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Op-ed

Beyond Colonialism: Türkiye's Unique Approach to Africa

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As a rising global power, Türkiye aims to contribute to Africa's peace, security, and economic development while offering an alternative to traditional powers with colonial ties. This evolving relationship can transform Africa's geopolitical landscape and potentially foster a more balanced approach to regional development.

Africa has enormous global economic and political potential but faces rapid urbanisation, poverty, and socio-economic divisions. Partnerships with external powers can catalyse development and resilience building. However, the increased attention also risks Africa being perceived merely as a theatre for global power competition, where it is utilised as a proxy in geopolitical rivalries. In this context, Türkiye's potential as a moderating power becomes increasingly essential, contributing to a more balanced and collaborative environment while respecting African agency.

To understand Türkiye's current involvement in Africa, we must examine historical engagements shaping its ties with the continent. Türkiye's historical engagement can be divided into three periods: the Ottoman State connections, the reduced relations between 1923-1998, and the revival of interest in Africa starting in the late 1990s.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and domestic factors led to a more proactive and assertive Turkish foreign policy, aiming to increase Türkiye's influence beyond its immediate neighbourhood. The significant impact of Turkish leaders on shaping Türkiye's policy towards Africa highlights the importance of cultural and historical connections with former Ottoman territories. Türkiye has been developing its approach to South-South cooperation, focusing on increasing visibility and engagement in African development projects. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency plays a crucial role in executing this strategy, with countries like Somalia and Sudan receiving significant contributions.

Türkiye's development assistance prioritises education, administrative and civil infrastructure, health, water, and sanitation, facilitating government projects, and directly engaging with Turkish NGOs. In 2019, Türkiye allocated 8.6 billion USD to development assistance, with a large portion targeting humanitarian and food aid.

Türkiye's educational diplomacy in Africa is vital to its foreign policy. Education fosters long-term cultural exchange and strengthens social, political, and economic ties. Türkiye's educational diplomacy

includes scholarships, exchange programs, and establishing Turkish schools and universities, which enhance its soft power and address language barriers, cultural differences, and resource limitations. The Gülen movement once significantly influenced Türkiye's educational diplomacy in Africa. Still, following the deterioration of its relationship with President Erdoğan's party and the failed 2016 coup attempt, Türkiye took measures to shut down Gülen-affiliated institutions.

Subsequently, Türkiye established the Turkish Maarif Foundation, which now operates nearly 150 schools and 20 dormitories across 25 African countries. Through its initiatives, the Turkish Maarif Foundation promotes Turkish education abroad, further solidifying Türkiye's commitment to strengthening its ties with African nations through educational diplomacy.

To understand Türkiye's role as an alternative partner in Africa, we must examine its military engagements, which include high-level diplomatic visits, military training schemes, collaborative exercises, and involvement in peacekeeping operations. Many African states are eager to benefit from Türkiye's experience in counterinsurgency, security sector modernisation, and defence industry advancements.

Türkiye's arms exports to African nations have increased, providing competitively priced military equipment with minimal restrictions. Turkish drone technology, such as the Bayraktar TB2, has become increasingly relevant in the African security landscape. However, Türkiye's no-strings-attached approach raises concerns about potential arms proliferation and its impact on regional conflicts.

Türkiye's engagement in Somalia exemplifies its blend of humanitarian concerns and long-term strategic interests. Ankara's involvement began as a humanitarian response to the 2011 drought and has evolved into a comprehensive policy encompassing political and social dimensions.

Türkiye has supported Somalia's humanitarian and reconstruction efforts, investing in infrastructure projects and education. Additionally, Türkiye has contributed to peacebuilding and mediation efforts and established a military base in the country.

Despite these efforts, Türkiye's humanitarian diplomacy in Somalia faces challenges, including on-the-ground realities, competing interests of other nations, capacity constraints, and the need for regional recognition and international collaboration.

Türkiye's engagement in Somalia demonstrates its aspiration to establish a prominent role in regional and global politics. Despite challenges and limitations, Türkiye's comprehensive policy in Somalia showcases its commitment to fostering long-term relationships and supporting development and peacebuilding efforts within the African continent.

Türkiye's expanding trade and investment in Africa reflect its diversification strategy and growing reliance on the continent to develop export markets and sustain economic growth. Focusing on agriculture, construction, and textiles, Türkiye has forged strong trading partnerships with countries like Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Africa.

By 2022, Africa became Türkiye's third-largest trade source, surpassed only by Europe and Asia. Türkiye has signed Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreements with 38 African nations, establishing a solid foundation for mutual economic relations. Turkish investments in Africa have increased tenfold since 2004, reflecting a broader strategy to extend economic influence and promote sustainable development.

Türkiye's engagement with Africa presents opportunities and challenges for both parties. Türkiye seeks to diversify its economic and political interests, while African nations can diversify their economic base and access new technologies and investments.

Despite Türkiye's impressive growth in engagement with African countries, more needs to be done. To address challenges that remain in balancing interests, navigating geopolitical rivalries, and adapting Türkiye's foreign policy to the demands of African engagements, here are five recommendations to enhance Turkish-African relations:

- **Boost military agreement transparency:** Collaborate with African nations and regional organisations, ensuring compliance with international norms and human rights standards.
- **Increase long-term funding:** Shift from project-based to structured investments in development programmes, addressing systemic challenges.
- **Strengthen development commitment and social responsibility:** Focus on sustainable development, human rights, social accountability, environmental conservation, social inclusion, gender equality, and ethical business practices in trade and investment.
- **Support regional integration and cooperation:** Collaborate with African organisations like the AU and RECs, promoting economic growth, intra-regional trade, political stability, and infrastructure investment.
- **Enhance political dialogue and cooperation:** Establish clear engagement objectives, invest in diplomatic interactions and institutional structures, and tackle common challenges, including global issues, democratic governance, transparency, and the rule of law.

By implementing these recommendations, Türkiye and African nations can create a positive, constructive partnership that encourages long-term growth and development, fostering a more prosperous interconnected future for both sides.

Daryl Swanepoel is the CEO of the Inclusive Society Institute. This article draws on the content of a paper titled 'Beyond Colonialism: Türkiye's unique approach to Africa which was prepared for the Istanbul Security Forum held in Istanbul from 2 to 3 May 2023.'