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TÜRKIYE'S AFRICA POLICY UNDER THE AKP

TRANSITION IN INSTRUMENTS BETWEEN SOFT AND HARD POWER

ABSTRACT

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power, Türkiye has relied primarily on soft power instruments in its engagement with Africa, including the export of cultural goods and educational exchange programs, and development assistance, as well as the development of economic ties supported by the private sector. Over time, these instruments were increasingly complemented by more assertive forms of engagement, particularly in the areas of security and military cooperation. The aim of this article is to demonstrate how Türkiye has combined soft and hard power instruments in its policy towards Africa from 2002 to 2025. For this purpose, the transformation of foreign policy instruments was analyzed, divided into three phases: (I) Normative legitimization of Türkiye's presence in Africa, (II) Structural economic anchoring of Türkiye in Africa, and (III) Security projection of Türkiye's Interests in Africa. The research hypothesis assumes that soft power instruments have played a key role in establishing the long-term foundations of Türkiye engagement in Africa, which were subsequently complemented by growing security and defense cooperation.

Keywords: soft power, hard power, Türkiye, Africa, AKP

INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy has become more than just the state's external engagement for the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has been ruling Türkiye since 2002. It does not ignore references to internal political dynamics and state-society relations, as well as strategic culture and domestic institutions.¹ It can therefore be considered an important element of domestic policy and an effort to restructure the state's identity.²

Türkiye's actions in the international arena during the AKP's rule were based on history, geography and national interests.³ However, researchers have described them as frequent paradigm shifts, multiple axis shifts, frequent plot twists and dramatic fluctuations.⁴ Although Turkish foreign policy priorities simultaneously reflected different approaches, in reality they were attempts to protect Türkiye's interests in a regional context characterized by growing uncertainty and new challenges. The dynamics of Türkiye's goals in international relations have embodied numerous strategic choices of the government over time, revealing the strength of the state as an intelligent power. Initially, Türkiye used soft power tools and identity projection, but over time it began to refer to hard attributes and securitization. At the same time, however, dialogue and mediation were an important element of its activities.⁵

Türkiye's presence in Africa at the beginning of the 21st century can be described as relatively limited in both the diplomatic and economic dimension. However, the situation changed radically during the subsequent years of the rule of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his AKP.⁶ This is reflected in the almost fourfold increase (from 12 to 44) in the number of Turkish embassies in Africa between 2002 and 2025. As well as the increase in the percentage of connections between Türkiye and Africa operated by Turkish Airlines by approximately, 1140% over the twenty-year period (2005-2025). Currently, Turkish Airlines reach over 60 African destinations.⁷

Initially, Türkiye's engagement with Africa was based primarily on soft power instruments, such as the export of cultural goods, educational exchanges, and development

¹ V. Giannotta, S. Suha Çubukçuoğlu, S. Al Qutbah, "Looking at Turkish Foreign Policy Under the AKP Rule," *Trends Research and Advisory*, 7 October 2024, at <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/looking-at-turkish-foreign-policy-under-the-akp-rule/>, 21 April 2025.

² M.B. Altunışık, L.G. Martin, "Turkey and the Middle East and North Africa under the AKP: A Three Level Analysis of Foreign Policy Change," *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi*, vol. 20, no. 78 (2023), p. 81.

³ A. Siradag, "The Rise of Turkey's Soft Power in Africa: Reasons, Dynamics, and Constraints," *International Journal of Political Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2022), p. 9.

⁴ K. Akkoyunlu, "The Five Phases of Turkey's Foreign Policy under the AKP," *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, vol. 88, no. 2 (2021), p. 243.

⁵ V. Giannotta, S. Suha Çubukçuoğlu, S. Al Qutbah, "Looking at Turkish..."

⁶ A.-S. Vial, M. Isidore, Türkiye, the new regional power in Africa (1/3). 'African solutions for African problems', *Les clés du Moyen-Orient*, 21 February 2025, at <https://www.lescledumoyenorient.com/Turkiye-the-new-regional-power-in-Africa-1-3-African-solutions-for-African.html>, 21 April 2025.

⁷ T. Nogueira Pinto, "Turkey is gaining ground in Africa," *GIS Reports*, 9 April 2024, at <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/turkey-influence-africa/>, 22 April 2025.

assistance, as well as the development of economic ties supported by the private sector. Over time, these instruments were increasingly complemented by more assertive forms of engagement, particularly in the areas of security and military cooperation.⁸ The aim of this article is to demonstrate how Türkiye has combined soft and hard power instruments in its policy towards Africa from 2002 to 2025. For this purpose, the transformation of foreign policy instruments was analyzed, divided into three phases: (I) Normative legitimation of Türkiye's presence in Africa, (II) Structural economic anchoring of Türkiye in Africa, and (III) Security projection of Türkiye's interests in Africa. It should be noted, however, that individual state actions do not always occur sequentially. Therefore, these phases sometimes run in parallel, and their effects are mutually reinforcing. This allows for an assessment of how the combination of soft and hard instruments has contributed to the expansion of Türkiye's diplomatic, economic, and security presence on the African continent. The research hypothesis assumes that soft power instruments have played a key role in establishing the long-term foundations of Türkiye engagement in Africa, which were subsequently complemented by growing security and defense cooperation. The study is based on a qualitative analysis of secondary data, encompassing government strategies, trade data, diplomatic presence, and the academic literature on Türkiye's foreign policy.

AKP FOREIGN POLICY AND SOFT POWER IN TÜRKİYE'S INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY

Soft power is the ability of an international entity to convince others to change their preferences, in contrast to hard power, which is based on coercion. The main sources of a given actor's soft power include culture, history, progressive political values, effective foreign and domestic policy, and effective public diplomacy.⁹ In relation to the international environment, the effectiveness of soft power is based on credibility and building a position. This occurs through the attractiveness of a given state's institutions, the foreign policy it has adopted, or through cultural influences. Thus, elements of the political system must be perceived as attractive by other actors in the international arena.

According to Joseph Nye, a state can achieve the results it wants in world politics when other entities admire its values, follow its example, and aspire to its level of prosperity and openness.¹⁰ Soft power is thus a behavioral incentive, the primary feature of which is attractiveness. One of the attributes of soft power is contextual intelligence, which is a fundamental feature of today's leadership. Leaders with contextual intelligence have the ability to distinguish trends in the face of emerging problems, as well as

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ A. Omid, "The Evolutionary Feature of Turkey's Soft Power in the Middle East, 2011–2020," *Insight Turkey*, vol. 23, no. 4 (2021), p. 12.

¹⁰ J.S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York 2004, p. 5; S.B. Çevik, "Reassessing Turkey's Soft Power: The Rules of Attraction," *Alternatives*, vol. 44, no. 1 (2019), pp. 50–70.

the ability to shape issues and actively adapt attitudes to the needs of the international environment.¹¹

The first years of AKP rule were a period paving the way for strengthening Türkiye's potential as a soft power in world politics. Türkiye's soft power was defined by the resources of this state:¹² (1) democratization experiences and reforms; (2) significant and sustainable economic growth of an emerging trading state; (3) visionary, engaging and proactive foreign policy.¹³ On the one hand, the actions taken by the Turkish authorities distanced Türkiye from both the traditional, radical secularism enforced by military rule. On the other hand, they turned the state away from harsh religious dogmatism. Efforts to harmonize democracy, secularism, and Islam allowed for the creation of an image of a modern Turkish state with a liberal economy. In turn, the Turks as the only Muslim nation, democratic, secular, with aspirations to join the European Union.¹⁴ All this allowed for the construction of a kind of model generating enormous potential for Türkiye's role as a soft power.¹⁵

The reorientation of Turkish foreign policy that took place at the beginning of the 21st century was based on the concept of Ahmet Davutoğlu, an AKP ideologist. He first served as a foreign policy advisor to the head of government,¹⁶ then as Minister of Foreign Affairs (2009-2014) and Prime Minister (2014-2016). Davutoğlu included the assumptions of the new policy in his work entitled "Strategic Depth" and the Turkish foreign policy of the same name, which is implemented in practice. According to the author of the concept, international relations are a dynamic process that forces the state to conduct policy 'with vision'. Therefore, Türkiye cannot position itself as a peripheral state, but must stand at the center of the global political scene. This assumption implied taking active steps in bilateral relations and within multilateral organizations.¹⁷ The qualitative change in foreign policy also assumed the use of the state's geostrategic location.¹⁸ Due to the historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire, modern Türkiye is located in what Davutoğlu called 'geographic depth'. This is related to the state's favorable location and the influence of the former Ottoman Empire, among

¹¹ B. Hergüner, "An Analysis of the EU's Soft Power and the EU-Turkey Relations Through Metaphors," *İstanbul Ticaret Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, vol. 19 (2020), p. 503.

¹² S.B. Çevik, "Reassessing..."

¹³ A. Bakır, "Mapping the Rise of Turkey's Hard Power," *New Lines Institute for Strategy and Politics*, 24 August 2021, at <https://newlinesinstitute.org/strategic-competition/regional-competition/mapping-the-rise-of-turkeys-hard-power>, 22 April 2025.

¹⁴ M.B. Altunışık, "The Soft Power of Turkey in International Relations," *Global Panorama*, 11 November 2022, at <https://www.globalpanorama.org/en/2022/11/the-soft-power-of-turkey-in-international-relations-meliha-benli-altunisik/>, 22 April 2025, p. 3.

¹⁵ A. Bakır, "Mapping the..."

¹⁶ K. Wasilewski, *Turcja w procesie przemian: wnioski dla strategii UE*, Warszawa 2017, p. 38.

¹⁷ J. Wódka, *Polityka zagraniczna „nowej” Turcji. Implikacje dla partnerstwa transatlantyckiego*, Warszawa 2013, p. 42.

¹⁸ K. Zajączkowski, "Uwarunkowania ekonomiczne a członkostwo Turcji w Unii Europejskiej," in A. Szymański (ed.), *Turcja i Europa. Wyzwania i szanse*, Warszawa 2011, pp. 70-71.

others in the Middle East, North Africa and the Mediterranean. Türkiye's involvement in all potential zones of influence was supposed to allow the country to achieve the role of a global actor over time.¹⁹

In this context, developing relations and cooperation with the African continent has become one of the fundamental principles of Türkiye's multidimensional foreign policy. In recent years, Africa's economic and trade potential and growing strategic importance in the international system have attracted numerous states and investors interested in consolidating its strategic position, exploiting natural resources, and expanding its spheres of political and economic influence. For Türkiye, Africa's growing importance in the international system has also made the continent a key area of interest, where the state is consistently expanding its presence.²⁰ Although Türkiye's economic involvement, arms sales, and foreign aid in Africa are overshadowed by the activities of larger powers, it is in fact its position as a smaller player in many situations that constitutes a significant advantage. Its less prominent presence on the continent than the United States, China, Russia, or the European Union means that Türkiye has the opportunity to invest in key areas of interest. Furthermore, the country positions itself, its non-governmental organizations, and even its contractors as neutral actors compared to its competitors.²¹ The Turkish government cooperates with the governments of individual states, preferring to adopt a neutral position in the case of internal conflicts.²² Ankara thus emphasizes that it places emphasis on the sovereignty of its African partners, refraining from imposing political conditions on them. Türkiye's model of action on the African continent is also reinforced by anti-colonial rhetoric. While portraying the state as a *friend and development partner of Africa*, the Turkish authorities simultaneously demonstrate their own opposition to colonialism, imperialism, and other forms of exploitation. This anti-Western discourse of Turkish public diplomacy proved helpful in building a counterweight to colonial powers such as France and other European states.²³

NORMATIVE LEGITIMATION OF TÜRKIYE'S PRESENCE IN AFRICA

The end of the Cold War contributed to a reorientation of Türkiye's foreign policy, moving away from security-focused paradigms based on rigid alliance systems. Türkiye's new approach was proactive and multidimensional, aligning with the country's

¹⁹ B. Kesgin, *Political Leadership and Foreign Policy in Post-Cold War Israel and Turkey*, University of Kansas, 19 January 2011, at <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/213394412.pdf>, 21 April 2025, p. 167.

²⁰ "Türkiye-Africa Relations," *Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, at <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-africa-relations.en.mfa>, 21 April 2025.

²¹ R. Parens, M. Plichta, "Turkey's Return to Africa," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 10 March 2025, at <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/03/turkeys-return-to-africa/>, 02 February 2026.

²² E.P. Dal, S. Dipama, "Assessing Turkey-Africa Engagements," *Africa Policy Research Institute*, 27 April 2023, at <https://afripoli.org/assessing-turkey-africa-engagements>, 22 April 2025.

²³ A. Dahir, "The Turkey-Africa Bromance: Key Drivers, Agency, and Prospects," *Insight Turkey*, vol. 23, no. 4 (2021), p. 32.

desire to expand its influence in the regional balance of power. This transformation in Turkish foreign policy stemmed both from the opportunities offered by the unipolar international order and from the need to redefine Türkiye's own identity. Until 1998, the state proclaimed its 'African Initiative Policy'.²⁴ This plan envisioned improving political, economic, and cultural ties with African countries. Türkiye's proposals included intensifying relations and implementing economic measures to encourage investment, trade, and technical assistance. Cultural cooperation was also strengthened, driven by the establishment of scholarship programs and partnerships between higher education institutions.²⁵ This initial official framework was intended to transform Türkiye's limited relations with Africa into a platform for multidimensional and systematic relations. This plan was largely postponed due to subsequent economic and political crises.²⁶

The AKP's rise to power marked the beginning of a new phase in Türkiye's domestic politics. The party's gradual consolidation in the political system also translated into a shift in the direction and instruments of foreign policy, including towards Africa. After 2002, Türkiye participated in African Union (AU) summits as a guest state, and in 2005, it obtained observer status with the organization. A significant determinant in the evolution of Türkiye-Africa relations toward qualitative deepening was the declaration of 2005 as the 'Year of Africa'.²⁷ Since then, relations with the continent have become a crucial element of the state's multifaceted policy. Therefore, just three years later (2008), Türkiye became a strategic partner for the AU, and the First Turkey-Africa Cooperation Summit was held in Istanbul.²⁸ During the summit, the 'Istanbul Declaration on the Türkiye-Africa Partnership: Solidarity and Partnership for a Shared Future' and its annex, the 'Framework for Cooperation for the Türkiye-Africa Partnership', were adopted. The priority areas of cooperation identified therein focused on political, economic, and investment dimensions, social and environmental development, security and peace, as well as cultural, educational, and technological cooperation.²⁹ Türkiye's strategy, which addresses the multidimensional 'Opening to Africa Policy', has yielded significant progress in subsequent years in the areas of politics, economy, culture, security, and development.³⁰ In the first years Türkiye's African policy encompassed above

²⁴ M.B. Durdu, "Türkiye in West Africa: Soft Power Rhetoric, Hard Power Reality," *The Elephant: African Analysis, Opinion, and Investigation*, 27 August 2025, at <https://www.theelephant.info/analysis/2025/08/27/turkiye-in-west-africa-soft-power-rhetoric-hard-power-reality/>, 2 February 2026.

²⁵ W. Rugutt, M. Nzomo, P.G. Okoth, "Examining Foreign Development Assistance in Africa through Emerging Power Dynamics: A Focus on Turkey's Engagement in the Horn of Africa," *European Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 3, no. 6 (2023), p. 81.

²⁶ M.B. Durdu, "Türkiye in West Africa..."

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ "Türkiye-Africa Relations..."

²⁹ "Türkiye and The African Union," *Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, at <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-and-the-african-union.en.mfa>, 2 February 2026.

³⁰ "Bilateral Relations: Türkiye-Africa Trade and Economic Relations," *Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Trade*, at <http://tabef.org/bilateral-relations.html>, 21 April 2025.

all the establishment of political, humanitarian, economic, and cultural relations, both at the bilateral level and at the regional, continental, and global levels.³¹

As Jens Heibach and Hakkı Taş note, the AKP's policy towards Africa was initially a *textbook example of cooperation between state and non-state actors*. This was due to the activities of the Gülen Movement and the activities of Hizmet-related schools in countries such as Algeria (1994), Senegal (1997), Nigeria, Kenya, and Tanzania (1998). This process, initiated in the 1990s, allowed Türkiye to build an early 'bridgehead' in Africa before intensifying its official foreign policy. On this basis, many scholars have described Türkiye's pivot to Africa as a *civil society-led and state-implemented initiative*.³² Therefore initially, priority was given to activities in the field of development cooperation and humanitarian aid³³ (referred to as humanitarian diplomacy). Since 2004, the participation of Turkish NGOs and civil society in numerous projects on the African continent has increased significantly.³⁴ They cooperate with Turkish state entities such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA).³⁵ The first TİKA office in Africa opened in Ethiopia in 2005, with subsequent offices in Sudan and Senegal. By 2022, a total of 22 offices had been opened across the continent, including in Algeria, Djibouti, Namibia, Senegal, and Cameroon.³⁶ These regional offices also cover neighboring states. Areas of cooperation beyond humanitarian aid include agriculture, healthcare, education, and sanitation. Through TİKA, Türkiye is implementing numerous social infrastructure projects in Africa, including the construction of hospitals and schools.³⁷

Since 2005, Türkiye has also intensified diplomatic relations with African states.³⁸ Top-level visits have been identified as a key element in maintaining and effectively implementing Türkiye's partnership policy towards Africa. Therefore, by 2025, President (and previously Prime Minister) Erdoğan had made 53 official visits to 31 countries across Africa (including Algeria, Chad, Gambia, Tanzania, Madagascar, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo).³⁹ Furthermore, in the subsequent years

³¹ D. Liszkowska, "Dyplomacja humanitarna jako wyznacznik 'normatywnej potęgi' Turcji," *Horyzonty Polityki*, vol. 15, no 51 (2024), pp. 320-321.

³² J. Heibach, H. Taş, "Beyond the Soft–Hard Power Binary: Resource Control in Turkey's Foreign Policy Towards Sub-Saharan Africa," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2024), p. 318.

³³ D. Liszkowska, "Dyplomacja humanitarna...", pp. 320-321.

³⁴ I.H. Alio, "Türkiye's Foreign Aid to Africa Under the AK Party: A Constructivist Approach," *Akdeniz Havzası ve Afrika Medeniyetleri Dergisi*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2023), p. 52.

³⁵ "Türkiye-Africa Relations..."

³⁶ "TİKA Carried Out 1884 Projects in the Last 5 Years in Africa," *TİKA: Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency*, 31 May 2022, at https://tika.gov.tr/en/detail-tika_carried_out_1884_projects_in_the_last_5_years_in_africa/, 2 February 2026.

³⁷ "Türkiye's Development Cooperation: General Characteristics And The Least Developed Countries (LDC) Aspect," *Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, at https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye_s-development-cooperation.en.mfa, 2 February 2026.

³⁸ A. Kaya, "After 25 Years of Türkiye's Opening to (Sub-Saharan) Africa: From Endeavours to State Policy," *Avrasya Etüdderi*, no. 62 (2023), p. 115.

³⁹ "Bilateral Relations..."

of the AKP government, the number of Turkish diplomatic missions on the African continent also increased significantly. In 2002, there were only six Turkish embassies, but by 2009, this number had risen to 12, and between 2009 and 2012 alone, another 19 were opened.⁴⁰ By 2022, 44 Turkish embassies were operating in Africa. African states also increased the number of their embassies in Ankara to 38 in 2002, compared to 10 at the beginning of 2008.⁴¹

As noted in the literature, concepts such as ‘humanitarian diplomacy’ and ‘public diplomacy’ were regularly invoked in the context of Türkiye’s international activities in Africa. Their goal was not only to give meaning to the political and economic opening in pursuit of regional and global integration, but also to provide Türkiye with a basis for its normative legitimacy.⁴² This is partially confirmed by the change in the scope of development assistance provided by Türkiye to individual states and regions in subsequent years. The total amount of official regional provided bilateral official development assistance Türkiye to Africa in 2006 was USD 51.73 million, a fivefold increase compared to 2005. Türkiye also committed to increasing these amounts.⁴³ This continued in subsequent years, and according to TİKA reports, in 2014, aid amounting to USD 383.3 million was directed to African states. Importantly, during this period, Africa was the second region to receive Turkish funds, after the Middle East (USD 2,500.4 million). However, in 2015, this assistance decreased to USD 183.4 million, and the largest beneficiaries among African states during these two years (2014-2015) were Somalia (second place behind Syria with a total of USD 314.8 million) and Sudan (tenth place with USD 22.0 million).⁴⁴ However, a significant decline in Türkiye’s development aid for Africa was recorded in the following years, reaching USD 59.72 million in 2022 and USD 59.27 million in 2023. Again, the states that benefited most from Türkiye’s development aid included Somalia with USD 10.98 million (7th place among all beneficiary states in the world), Sudan with USD 7.89 million (10th place), but significant funds were also transferred to Libya with USD 6.39 million (11th place) and Guinea-Bissau with USD 5.97 million (12th place).⁴⁵

In addition to the areas mentioned above, Türkiye has decided to build its position in Africa through cultural and educational activities. One form of action is scholarship programs awarded to African students.⁴⁶ Since 2000, the number of African students

⁴⁰ A. Ozturk, “Turkey Opens 31 Embassies in Africa,” *AA*, 16 December 2012, at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkey-opens-31-embassies-in-africa/298107>, 2 February 2026.

⁴¹ “Türkiye-Africa Relations...”

⁴² J. Heibach, H. Taş, “Beyond the Soft–Hard...,” p. 312.

⁴³ “Türkiye’s Development Cooperation...”

⁴⁴ “Turkish Development Assistance Report 2015,” *TİKA: Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency*, at <https://tika.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/YAYINLAR/TKYR%202015%20ENG/KALKINMA%20.pdf>, 2 February 2026, p. 19.

⁴⁵ “Türkiye Development Assistance Report 2023,” *TİKA: Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency*, at <https://tika.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/TURKIYE-DEVELOPMENT-ASSISTANCE-REPORT-2023-ENG-final.pdf>, 02 February 2026, pp. 18-21.

⁴⁶ “Türkiye-Africa Relations...”

enrolled at Turkish universities has increased significantly, encompassing over 60,000 students from 54 African countries. Eight centers of the Yunus Emre Institute and the Maarif Foundation,⁴⁷ established in June 2016, are also actively involved in these areas on the continent. Analysts note that this foundation was established *with the express purpose of taking over Gülen schools and creating a transnational educational network under the control of the Turkish state*.⁴⁸ By 2025, it oversaw 201 schools in 26 states, with over 20,000 students enrolled.

Cultural exports, resulting from Turkish cinema, have also contributed to building Türkiye's potential in Africa. According to research conducted by Sebastián Ruiz-Cabrera and Hasan Gürkan among respondents from Senegal, Mozambique and Kenya, through Turkish TV series, soft power has significantly changed the perception of Türkiye among citizens of African states, also in the political dimension.⁴⁹ The cooperation undertaken in the field of cinematography has even included the Turkish state broadcaster TRT in bilateral relations. Its task was to help *the flourishing of Somali culture and train Somali filmmakers in high-quality production*. In order to develop cultural exchange between the two states, a decision was made to translate Turkish dramas into Somali. Interest in Turkish cinematography also influenced the increase in demand for learning Turkish, especially among young women and girls. One of the manifestations of Turkish influences may also be the name 'İstanbul', which has become one of the most popular female names in this country.⁵⁰

Cinematography is not the only platform for cooperation with African states. On 25-26 May 2022, the 'Turkey-Africa Media Summit' was organized in Istanbul. It was attended by 80 press representatives from 45 African countries, African diplomats, representatives of non-governmental organizations and scientists. The aim of the summit was to strengthen cooperation between representatives of Turkish and African media, as well as to strengthen Türkiye's image in the media of African countries. Thus, through media cooperation as a tool of soft power, Ankara is strengthening its strategic presence on the continent.⁵¹

STRUCTURAL ECONOMIC ANCHORING OF TÜRKİYE IN AFRICA

Türkiye's rapid economic success under the AKP government made it one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. This economic growth gave Türkiye the confidence to pursue a more assertive foreign policy agenda, evolving from a regional focus

⁴⁷ "Bilateral Relations..."

⁴⁸ J. Heibach, H. Taş, "Beyond the Soft-Hard...", p. 320.

⁴⁹ S. Ruiz-Cabrera, H. Gürkan, "Effects of Turkish Cultural Products on Its Foreign Policy Toward Africa: Turkish TV Series as an Example of Soft Power in Kenya, Mozambique, and Senegal," *Profesional de la Información*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2023), pp. 8-13.

⁵⁰ "'İstanbul' Becomes Most Popular Name in Somalia," *Daily Sabah*, 24 December 2021, at <https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/istanbul-becomes-most-popular-name-in-somalia/news>, 21 April 2025.

⁵¹ A. Siradag, "The Rise of...", p. 6.

to a global reach.⁵² One of the important indicators of the strengthening of Türkiye's relations with African states are the developing economic ties and trade turnover. In 2013, Türkiye became a member of the African Development Bank (AfDB), which gave Turkish companies and individuals access to tenders financed by the AfDB, the African Development Fund and the Nigerian Trust Fund.⁵³ A year later, during the 2nd Türkiye-Africa Partnership Summit, which took place in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, the Türkiye-Africa Business and Economy Forum was initiated.⁵⁴ This cyclical platform has been organized so far in 2016, 2018, 2021, 2023. Its first edition was attended by, among others: 50 top-level officials, namely ministers and deputy ministers of economy, trade, investment, and finance from 42 African countries, as well as a wide range of chairmen and presidents of chambers and business associations operating on the African continent.⁵⁵ The last forum, which took place on October 12-13, 2023 in Istanbul, was entitled 'Unlocking Opportunities: Building Stronger Türkiye-Africa Economic Partnerships'. It was attended by almost 4,000 representatives of economy, trade and business from Türkiye and 53 African countries. Türkiye's actions in and towards Africa show significant differences in terms of content and purpose. They have evolved from single-track diplomacy, focused on the state, to multi-track diplomacy, which encompasses both public and private stakeholders.⁵⁶

The strategy for developing trade and economic relations with Africa, which was launched in 2003, as emphasized by the Turkish authorities, is being intensively implemented in every dimension.⁵⁷ The increase in the volume of trade between Türkiye and the African continent deserves special attention, which increased from USD 5.4 billion to USD 40.7 billion in the years 2003-2022. In 2024, the trade volume was approximately USD 36.5 billion (including exports of USD 21.8 billion and imports of USD 15 billion). Türkiye's main partners on the continent are Egypt, Algeria, Libya, South Africa, and Nigeria. Currently, free trade agreements have been concluded with Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and Mauritius. Another agreement awaiting ratification has already been concluded with Sudan, and agreements with Ghana, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, and Libya are also at a significant stage of negotiation.⁵⁸ Its target level for the coming years was set at USD 50 billion, and then at USD 75 billion.⁵⁹

⁵² W. Rugutt, M. Nzomo, P.G. Okoth, "Examining Foreign..."

⁵³ "Bilateral Relations..."

⁵⁴ "Addressing Challenges, Unlocking Opportunities: Building Stronger Türkiye-Africa Economic Partnerships," *Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Trade*, at <http://tabef.org/about-overview.html>, 21 April 2025.

⁵⁵ "III. Türkiye-Africa Economic and Business Forum (2021)," *Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Trade*, at <https://tabef.org/about-past-forums.html>, 21 April 2025.

⁵⁶ J. Heibach, H. Taş, "Beyond the Soft-Hard...", pp. 319-320,

⁵⁷ "Minister Bolat 'Our Trade Volume with Africa Reached 40.7 Billion Dollars,'" *DEİK – Foreign Economic Relations Board*, 12 October 2023, at <https://www.deik.org.tr/press-releases-minister-bolat-our-trade-volume-with-africa-reached-40-7-billion-dollars>, 21 April 2025.

⁵⁸ "Bilateral Relations..."

⁵⁹ Ibid.

According to statistics, Turkish entrepreneurs have invested over USD 85 billion in infrastructure in Africa.⁶⁰ Türkiye's priority in economic cooperation with the African continent is infrastructure projects, especially in the areas of transport, energy, and health. Turkish companies build, among others, roads, railways, airports, power plants, hotels, residential buildings, conference centers. One of the largest Turkish companies, Summa, has obtained several important contracts in the construction sector. These include the reconstruction and operation of the new international airport in Guinea-Bissau in March 2022, the construction of the Senegalese national stadium completed in February 2022, and the construction of airports in Niger, Senegal, and Sierra Leone.⁶¹

The wide range of areas also includes the production of Turkish companies locating their plants in Africa, such as cement, steel, medicines, clothing, but also electronics, including household appliances. Thanks to this, Turkish companies provide jobs for citizens of African states, not only on the continent itself, but also in Türkiye, where the percentage of residents of African origin has significantly increased in recent years.⁶² In the coming years, broader Turkish-African cooperation is forecast in the energy, digitalization, services, security, and health sectors. All these areas were addressed during the aforementioned 4th Business and Economic Forum in 2023 in the panels: 'Cooperation in the field of manufacturing and agriculture industries: supply chain sustainability and food security', 'Digital transformation in Africa: strengthening the digital technology ecosystem in Africa', 'Assessment of health technologies and promotion of tourism hubs', 'Infrastructure investment opportunities: 'Energy, telecommunications and transport networks', 'Opportunities and advantages of free zones', 'Digital transformation in Africa: strengthening the digital technology ecosystem in Africa', 'The importance of efficient defense and aerospace technologies', 'Financing investment and trade in Africa and Banking relations with Türkiye' and 'Investment and trade opportunities in the ECCAS region'.⁶³

Türkiye is also interested in exploiting African natural resources, including oil, uranium, and gold. For example, in October 2024, the country began exploring for oil and gas off the coast of Somalia. Cooperation with Niger is also crucial for Türkiye, providing potential access to rich uranium deposits needed to power Türkiye's first nuclear power plant.⁶⁴ However, Africa's natural resources are often located in unstable areas. Therefore, Turkish companies must engage in conflict-ridden environments to extract resources. Extracting resources from war-torn areas therefore requires Turkey to make certain security commitments and assume a mediating role in regional conflicts.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ M.B. Durdu, "Türkiye in West Africa...".

⁶¹ E.P. Dal, S. Dipama, "Assessing Turkey...".

⁶² "Bilateral Relations...".

⁶³ "Minister Bolat...".

⁶⁴ N. Gbadamosi, "How Turkey Became Africa's Mediator," *Foreign Policy*, 15 January 2025, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/01/15/turkey-africa-mediator-sudan-ethiopia-somalia/>, 2 February 2026.

⁶⁵ R. Parens, M. Plichta, "Turkey's Return...".

The AU's inactivity in this regard has strengthened Türkiye's influence in states such as Somalia, Ethiopia, and Sudan.⁶⁶

SECURITY PROJECTION OF TÜRKIYE'S INTERESTS IN AFRICA

In recent years, Türkiye has become a strategic actor in the international arena, combining elements of both soft and hard power, intervening with tools appropriate to current challenges.⁶⁷ The challenges resulting from the Arab Spring, as well as the aftermath of the civil war in Syria, have significantly undermined Türkiye's regional role.⁶⁸ The failed coup d'état that took place in the state in July 2016 led to a transformation of its approach to foreign policy, which became even more assertive and multi-regional.⁶⁹ Türkiye also began to strengthen its influence in subsequent years, not only through economic, political and cultural means, but also through its military presence.⁷⁰ For Türkiye, the second-largest army in NATO (after the United States) and the strongest army in the Middle East, it did not take long for hard power to materialize. The state is involved in various armed conflicts,⁷¹ and its significant role in the global defense industry has also attracted international attention, primarily through the production of drones such as the Bayraktar TB2 and the Akinci.⁷²

Turkish hard power activity was based on four main pillars: strengthening the executive power and centralized decision-making; a professional army experienced in conducting multi-front hybrid wars; a domestic defense industry that increasingly began to meet the needs of local armed forces; and the assumption of strategic autonomy, resulting from Türkiye's aspirations to become a medium-sized and regional power. The process of strengthening Turkish hard power was also accompanied by external conditions: a regional vacuum, growing radicalism and terrorism, interference from foreign powers, and the need to confront growing hybrid threats and protect its own interests.⁷³ The expansion of the domestic defense industry has become one of the priorities for the Turkish government. The volume of Turkish defense, aviation and space exports increased by 27% in 2023 and reached a record

⁶⁶ N. Gbadamosi, "How Turkey Became..."

⁶⁷ W. Rugutt, M. Nzomo, P.G. Okoth, "Examining Foreign..."

⁶⁸ A. Chiriatti, F. Donelli, "Turkish 'Zero Problems' Between Failure and Success," *Centre for Policy and Research on Turkey – Research Turkey*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2015), p. 1.

⁶⁹ A. Lebovich, N. van Heukelingen, "Unravelling Turkish involvement in the Sahel," *Clingendael*, 28 July 2023, at <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/unravelling-turkish-involvement-sahel>, p. 3.

⁷⁰ S. Saddiki, "The New Turkish Presence in North Africa: Ambitions and Challenges," *Med Dialogue Series*, no. 33 (2020), at <https://www.kas.de/documents/282499/282548/The+New+Turkish+Presence+in+North+Africa.pdf/1ef5bc1d-f900-a9b5-6fb0-619c94ec37b1>, 21 April 2025.

⁷¹ J. Heibach, H. Taş, "Beyond the Soft–Hard..." p. 316.

⁷² T. Nogueira Pinto, "Turkey..."

⁷³ A. Bakir, "Mapping the..."

amount of USD 5.5 billion. Even greater growth in this area is forecast in the coming years.⁷⁴

This process also began to take place in the context of Türkiye's relations with Africa. According to data from the Stockholm International Peace and Research Institute (SIPRI), from 2016 to 2023, Ankara increased its annual arms exports to Africa by about 284%.⁷⁵ This increase is, among other things, an expression of Türkiye's efforts to strengthen political and economic ties with African states. Turkish defense products have many advantages for African partners, due to their competitive price, but also reliability, which has been proven in Libya, Syria, and Ukraine. For African states facing insurgencies and underfunded militaries, such as Nigeria, Niger, and Somalia, Turkish expertise, drones, and counterterrorism experience are particularly valuable.⁷⁶ Moreover, the state emphasizes lower costs and flexible policies as key selling points. States that have signed contracts with it include Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Senegal, Rwanda, and Uganda.⁷⁷

Türkiye's growing involvement in Africa's security sector demonstrates its strategy of expanding its geopolitical influence and consolidating its position as a key power through military means.⁷⁸ The direction of Türkiye's foreign policy towards Africa can therefore be described as a retreat from the use of soft power to the benefit of hard power. Its manifestation is visible in several forms of Turkish activity, such as: extraterritorial military operations, deployment of troops on foreign territory, deployment of military bases and showing its land, sea and air power in the Horn of Africa, North Africa and the eastern part of the Mediterranean. Türkiye has signed numerous defense agreements with Somalia, Sudan and Libya, among others, which paved the way for the establishment of military bases in their territories. For example, the largest foreign military academy Camp TURKSOM in Somalia,⁷⁹ launched in 2017, is considered Türkiye's bridgehead in Africa. Although the base is referred to as Afrika Kartalı (African Eagle), it is defined by Turkish calculations of political and military power. It is built on a 'military-sociological' identity. Somali officers and NCOs receive their education in Turkish after an intensive Turkish language course and also take an official oath in this language (along with Somali).⁸⁰

⁷⁴ "Turkish Defense Industry Sets New Record with \$5.5B in 2023 Exports," *Daily Sabah*, 3 January 2024, at <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/turkish-defense-industry-sets-new-record-with-55b-in-2023-exports>, 21 April 2025.

⁷⁵ I. Touazi, A. Sau, M. Benucci, "Türkiye, the New Regional Hegemonic Power in Africa," *The International Team for the Study of Security-Verona*, 14 January 2025, at <https://www.itssverona.it/turkiye-the-new-regional-hegemonic-power-in-africa>, 21 April 2025.

⁷⁶ T. Nogueira Pinto, "Turkey..."

⁷⁷ J. Heibach, H. Taş, "Beyond the Soft-Hard...", p. 316.

⁷⁸ I. Touazi, A. Sau, M. Benucci, "Türkiye, the New..."

⁷⁹ A. Bakir, "Mapping the..."

⁸⁰ C. Kasapoglu, "Turkey's 'African Eagle' Trains Turkish-Speaking Troops in Somalia: Where Next?," *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 18, no. 21 (2020), at <https://jamestown.org/program/turkeys-african-eagle-trains-turkish-speaking-troops-in-somalia-where-next/>, 21 April 2025.

SADAT is considered to play a significant role in Türkiye's hard power engagement. Founded in 2012, SADAT Defence is the first and only private Turkish military company to provide consulting, training, and logistics services in the international defense and internal security sectors on the international stage.⁸¹ The organization has played a significant role in operations through Syrian mercenaries in Libya, Niger and Mali, among others. Its activities are in line with the state's goals and consist of increasing Türkiye's influence in the region. At the same time, however, this is done with a certain degree of operational discretion. Türkiye's use of private military contractors is part of a broader state strategy.⁸² It aims to expand Türkiye's presence in key strategic areas of Africa, namely the Horn of Africa, North Africa and the Sahel.

CONCLUSIONS

It seems that Türkiye's multidimensional cooperation with African states and an effective strategy of smart influence, implemented in various regions of this continent, using various methods, gives this state a chance to become not only an active actor, but also a partner that builds trust and takes responsibility.⁸³ The analysis of Türkiye's activities in Africa allows for positively verification of the hypothesis that the state consistently uses soft power tools as the main element of its long-term strategy and expansion of influence on the African continent. In shaping a positive image of Türkiye among African societies, key roles are played by such tools as humanitarian diplomacy, development aid, and cultural and educational initiatives. Türkiye's autonomous engagement in Africa also helps distinguish it from the former colonial powers, portraying it as a partner free from imperial ideology and colonial legacy. All this contributes to the continuous strengthening of Türkiye's political, economic, and cultural ties with African countries.

Secondly, it should be noted that the growing presence of Türkiye's hard power instruments also plays an important role, although it does not constitute a key axis in this state's strategy towards Africa. Hard power elements such as military cooperation and training, arms exports, and the presence of Turkish military bases significantly complement Türkiye's engagement and enhance the defense capabilities of selected African states. The state is also presented as an actor ready to assume the role of a guarantor of security in selected parts of Africa, gaining allies that perceive it as a stabilizing force amid global rivalries.

Thirdly, Türkiye's actions are part of a broad process of redefining its foreign policy. By deepening its presence in regions that were until recently treated as marginal, Türkiye responds to the ambitions of a state aspiring to become a middle-range power. Through its growing engagement in Africa, Türkiye has diversified the directions of its policy and strengthened its position at both the regional and global levels. At the same

⁸¹ "Sadat Defense," SADAT, at <https://sadat.com.tr/en/>, 21 April 2025.

⁸² I. Touazi, A. Sau, M. Benucci, "Türkiye, the New..."

⁸³ M.B. Durdu, "Türkiye in West Africa..."

time, thanks to the skillful combination of soft and hard power tools, it has managed to develop a relatively lasting and multidimensional presence in Africa. This translates into an increase in Türkiye's geopolitical importance, but also into benefits in terms of trade, gaining new markets (including for the Turkish construction or military sector), and support for African states in multilateral forums.

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