruism nor neo-Ottoman nostalgia alone. It is strategic depth in practice.

For Europe and NATO, the challenge is not to contest Turkey's presence in Africa per se, but to assess how its growing leverage reshapes the Mediterranean balance, alliance cohesion, and the evolving architecture of multipolar competition.

Turkey is no longer a peripheral actor in Africa. It is a consequential stakeholder—and increasingly, a strategic competitor.

Footnotes:

1. Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Turkey–Africa Relations."
2. Pınar Akpınar, "Turkey's Africa Policy: From Humanitarianism to Hard Power?" *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2013).
3. Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), Annual Reports.
4. Council of Higher Education of Turkey, International Student Statistics, 2022.
5. Turkey Maarif Foundation, Institutional Overview Reports.
6. Ahmet Erdi Ozturk, "Turkey's Diyanet under AKP Rule: From Protector to Imposer of State Ideology?" *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* (2016).

7. Turkish Statistical Institute, Trade Statistics; Ministry of Trade, Turkey–Africa Trade Data.

8. International Crisis Group, “Turkey’s Somalia Base: Strategic Expansion in the Horn of Africa,” Briefing Report.

9. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Arms Transfers Database.