



Influence without Power: Rethinking Greek-African relations

SECURITY & FOREIGN POLICY

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- Greece should build influence through networks rather than financial power.

Summary

- Focus on a small number of strategic African partners.
- Expand university cooperation and scholarships.
- Mobilise the Patriarchate, diaspora and civil society.
- Develop a Greece–Africa digital platform and legal mobility schemes.

...recent European developments, particularly the European Union's Global Gateway strategy and the African Continental Free Trade Area agreement (AfCFTA), create an opportunity for a strategic rethinking of Greek policy.

AFRICA¹ IS EMERGING AS ONE OF THE MOST STRATEGICALLY IMPORTANT REGIONS of the twenty-first century. Despite armed conflicts, democratic backsliding, debt crises, and persistent poverty, the continent is characterized by rapid demographic growth, increasing urbanization, expanding markets, and rising geopolitical significance. Global actors such as China, Russia, Turkey, India, the United Arab Emirates, and Brazil have significantly expanded their political and economic engagement with African countries. Greece, by contrast, has traditionally maintained weak and fragmented relations with Sub-Saharan Africa. However, recent European developments, particularly the European Union's Global Gateway strategy and the African Continental Free Trade Area agreement (AfCFTA), create an opportunity for a strategic rethinking of Greek policy.

The challenge for Greece is not whether it should engage with Africa, but how it can do so with limited diplomatic, financial, and administrative resources. Rather than attempting to imitate larger powers, Greece should adopt a selective strategy emphasizing concentrated partnerships, network diplomacy, educational links, and societal actors.

The Policy Challenge

The starting point of Greek engagement with Africa is structurally weak. Although geographically close to the continent, Greece maintains only eight embassies across forty-nine countries of Sub-Saharan Africa serving a population of approximately 1.2 billion people (in comparison, Turkey maintains thirty-two embassies in the region). Furthermore, only the Greek embassy in South Africa has a commercial attaché, while official high-level political visits have been extremely rare (an exception was Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias' official visits to several Sub-Saharan African countries, looking mainly for support for Greece's candidature for the UN Security Council). No Greek Prime Minister has visited a Sub-Saharan African country during the last three decades. Greek exports to Africa represent only approximately 0.3 percent of total exports, while investment remains minimal.

The weakness of institutional engagement contrasts sharply with the continent's growing significance. Africa currently hosts some of the fastest-growing economies in the world and the African Continental Free Trade Area aims to create a market of approximately 1.5 billion consumers. In addition, under the European Union's Global Gateway initiative, €150 billion out of the overall €300 billion package are directed toward Africa.

At the same time, Greece possesses assets that remain largely underutilized.

Existing Greek Assets and Untapped Opportunities

The Orthodox Church represents one of Greece's most important but often neglected channels of influence in Africa. The Patriarchate of Alexandria maintains bishoprics in twelve African countries with an estimated flock of approximately 1.2 million faithful. Historically, religious diplomacy has often operated as an informal channel for strengthening relations and promoting social initiatives in education, health, and community development.

¹ In this paper, the term "Africa" refers specifically to Sub-Saharan Africa, unless otherwise indicated. North Africa is treated separately due to its distinct historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural dynamics.

Influence without Power: Rethinking Greek-African relations

The Church could therefore function as an instrument of soft power by supporting educational programmes, scholarships, local partnerships, and social services. For example, cooperation between Greek universities and schools connected to the Patriarchate of Alexandria could create educational networks extending from Egypt and Kenya to countries of Central and Southern Africa. Such initiatives would be relatively inexpensive while generating long-term influence. However, the Russian Orthodox Church has increasingly attempted to expand its presence in Africa, potentially weakening the historical position of the Patriarchate of Alexandria (numerous African Greek Orthodox priests have joined the Russian Church in recent years). Consequently, supporting the activities of the Patriarchate also acquires broader geopolitical significance, especially in the current context.

Diaspora communities constitute another important but largely underexploited resource. Although the Greek diaspora in Africa has declined dramatically—from approximately 150,000 individuals in 1960s to only a few tens of thousands today—it still provides networks and contacts across various sectors. At the same time, the African diaspora in Greece, including entrepreneurs, artists, athletes, and community organizations, has become more influential and can function as an important bridge.

Civil society organizations have already demonstrated the potential of such engagement. Organizations including the Greek-African Chamber of Commerce, several consultancies, but also NGOs like Doctors Without Borders—Greece, Lalibella, YouthmakersHub, and ELIX already undertake projects across African countries, often financed through European and private resources. University initiatives such as the AfrikuEurope programme of the University of the Peloponnese illustrate that society has often moved ahead of the state and ELIAMEP's agreement with Pretoria University.

Society has often moved ahead of the state in building Greek-African relations.

Policy Recommendations

Given its limited resources, Greece should avoid a continent-wide strategy and instead focus on one or two strategic partner countries that can function as anchor states. Kenya, for example, combines strong economic growth, regional influence, and importance in logistics and maritime activities. Ethiopia represents another possible case because of historical links and religious connections. Concentrating resources would allow Greece to build expertise and create visibility at manageable cost.

Second, Greece should strengthen educational and digital partnerships. Universities could expand English-language and French-language programmes specifically targeting African students. Visa procedures should also be simplified. It is inefficient for prospective African students to wait five or six months for visa appointments.

Third, Greece should establish a national volunteer programme inspired by international examples such as the Peace Corps in the US or similar programmes in Europe. Young Greeks could participate in educational, environmental, or healthcare projects in African countries. Such a programme could seek financial support from the Greek Public Employment Service (DYPA) and the EU, create networks and simultaneously improve Greece's currently limited development profile.

Moreover, Greece should create a digital platform on Greek–African relations that could serve as an innovative mechanism for strengthening coordination, visibility, and interaction among the multiple actors involved in the relationship. The platform could function as a shared digital ecosystem bringing together public institutions, private enterprises, civil

Influence without Power: Rethinking Greek-African relations

Modest but carefully designed interventions can generate substantial diplomatic dividends.

society organizations, academic institutions, diaspora networks, and cultural actors from Greece and African countries. It could include databases of ongoing initiatives and partnerships, funding opportunities, business and educational collaborations, cultural exchanges, and development projects, while also providing interactive tools such as discussion forums, thematic working groups, and networking spaces. Beyond its informational role, such a platform could facilitate dialogue and the co-production of ideas, reduce fragmentation among existing initiatives, and create synergies between actors who currently operate in isolation. In this way, it could strengthen relational ties and transform dispersed activities into a more coherent framework of engagement, enhancing Greece's visibility and influence through networking, participation, and sustained interaction rather than through traditional forms of state power.

Greece cannot compete with larger powers through financial resources, but it can develop influence through networks, education, religion, and societal links.

Finally, Greece should adopt a broader understanding of migration and mobility by creating more legal pathways for seasonal workers in agriculture, construction, and care services. Bilateral agreements with countries such as Ethiopia could address labour shortages while strengthening long-term partnerships.

Conclusion

Greece cannot compete with larger powers in Africa through financial resources or extensive diplomatic infrastructures. However, it can develop influence through networks, education, religion, and societal links. Rather than perceiving Africa as a distant periphery, Greece should view the continent as an emerging strategic space where modest but carefully designed interventions can generate substantial diplomatic dividends.