



Turkey's African adventure:

Taking stock of a new chapter in EU-Turkey relations

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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Summary

- Turkey's African opening arguably represents the most successful illustration of its foreign policy reorientation over the last fifteen years.
- Turkey's goal of winning over the "hearts and minds" of African state elites has proven to be a gradually evolving process.
- The crisis in the Nile basin triggered by the construction of the "Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)" has served as an opportunity for Turkey to deepen its involvement in regional politics and conflict resolution, including the Tigray conflict.
- By controlling transport and delivery, Turkey can avoid aid brokers and send direct funding to Somalia, thereby distancing itself from the international organizations which follow multilateral procedures and operate from Kenya, in the main.
- Despite Ankara's latest bid to normalize its relations with Egypt, its position in the Egypt-Ethiopia-Sudan triangle remains delicate, since additional militarization in the region could lead to the escalation of regional instability and conflict
- Although Greece's contribution to sub-Saharan African security can be considered a step forward, Athens should seek to go far beyond its currently minimum level.
- EU-Africa relations could improve further if the EU powers in the Sahel seek areas of cooperation and synergies with other states active in the region, including Turkey.

Introduction

Turkey's African opening arguably represents the most successful illustration of the reorientation of its foreign policy over the last fifteen years. Since the early years of the Republic of Turkey, African affairs were never a priority on the country's foreign policy agenda. Turkey's decision in the aftermath of World War Two to join the Western alliance and security organizations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952, contributed to its alignment with the African policy of key European states whose colonial empires were crumbling. This alignment was further substantiated by Ankara's opposition to Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's decision to nationalize the Suez Canal in 1956 and its political alignment with Western governments in the United Nations against Algerian and Tunisian demands for independence. In the 1960s, Turkey's disillusionment with the United States over its stance on the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Cyprus problem paved the way for a rethinking of Turkey's position on Africa and the developing world at large. The rising tide of decolonization and the emergence of the Unaligned Movement met with sympathy from Turkey's anti-imperialist Left, but never succeeded in calling the country's Western strategic alignment into question. The economic reforms led by Turgut Özal in the 1980s, coupled with the end of the Cold War, led to the emergence of Africa and other hitherto neglected regions as prospective economic partners and spheres of economic influence.

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The view that Turkey's strategic outlook should extend far beyond its Western alliance was not limited to the Turkish Center-Right. It was also adopted by Ismail Cem, Turkey's Foreign Minister between 1997 and 2002 and a prominent member of the Republican People's Party (CHP). This aspiration gained further traction after the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in November 2002. Turkey's successful economic and political reforms underwrote a new ambitious and extroverted foreign policy. This was best outlined by Ahmet Davutoğlu, a university professor who rose from the post of foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister Erdoğan to serve as Foreign Minister and Prime Minister. While the Arab uprisings of 2011 led to the unraveling of Davutoğlu's doctrine and to democratic backsliding on Turkey's part, too, economic qualms severely limited Turkey's regional and global appeal. Despite these domestic and international setbacks, Turkey has managed to maintain some significant gains it made in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa.

Turkey's Policy Towards Sub-Saharan Africa

Boosting Engagement Through Trade

In 1998, Turkey adopted its first African Action Plan with a view to promote its relations with key African states. The policy was officially implemented following the coming to power of the AKP in November 2002. Ultimately, a new policy named “Africa Opening” (*Afrika Açılımı*) was introduced in 2005, which was dubbed the “Year of Africa” (*Afrika Yılı*). Prime Minister Erdoğan's March 2005 visit to South Africa was the first official visit by a Turkish Prime Minister to an African state south of the equator (Ozkan, 2010. 533).

Turkey's goal of winning over the “hearts and minds” of African state elites has been a gradually evolving process. The successful diplomatic visits of 2005 resulted in Turkey being accredited with observer status in the African Union (AU) that same year, and to the organization of the First Turkey-Africa Summit in Istanbul in 2008. In the same year, Turkey joined the African Development Bank, as well as actively engaging with regional

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organizations such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in East Africa, and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Turkey's African engagement would further expand still, especially after the Second Turkey-Africa Summit, which took place in Equatorial Guinea in 2014 and concluded its session with the promulgation of a 2015–2019 Joint Implementation Plan.

In parallel with this multilateral diplomacy, Ankara expanded its diplomatic footprint in the continent from twelve embassies in 2003 to 43 in 2021 (see figure 1), while Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced in June 2021 that Turkey would be opening a new embassy in Guinea-Bissau, bringing the overall number of embassies to 44 (Aydogan, 2021). In the meantime, the implementation of a “leader diplomacy” approach has resulted in President Erdoğan visiting 28 African countries, which is a record for a non-African head of state. This was followed by a pledge to establish a Turkish diplomatic presence in every country on the continent (Akca, 2019).

One of the most tangible indicators of Turkish involvement in the African continent—setting aside the expansion of its diplomatic capital—is the strengthening of Turkey's economic footprint in sub-Saharan Africa. According to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Ankara's trade volume with the African continent rose from 5.4 billion USD in 2003 to 25.3 billion USD in 2020. The biggest change can be viewed in its trade volume with sub-Saharan African states, which rose from 1.35 billion USD in 2003 to 10 billion USD in 2020.](#)

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Figure 1: Turkish Embassies in Africa © African Business

Gambit in the Horn of Africa

The Horn of Africa is one of the world's most strategic regions: a trade crossroads between Europe and Asia, it is also plagued by international conflict, terrorism and crime.¹ The terrorist activities of *Al-Shabaab* in both Somalia and Kenya, and the civil war in South Sudan, have posed substantial threats to regional peace and stability. The geostrategic value of the region has attracted several foreign powers: The United States, China and France have all established military bases in Djibouti. In a similar vein, Turkey established its presence in Somalia in 2011, and has since sought to expand its influence across the region. Since 2017, Ankara has pursued closer cooperation with Sudan by boosting its investments in the country and signing a plethora of bilateral agreements, one of which related to the reconstruction of Suakin island, a long-abandoned trading site on Sudan's Red Sea coast (Vertin, 2019). The latest chapter in Sudanese-Turkish relations was written in August 2021, [when President Erdoğan met with Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the Chairperson of Sudan's Sovereign Council, and signed various agreements.](#)

“While Turkey initially followed a bottom-up approach, its decision to establish its first overseas military base in Somalia in 2017 revealed its desire to strengthen its strategic position in the region.”

Turkey's relations with Ethiopia have been cordial overall. Nonetheless, the crisis in the Nile basin triggered by the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has served as an opportunity for Turkey to deepen its involvement in regional politics and conflict resolution, including the Tigray conflict. Concerns about Turkey's involvement in the conflict were voiced following the Erdoğan-Abiy meeting on 18 August 2021. The meeting included a deal on military and financial cooperation (Fakude, 2021) and discussion on Turkey's potential mediatory role in the al-Fashaga border dispute between Ethiopia and Sudan.

Involvement in Somalia

While Ankara's footprint has been more visible in Somalia since 2011, its presence in the country dates back to its participation in the first UN Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM I) and the appointment of the Turkish general Çevik Bir as the force commander of UNOSOM II in 1993. What separates the past from the present is that Turkey's security-related efforts are now intertwined with a much broader agenda to rebuild the state infrastructure that collapsed after the Somali civil war (Rossiter & Cannon, 2019. 173). Turkey's re-engagement with the conflict-torn country began in 2011, when Prime Minister Erdoğan visited Mogadishu during Ramadan, despite significant security risks emanating from *Al-Shabaab*. This visit made Erdoğan the first non-African leader to visit Somalia in nearly two decades, and accomplished three desiderata; putting Somalia back on the international agenda through Turkey; addressing African leaders' concerns about Turkey's true intentions by upping its commitment; and exporting Turkey's “conflict resolution model” for the first time.

In the years that followed, Turkey focused in the main on the provision of humanitarian aid and development assistance through the construction of hospitals, schools and roads. In the period between 2011 and 2017, Turkey claimed to have sent almost [1 billion USD worth of aid to Somalia](#), while Ankara recently donated another 30 million USD to the country for capacity-building purposes (Tokyay, 2021). President Erdoğan visited Mogadishu again in 2016 to re-open the Turkish embassy, while both direct flights between Istanbul and Mogadishu, and scholarships for Somali students to study in Turkey, have been introduced (Van den Berg & Meester, 2019. 6). While Turkey initially followed a bottom-up approach, its decision to establish its first overseas military base in Somalia in 2017 revealed its desire to strengthen its strategic position in the region.

¹ The Horn of Africa is one of the world's main piracy hotspots (the other being the Gulf of Guinea).

Ankara also assumed an interlocutory role in the Somali Civil War, mediating the reconciliation talks between the federal government of Mogadishu and the breakaway region of Somaliland, with a view to counterbalancing the political influence of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the region (see figure 2).²

What has differentiated Turkey from other national and international actors is the way in which it uses its military forces within its foreign policy strategy. Thus Turkey pledged to reinforce the military capacity of the Somali National Army (SNA) in order to address the terrorist actions of *Al-Shabaab* in Mogadishu and beyond and, in the long term, to help Somalia return to its pre-war unified and sovereign condition.

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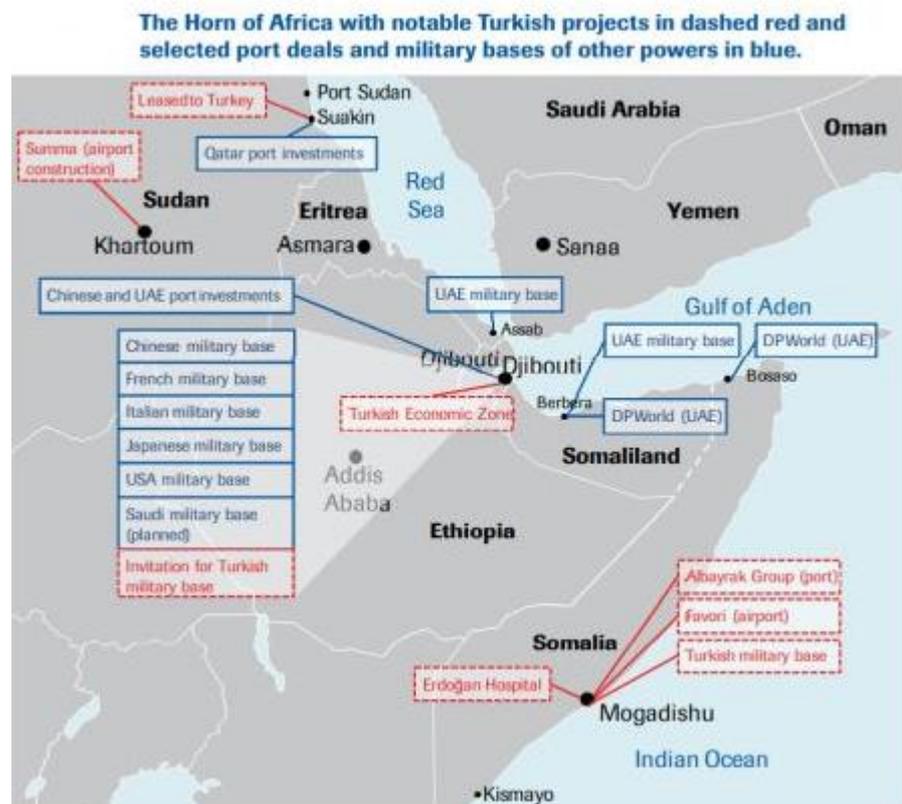


Figure 2: Securitization of Ports in the Horn of Africa © Clingendael Institute

The Turkish military base in Somalia, which reportedly cost 50 million USD and hosts between 200 and 300 military personnel, is an important instrument for implementing that strategy.³

What makes Turkey's presence in Somalia unique?

Turkish foreign policy towards sub-Saharan Africa cannot be fully comprehended without a brief reference to its unique approach to humanitarian aid. The previous sections have shown how Turkey's engagement in sub-Saharan Africa has transitioned from a donor-based to an extra-regional actor perspective. In stark contrast with Western and emerging powers, the core of the ideology underpinning Turkey's engagement is based

² The United Arab Emirates maintain a military presence in Eritrea and, since 2017, in the port town of Berbera in the internationally-unrecognized "Republic of Somaliland."

³ While the debate around Turkey's military positioning in Somalia certainly raises questions and should not rule out a more potent future deployment, it cannot be compared with Turkey's military base in Qatar, which was fast-tracked after the 2017 Qatar diplomatic crisis. Turkey's base in Qatar is expected to host a 5,000-strong operational contingent of the Turkish Armed Forces (Tanchum, 2020: 46), while the base in Somalia has functioned as a military training installation (Rossiter & Cannon, 2019: 169).

“In stark contrast with Western and emerging powers, the core of the ideology underpinning Turkey’s engagement is based on Turkey’s perceived clean-slate advantage: namely, the absence of a colonial past and the presence of Islamic religious ties to forge a new socio-political and economic model for the continent.”

on Turkey’s perceived clean-slate advantage: namely, the absence of a colonial past and the presence of Islamic religious ties to forge a new socio-political and economic model for the continent (Langan, 2017. 1405). The concerted efforts of the state, as well as private stakeholders, NGOs, faith-based and civil society organizations have facilitated the provision of humanitarian aid, direct investment and development assistance. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı-TİKA*) has spearheaded the coordination of public-private partnership projects on the ground (Guo, 2020. 125), while other important organizations that have contributed substantially to the distribution of humanitarian aid have been the Turkish Red Crescent (*Kızılay*), which focuses on the provision of relief, and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*), which—among its other competences—provides religious-oriented charity overseas.

In the case of Somalia, there are three main strands to Ankara’s humanitarian approach: The first relates to the existence of Turkish companies that have won government contracts, such as “Albayrak” and “Favori”, for Mogadishu’s port and airport respectively. These, alongside the extensive operation of Turkish Airlines, have boosted both the speed and efficiency at which humanitarian aid can be provided. By controlling transport and delivery, Turkey can avoid aid brokers and send direct funding to Mogadishu, thereby distancing itself from the international organizations which follow multilateral procedures and operate mainly from Kenya (Van den Berg & Meester, 2019. 8). The second strand of Ankara’s humanitarian approach is the religious dimension, which pertains to Turkey’s special responsibility towards embattled and ravaged Muslim communities abroad. In this regard, the religious educational institutions in Somalia (e.g., religious vocational (*imam-hatip*) schools and the Turkish *Maarif* Foundation) have received praise for their efforts (Van den Berg & Meester, 2019. 9). The final strand pertains to Turkey’s pledge to embrace the ideas of South-South Cooperation (SSC) by avoiding dependence, opting for mutually-beneficial economic solutions and long-lasting partnerships, and fostering the concept of “African solutions for African problems” (Donelli, 2018. 65).

In a nutshell, Ankara defines its approach on the basis of four key elements: non-conditionality, bilateralism, direct delivery on the ground, and a multi-stakeholder approach (Sucuoğlu & Sazak, 2016. 73). According to Donelli and Levaggi (2016), Turkey’s decision to integrate itself into the global South has revealed its intent to function as a bridge between the developed and developing worlds. This became clearer when Turkey hosted the [Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries \(LDC-IV\) in May 2011](#). Essentially, Ankara has attempted to exploit its relationship with the Global South to open new strategic routes, employing diverse soft power tools including public, cultural and humanitarian diplomacy.

Recent Forays into the Sahel

The region of the Sahel—described as the polygon of crises by the EU Special Representative for the region, Angel Losada—has been crippled by multidimensional challenges including government instability, climate change, inter-communal conflicts, the ever-rising jihadist terrorist threat, and the latest pandemic-related economic predicament (Salam Bello, 2021). Even more alarming is the fact that terrorist attacks have seen a worrying [five-fold increase in the Sahel](#). The inability of the Sahelian governments to control their territories, and the mistaken focus of foreign governments on military deployments than politico-economic reforms to invigorate the region, are seen as the main reasons why jihadists have become entrenched in the region’s local structures. According to Schmauder, Soto-Mayor and Goxho,

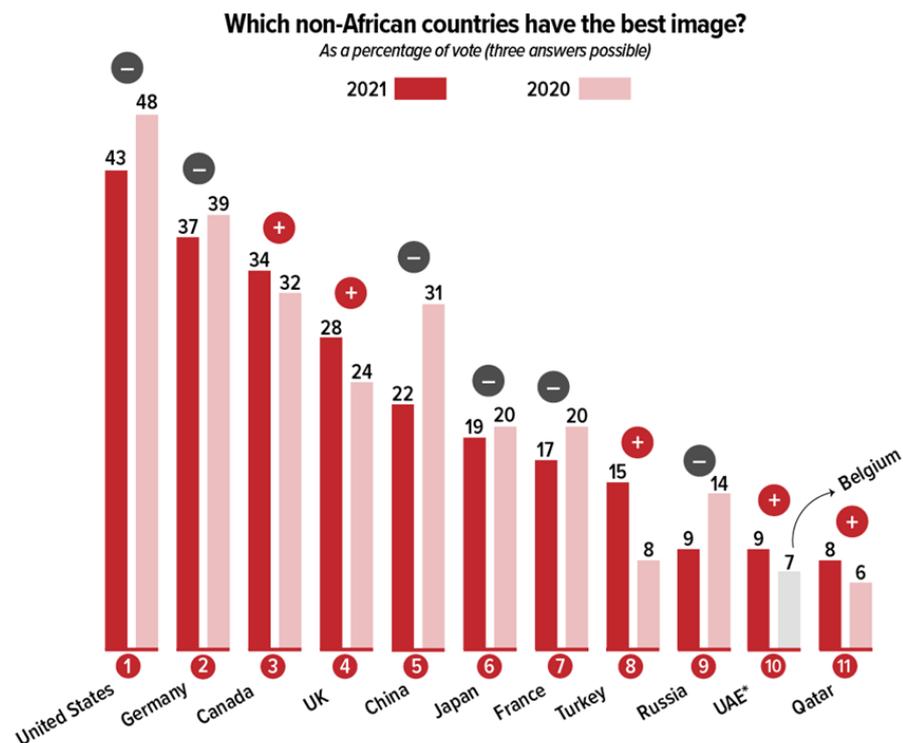
“Turkey’s decision to integrate itself into the global South has revealed its intent to function as a bridge between the developed and developing worlds.”

EU efforts in the Sahel remain heavily focused on the security-development nexus and a capacity-focused perception of governance; however, this approach falls short of addressing the underlying grievances of Sahelian citizens, which are just as much a consequence of state politics as of their absence (Schmauder, Soto-Mayor & Goxho 2020).

However the events of this year, with two coup d'états in Mali, and the [impending French military drawdown and reshaping of its presence in the region](#)—which bears a faint resemblance to the recent US exit from Afghanistan—have startled the region. Turkey's increasing leverage in the Sahel has occurred in parallel with these developments, opening another front with France following their recent face-off in Libya. Although the two countries downplayed their differences at [a meeting on the sidelines of the latest NATO Summit](#), the contrast between the weakened French presence and the growing Turkish footprint in the Sahel is expected to put cooperation plans at risk. The downward trajectory of French popularity in Africa compared to that of Turkey and the Gulf states, as indicated by the Africleads 2021 opinion poll, amply illustrates the recent weakening of France's African image. (see figure 3).

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Meanwhile, Ankara has ramped up its engagement in the region on both a bilateral and a multilateral level. At first glance, Turkey's engagement in the Sahel seems to be primarily driven by economic and religious incentives: Turkey has engaged in mosque-building for the High Islamic Council of Mali—the country's leading religious entity—and built hospitals in both Mali and Niger in 2018 and 2019 (Armstrong, 2021). This engagement can also be understood through the booming trade relations between Ankara and the Sahelian countries, with Turkey's trade with Mali increasing tenfold, from USD 5 million to USD 57 million, in 2019 alone.

However, Turkey's regional involvement is not limited to trade. Turkey and Niger signed

several agreements on economic and defense cooperation in July 2020, including a military training cooperation agreement (Tanchum, 2020). In parallel, Ankara has deepened its engagement with the G5 Sahel, a regional institutional format which focuses on providing security and development—a strategy clearly affirmed by Ankara's provision of five million USD in financial assistance to the group. Ankara reiterated its commitment in April 2021, when a G5 Sahel delegation visited the Turkish capital (De León Cobo, 2021).

Any assessment of Turkey's overtures in the Sahel must take a closer look at its stance on regional conflicts. Although official statements display a moderate stance, [welcoming the power-sharing agreement in South Sudan](#) and supporting a "[peaceful resolution](#)" in the Tigray conflict, Turkey's national interests often blur its allegiance to principles. Despite Turkey's virulent condemnation of both the July 2013 coup in Egypt (Aksoy & Roll, 2021, 1) and the [July 2021 coup](#) in Tunisia, Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu became the first senior foreign official to meet with the leaders of the 18 August 2020 coup in Mali, implicitly legitimizing the junta leaders by expressing "deep concerns" and avoiding any condemnatory line, in stark contrast with the stance of Western institutions and countries (Tastekin, 2020).

What Lies Ahead

Turkey has formulated a comprehensive Africa strategy over the last two decades and achieved significant results. Turkey continues to gradually extend its footprint in the continent, especially in Eastern Africa and in the Sahel, and while Erdoğan's gamble in Somalia has so far paid off, though this does not rule out the emergence of major challenges in the future. The crisis in the Nile basin over the GERD between Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan and South Sudan, the spillover of the Tigray conflict into adjacent regions, and Sudan's state collapse are interrelated within the context of the Somali conflict. Despite Ankara's latest bid to normalize its relations with Egypt, its position in the Egypt-Ethiopia-Sudan triangle remains delicate, since additional militarization in the region could lead to the escalation of regional instability and conflict, exposing Turkey to significant risks.

Implications for Greece and the European Union

What does Turkey's African adventure mean for Greece and the European Union? While Greek-Turkish relations experienced severe turbulence between November 2019 and September 2020 over the latter's ventures in the Eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus, Libya and its role in the refugee crisis, several rounds of ministerial-level discussions between Greece and Turkey the last twelve months have achieved de-escalation and established bilateral channels of dialogue and communication. This direction was further affirmed when Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan met at a side meeting during the June 2021 NATO Summit and committed to a "quiet summer" for both countries.

Over the last year, Greece has also adopted a more proactive stance towards sub-Saharan Africa, opening its Embassy in Dakar and [accrediting a Special Envoy for the Sahel](#). The Greek government has also agreed to join the fray along with other European governments as part of the Takuba Task Force (Balestrieri, 2021). This special force will provide a new dynamic in counterterrorism operations and complements gaps in the operational support for, and training of, Malian forces, despite the impending French withdrawal (Schmauder, Gorman & Berger, 2020). Although Greece's contribution to

"...comprehensive African strategy, focused not only on improving trade relations with African countries, but also on coordinating responses to problems of mutual interest—such as peace and security, climate change, energy transition, migration and cultural exchange—could consolidate Greece's engagement in the continent. This prospect would not only allow Greece to evolve its soft power tools through cultural."

sub-Saharan African security can be considered a step forward, Athens should seek to go far beyond its currently minimum level. Greece's ability to emerge as a key factor in the formation of a commercial East Africa-to-Europe corridor through Egypt depends fundamentally on the management of its foreign partnerships (Tanchum, 2021. 3) and on the existence of a well-rounded national strategy. Which is to say that a comprehensive African strategy, focused not only on improving trade relations with African countries, but also on coordinating responses to problems of mutual interest—such as peace and security, climate change, energy transition, migration and cultural exchange—could consolidate Greece's engagement in the continent. This prospect would not only allow Greece to evolve its soft power tools through cultural and religious diplomacy; it would also add a new layer to its relations with Turkey and other Mediterranean countries who are already engaged with African states.

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In a similar way, the EU, which has had rather fraught relations with Turkey since 2019, has just completed its post-Cotonou negotiations with the signing of the [EU-Africa/Caribbean/Pacific Partnership Agreement](#), instigating a much-needed boost to a stagnant relationship. This agreement will overhaul EU-Africa relations after the expiration of the Cotonou Partnership Agreement, which has been the main framework for cooperation between the European Union and the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) states since 2000. During the negotiations, the African Union (AU) requested a separate partnership with the European Union outside the ACP format; however, this did not come into fruition, as the EU suggested that relations with the ACP states are based on the principles of subsidiarity and complementarity (Pichon, 2021. 10). This suggests that the EU should prioritize its engagement with its neighbouring continent and that the incumbent Slovenian presidency should host the Sixth EU-AU Summit before the end of the year, adding more areas of cooperation to their common agenda. EU-Africa relations could improve further if the EU powers in the Sahel seek areas of cooperation and synergies with other states active in the region, including Turkey. Brussels could consider the benefits from a potential cooperation with Ankara, if the latter suspends any military deployment plans and focuses on providing financial or technical assistance to the G5 Sahel (Armstrong, 2021). Africa, a continent whose economic and strategic significance is bound to rise sharply in the coming years, deserves more attention from the EU authorities and Greece.

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