Transformations of turkey's African policy in sub-Saharan Africa: from humanitarian diplomacy to security partnerships



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Abstract:

Since the early 2000s, Turkey's policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa has expanded from humanitarian and developmental initiatives into an increasingly dense web of diplomatic, economic, and security instruments. Much of the existing scholarship, most influentially Donelli's (2021) account of a "smart power" trajectory, reads this expansion as a sequential shift, in which an initial phase of humanitarian diplomacy generated the trust on which a later phase of security and military cooperation was built. Drawing on the Somali case — including the February 2024 Turkish–Somali Defence and Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement and its associated hydrocarbon, fisheries, and maritime-security provisions through 2026 — this article reassesses that sequential reading. It asks whether Turkey's humanitarian, economic, and security instruments in Africa are best understood as stages of a linear evolution, or as increasingly imbricated components of a single, opportunistic foreign-policy repertoire, an interpretation closer to the process-oriented, resource-control framework recently proposed by Heibach and Taş (2024). The article further interrogates the applicability of the Copenhagen School's concept of securitization to this case, arguing that much of what the literature labels "securitization" more accurately describes the routinization of bilateral defence cooperation than a securitizing speech act in the sense specified by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998). Based on a qualitative, document-based analysis combining the historical, analytical, and case-study methods, the article suggests that Turkish engagement in the Horn of Africa is better characterized as a cumulative, increasingly commercial-security continuum than as a clean two-stage transformation, while acknowledging the empirical and methodological limits of a single-case, largely open-source-based study.

Key words: *Turkey; Sub-Saharan Africa; Somalia; humanitarian diplomacy; security partnerships; securitization; soft power; resource control.*

Introduction:

Since the beginning of the third millennium, Turkish foreign policy has undergone profound transformations in its geopolitical orientations, with an increasing focus on the African continent, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa, which has become a strategic arena for the repositioning of international and regional powers (Donelli, 2021, p. 3). This shift emerged within the broader context of redefining Turkey's international role, especially following the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, as Ankara sought to formulate a dynamic foreign policy based on the diversification of partnerships and the strengthening of its presence in regions traditionally beyond its sphere of influence.

The declaration of the "Opening to Africa" policy in 1998 marked the starting point of this orientation, later reinforced through successive diplomatic, economic, and cultural initiatives. In 2008, Turkey obtained "strategic partner" status with the African Union, granting its presence an institutional dimension and supporting the expansion of its relations with African states (Özkan & Akgün, 2010, p. 530). This opening was reflected in the increase in the number of Turkish embassies across the continent, from 12 embassies in 2002 to more than 40 embassies in the third decade of the twenty-first century, highlighting Africa's growing importance in Turkey's foreign policy strategy (Donelli, 2021, p. 8).

Turkish policy has combined soft- and hard-power instruments, though the precise sequencing of this combination is contested and is treated in this article as a question to be examined rather than a premise. An initial phase clearly centred on humanitarian and developmental diplomacy, through aid, development cooperation programmes, and educational and cultural diplomacy delivered via institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) and the Turkish Red Crescent, particularly in the Horn of Africa (Akpinar, 2013, p. 738). As international competition intensified, Turkish policy came to include an increasingly visible strategic and security dimension, defence cooperation, military training bases, and security agreements. Whether this security dimension represents a discrete second phase that followed and depended on the completion of the first, or whether humanitarian, economic, and security instruments have in practice been pursued concurrently and have reinforced one another almost from the outset, is a question this article addresses directly, in dialogue with Heibach and Taş's (2024, pp. 312–314) recent critique of the soft-power-to-hard-power narrative.

It can be argued that Turkey's experience in Africa represents a notable, if not necessarily representative, case of multidimensional diplomacy, combining humanitarian, developmental, economic, and security instruments in its effort to reposition itself as an emerging regional power beyond its traditional geopolitical sphere, amid competition among major and regional powers over the African continent (Akpinar, 2013, p. 740; Donelli, 2021, p. 74; Heibach & Taş, 2024, p. 313).

a. Research Problem

Over the past two decades, Turkey's African policy has undergone a significant transformation, evolving from limited engagement into a multidimensional strategy combining diplomatic, economic, humanitarian, developmental, and security instruments. Initiated by the "Opening to Africa" policy in 1998, this transformation intensified under the Justice and Development Party, particularly through humanitarian and development diplomacy, which enabled Turkey to establish networks of political and societal relations, especially in the Horn of Africa. Over time, these instruments were increasingly complemented by security and military partnerships.

Much of the existing literature, notably Özkan and Akgün (2010), Akpinar (2013), and Donelli (2021), documents this evolution in rich empirical detail and has become foundational to the field. These studies converge on a broadly sequential narrative in which humanitarian and developmental engagement precedes, and functions as the enabling condition for, security cooperation. What remains less examined is, first, whether this sequential narrative survives scrutiny against the post-2022 record, during which humanitarian, commercial, and security instruments in Somalia have become difficult to disentangle temporally; and second, whether the concept of securitization, borrowed from the Copenhagen School, is being used in this literature in a manner consistent with its original theoretical specification, or has instead become a loose synonym for "increased security cooperation" (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). The present article addresses this problem by re-examining the Somali case in light of developments through 2024–2026 and by subjecting the securitization framework to closer conceptual scrutiny.

b. Research Gap and Contribution

The article's contribution is therefore twofold. First, it updates the empirical record on the Somali case beyond the period covered by Donelli (2021), Akpinar (2013), and Özkan and Akgün (2010), integrating the February 2024 Turkish–Somali defence and economic framework agreement and the hydrocarbon, fisheries, and drone-related agreements that followed it. Second, rather than applying the securitization framework as self-evidently valid, it tests its fit against Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde's (1998) original criteria and considers Heibach and Taş's (2024) resource-control framework as a complementary, and in some respects more parsimonious, alternative. The article does not claim to resolve the sequential-versus-concurrent question definitively; a single, largely open-source-based case study cannot bear that weight. Its aim is more modest: to reframe a premise that the earlier literature, including the first version of this article, tended to treat as settled, as an open empirical question.

c. Research Question and Working Hypothesis

Rather than assuming a two-stage transformation, the study poses the following central research question: does Turkey's engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa reflect a sequential shift from humanitarian diplomacy to security partnerships, or does it

reflect the simultaneous and mutually reinforcing deployment of humanitarian, economic, and security instruments within a single, adaptive strategy? The study's working hypothesis is that, while humanitarian and developmental diplomacy historically preceded formal security cooperation in most cases, including in Somalia after the 2011 famine, the two dimensions have since converged to the point that, by 2024, they operate as parts of an integrated and increasingly commercially driven repertoire rather than as clearly separable phases. This hypothesis is treated as provisional and is evaluated, rather than assumed, in the empirical sections that follow (Sections 6 and 7).

d. Importance of the Study

This study is significant for examining the transformation of Turkey's foreign policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa over the past two decades, particularly the interplay between traditional diplomatic and economic engagement and an increasingly visible security dimension. Beyond documenting this evolution, the study contributes to a live theoretical debate, opened most recently by Heibach and Taş (2024), about whether "soft power," "hard power," and "securitization" remain the most useful analytical categories for characterizing the foreign policy of an autocratising middle power in Africa, or whether a resource-control framework offers a more accurate account (Donelli, 2021, p. 4; Özkan & Akgün, 2010, p. 528).

e. Methodology of the Study

This study adopts a multi-methodological, qualitative approach. The analytical method is used to deconstruct the components of Turkish policy, diplomatic, economic, and security tools, and to test the sequential-versus-concurrent hypothesis against the empirical record, rather than only to describe Turkey's motivations (Viotti & Kauppi, 2019, p. 32). The historical method traces the development of this policy from the late twentieth century through the phases of openness, expansion, and the strengthening of security partnerships (Donelli, 2021, p. 6). A critical literature review situates the article within both the foundational scholarship of the 2010s and the revisionist scholarship published since 2022. Finally, the study relies on the case-study method, focusing on Somalia as the most extensively documented instance of Turkey's presence on the continent, with the empirical record extended through open-source policy analyses published in 2024–2026 (Atlantic Council; TRENDS Research & Advisory; Jamestown Foundation; Critical Threats Project).

This methodology has identifiable limits, which are revisited in the Evaluation section: the analysis relies on secondary and open-source material rather than field research, elite interviews, or Turkish- and Somali-language primary sources, and it concentrates on a single, unusually well-documented case. These choices allow for analytical depth but constrains the extent to which findings from Somalia can be generalized to Turkey's roughly thirty other African security partners (Atlantic Council, 2024).

FIRST TOPIC:

LITERATURE REVIEW: TURKEY'S AFRICA POLICY IN SCHOLARLY DEBATE

Before developing the theoretical framework used in this article, it is necessary to situate the study within the body of scholarship it engages with, distinguishing what is already well established from what this article seeks to add.

First requirement: Foundational Studies

The scholarly literature on Turkey's engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa is anchored in a small number of foundational studies. Özkan and Akgün (2010) provided one of the earliest systematic accounts of the 1998 "Opening to Africa" policy and its diplomatic expansion under the AKP. Akpinar (2013) offered a critical assessment of Turkey's peacebuilding role in Somalia, cautioning against overstating the transformative effect of humanitarian diplomacy and identifying limits to Ankara's leverage on the ground. Donelli's (2021) monograph, Turkey in Africa, remains the most comprehensive account of the transition from developmental to strategic engagement, framing this transition as a movement toward "smart power". These three works structures much of the subsequent literature, including the argument advanced in the original version of this article.

Second requirement: Recent Scholarship (2022–2026): Contesting the Soft-to-Hard-Power Narrative

A more recent body of scholarship has begun to question the linear, soft-to-hard-power reading that Donelli's framework implies. In a 2024 special issue of the Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies devoted to "Turkey in Africa" (Eyrice Tepeciklioglu, Vreji, & Baser, 2024), Heibach and Taş (2024) argue that the soft-power/hard-power dichotomy is analytically "spurious" when applied to an autocratising state such as Turkey, and propose instead a process-oriented framework centred on the state's attempts to gain control over societal and material power resources — including, in the Somali case, port, airport, and, since 2024, offshore hydrocarbon and fisheries resources. In the same special issue, Cannon and Donelli (2024) revisit Turkey's self-conception as a "centre country" in Africa; Kurç (2024) documents the growth of Turkish arms exports to the continent as a distinct instrument that fits awkwardly into either the humanitarian or the classical security-cooperation category; and Vreji and Blaine (2024), together with A. O. Tepeciklioglu, Eyrice Tepeciklioglu, and Karabiyik (2024), examine the maritime and commercial dimensions of Turkey's African agenda that connect embassy expansion directly to trade outcomes. Separately, Soyaltın-Colella and Demiryol (2023) situate Turkey's drone diplomacy in Africa within a broader argument about how "unusual middle powers" use external security engagement to bolster domestic regime survival, a dimension largely absent from the earlier literature. Siradağ (2022) and Rugutt, Nzomo, and Okoth (2023) revisit the soft-power and developmental-assistance

dimensions specifically in the Horn of Africa, generally continuing to treat humanitarian and security instruments as separable. Taken together, this literature does not dispute the empirical fact of growing Turkish security engagement; rather, it questions whether "securitization" and a "soft-to-hard-power shift" are the most accurate labels for it, as opposed to a more continuous, resource-driven form of engagement (Heibach & Taş, 2024, p. 312).

Third requirement: The Somalia Case in the Literature

Somalia occupies a central place in this literature as the paradigmatic case of Turkish engagement in Africa, from the 2011 famine response through the 2017 opening of Camp TURKSOM to the February 2024 defence and economic cooperation framework agreement. Policy-oriented analyses published after 2024 (Atlantic Council, 2024; TRENDS Research & Advisory, 2024; Africa Defense Forum, 2026; Jamestown Foundation, 2026; Critical Threats Project, 2026) document how this agreement was followed within weeks by a hydrocarbon exploration memorandum, and subsequently by further onshore petroleum concessions and a fisheries arrangement, alongside the continued expansion of Turkish-trained Somali special units and the transfer of drone and strike capabilities. These accounts, produced largely by think tanks and policy institutes rather than peer-reviewed venues, offer valuable and current empirical detail but tend to describe rather than theorize this convergence. This creates space for a contribution that reconnects the empirical record with the theoretical debate opened by Heibach and Taş (2024).

Fourth requirement: Positioning of the Present Study

Building on this literature, the present study updates the empirical record on the Somali case through 2024–2026, a period largely outside the scope of Donelli (2021), Akpinar (2013), and Özkan and Akgün (2010), and explicitly tests the securitization framework against Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde's (1998) original criteria rather than assuming its applicability, treating Heibach and Taş's (2024) resource-control framework as a complementary alternative. It does not claim to settle the sequential-versus-concurrent debate; rather, it aims to reframe the question as open rather than resolved, and to test it against the most current available evidence.

SECOND TOPIC:
THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding Turkey's expanding engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa requires a theoretical framework capable of explaining the evolving nature of power and influence in international relations. This framework combines three complementary, and, as argued below, not always compatible, concepts: soft power, humanitarian diplomacy, and securitization, read alongside the resource-control alternative proposed in recent scholarship.

First requirement: The Concept of Soft Power in International Relations

The concept of soft power is one of the most prominent concepts in international relations literature since the end of the twentieth century, representing a shift in understanding the nature of power in the contemporary international system. Traditionally, power was associated with military and economic tools linked to hard power. In the early 1990s, however, Joseph Nye highlighted the importance of non-coercive instruments of influence, defining soft power as the ability to attract others and influence their behaviour to achieve a state's objectives without resorting to coercion or military force (Nye, 2004, p. 5). Soft power relies on intangible elements such as culture, political values, and legitimate and ethical foreign policies, which lead others to accept the policies adopted by the state (Nye, 2011, p. 20).

The literature identifies three main sources of soft power: culture that attracts other societies; political values, such as democracy and social justice, that enhance a state's credibility; and cooperative foreign policies that build trust with international partners (Nye, 2004, pp. 11–14). In this context, Turkey has used soft power to enhance its presence in Sub-Saharan Africa through institutions such as TİKA, scholarship programmes, and cultural diplomacy, aiming to strengthen its image as a development partner (Donelli, 2021, p. 63; Özkan & Akgün, 2010, p. 534). As Heibach and Taş (2024, pp. 313–315) note, however, this self-characterization has itself become contested since the AKP's authoritarian turn, which challenges one of soft power's core assumptions, that attractiveness is closely tied to liberal-democratic credentials, and invites a more critical reading of how the concept is invoked in Turkey's own foreign-policy discourse.

Second: requirement: Humanitarian Diplomacy as a Tool of International Influence

Humanitarian diplomacy has become a central tool for states seeking to enhance their international presence and build positive relationships with societies and other countries through humanitarian and developmental work, and is considered a form of soft power that exerts influence without coercion or military force (Minear & Smith, 2007, p. 3). It is defined as a set of activities aimed at providing relief assistance, reconstruction, development support, and health and educational initiatives, with the goal of improving living conditions in recipient countries and building long-term political and economic relationships (Minear & Smith, 2007, p. 10).

While humanitarian aid contributes to alleviating suffering, it also serves as a tool for enhancing the political influence of donor states in strategic regions, strengthening bilateral relations and establishing a long-term geopolitical presence (Lancaster, 2007, p. 4). Within Turkey's Africa policy, humanitarian and development diplomacy have played a central role in strengthening its presence in Sub-Saharan Africa through TİKA and the Turkish Red Crescent, particularly in the Horn of Africa (Donelli, 2021, p. 65). This much is not in dispute; the question this article pursues is

how tightly, and for how long, this humanitarian layer remained analytically and temporally distinct from the economic and security layers that followed it.

Third requirement: The Concept of Securitization: Analytical Value and Limits

Securitization is a central analytical tool within the Copenhagen School, reflecting a shift in understanding security threats from a purely military dimension to a broader scope including economic, political, social, and environmental security (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998, p. 21). It is defined as the process of transforming a political or social issue into an existential threat that requires extraordinary measures outside the normal political framework: the issue is not inherently a security threat but becomes one through a political discourse that presents it as a direct threat to the survival of a specified referent object, before a relevant audience whose acceptance of the framing is what makes the securitizing move "successful" (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 23–25).

Applying this concept to Turkey's engagement in Africa requires more conceptual precision than the label is usually given credit for. Measured against Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde's (1998) original criteria, much of what the Turkey–Africa literature, including the earlier version of this article, calls "securitization" more accurately describes the routinization of bilateral defence cooperation: the negotiation of training programmes, base agreements, and maritime-patrol mandates through ordinary diplomatic and legislative channels, rather than through an exceptional speech act addressed to an identifiable audience (Buzan et al., 1998, pp. 23–25). The February 2024 Turkish–Somali defence and economic framework agreement, for example, was concluded and ratified through conventional bilateral and parliamentary procedures in both countries, without a clearly identifiable securitizing move of the kind the Copenhagen School specifies (TRENDS Research & Advisory, 2024).

This is not to say the concept is irrelevant: elements of securitizing discourse arguably are present in the framing of piracy, al-Shabaab, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing as existential threats to Somali sovereignty, a framing that has helped legitimize Turkey's expanded security role and has plausibly met with audience acceptance among relevant domestic constituencies (Donelli, 2021, p. 72). The theoretical claim should therefore be scoped to those specific discursive episodes, rather than applied as a blanket label for any expansion of Turkey's military footprint. Heibach and Taş's (2024) process-oriented, resource-control framework offers a complementary lens that does not require identifying a discrete securitizing act: it explains the expansion of Turkish security engagement as a function of Ankara's cumulative efforts to secure access to Somali ports, airspace, fisheries, and hydrocarbon reserves, a reading that this article's case-study section (Section 6) suggests fits the post-2024 evidence at least as well as, and arguably better than, a strict securitization account. Accordingly, this article uses "securitization" in a bounded sense, reserved for identifiable discursive framings of threat, and relies on the soft-

power and resource-control frameworks to account for the broader institutional and commercial expansion of Turkish security cooperation.

THIRD TOPIC

MODELS OF FOREIGN POLICY OF RISING POWERS IN AFRICA

The study of the foreign policies of rising powers in Africa provides a necessary framework for understanding the dynamics of international influence on the continent, particularly amid competition between traditional and emerging powers. Alongside Western powers, Africa has witnessed, over the past two decades, the growing role of several emerging states such as China, Turkey, and India, employing diverse strategies to strengthen their political, economic, and security presence.

First requirement: China in Africa

China is the largest global economic actor engaged on the African continent, through massive investment in infrastructure, trade, and natural resources. Chinese policy relies on a mix of economic power and developmental diplomacy, focusing on initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (Brautigam, 2009, p. 34). Chinese development-aid and investment-loan tools form part of a strategic economic diplomacy that strengthens China's influence in recipient countries, while researchers note that China generally avoids direct interference in the internal political affairs of African states, presenting itself as a non-interventionist economic partner (Alden & Alves, 2009, p. 8).

Second requirement: Turkey in Africa

In contrast to China, Turkey has adopted a model combining soft-power instruments with a security dimension that, as Section 6 will argue, may have developed alongside rather than strictly after the humanitarian and developmental diplomacy through which Turkey initially became visible in Somalia and Djibouti (Donelli, 2021, pp. 63–74). This model demonstrates how rising powers can employ humanitarian diplomacy to build political and geostrategic influence while, in practice, developing security cooperation in parallel rather than only after threats escalate.

Third requirement: India in Africa

India adopts a cooperative economic, developmental, and cultural strategy in Africa, focusing on trade, investment, and support for education and technical training (Cheru, 2016, p. 122). India employs tools similar to soft power, such as scholarship programmes and academic exchanges; unlike Turkey, however, it generally avoids direct security engagement, preferring economic diplomacy and technical cooperation over military partnership (Large, 2018, p. 45).

Fourth requirement: Comparative Approach

Comparing Turkey, China, and India reveals fundamental differences in instruments and geostrategic pathways in Africa. China relies on broad economic and developmental power with continental reach; India follows a long-term developmental and cultural approach with limited security engagement; Turkey represents a hybrid case combining humanitarian diplomacy with security cooperation, concentrated geographically in the Horn and East Africa. These patterns reflect the diverse strategies rising powers pursue according to their capabilities and interests, with Turkey standing out for the speed and density with which its humanitarian and security instruments have become intertwined in its anchor states (Donelli, 2021, pp. 70–74; Heibach & Taş, 2024, pp. 316–318).

FOURTH TOPIC

ROOTS AND EVOLUTION OF TURKEY'S OPENING TO AFRICA

The evolution of Turkey's engagement with Africa reflects a gradual transformation from limited and predominantly symbolic relations into a multidimensional foreign policy strategy. Before 2000, Africa occupied a marginal position within Turkey's foreign policy priorities, with bilateral relations largely constrained by limited diplomatic, economic, and cultural interaction. The launch of the "Opening to Africa" policy in 1998 initiated a significant shift toward broader engagement, which gained further momentum under the AKP after 2002. Turkey subsequently expanded its diplomatic, economic, humanitarian, and developmental activities across the continent, progressively developing these instruments into broader strategic and security partnerships.

First requirement: Pre-2000 Period: Limited Relations Between Turkey and Africa

The period prior to 2000 was characterized by weak and limited relations between Turkey and Sub-Saharan Africa, as Africa did not occupy a central position in Turkish foreign policy, which was primarily focused on Europe and the Middle East (Özkan & Akgün, 2010, p. 526). Relations were confined to limited bilateral interactions with countries having historical or geographical ties, without a comprehensive strategic vision (Özkan & Akgün, 2010, p. 527). Diplomatically, Turkey relied on multilateral frameworks, particularly the United Nations, to maintain a symbolic presence without translating this into tangible influence (Balcı, 2024, p. 66); economically, trade exchanges remained limited, with an absence of strategic investment (Donelli, 2021, p. 11). Development initiatives were restricted to partial programmes in education and health (Akpinar, 2013, p. 736), while cultural relations remained largely symbolic (Donelli, 2021, p. 12). This phase can be considered preparatory and non-strategic, laying the groundwork for the post-2000 opening policy.

Second requirement: The "Opening to Africa" Policy (1998)

The 1998 "Opening to Africa" policy marked a pivotal turning point, as Ankara transitioned from limited engagement to a comprehensive strategic vision aimed at strengthening its presence on the continent through the integrated use of economic and diplomatic tools (Özkan & Akgün, 2010, p. 528). Economically, the policy focused on expanding trade and investment, with trade volume exceeding $1.2 billion at the beginning of the new millennium, directed toward construction, energy, and services (Donelli, 2021, p. 30); the economic dimension was a means of building long-term strategic partnerships rather than an end in itself (Balcı, 2024, p. 69). Diplomatically, this period saw a notable expansion in Turkish representation, contributing to trust-building and expanding cooperation (Özkan & Akgün, 2010, p. 530; Donelli, 2021, p. 31), forming a foundational stage for later humanitarian diplomacy and security partnerships (Akpinar, 2013, p. 738; Donelli, 2021, pp. 32–33).

Third requirement: The AKP Era: Expanding Turkish Influence in Africa

With the AKP's rise to power in 2002, Turkey's foreign policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa underwent a qualitative transformation, reflected in the expansion of its diplomatic network from 12 to over 40 embassies (Özkan & Akgün, 2010, p. 531), facilitating development and humanitarian programmes and boosting trade and investment (Donelli, 2021, p. 40). High-level presidential visits, to countries such as Somalia, Ethiopia, and Nigeria, deepened bilateral relations and reinforced Turkey's image as a reliable partner (Akpinar, 2013, p. 740; Balcı, 2024, p. 71), supporting humanitarian diplomacy through infrastructure, education, and health projects (Donelli, 2021, p. 42) and paving the way for the development of security partnerships (Akpinar, 2013, p. 742).

Fourth requirement: The Shift Toward Strategic Partnership

After 2008, Turkish policy toward Africa witnessed a qualitative shift toward strategic partnership, reflected in strengthened relations with African institutions and elevated political and security cooperation following Turkey's strategic-partner status with the African Union (mfa.gov.tr, 2026). This transformation provided Ankara with an effective institutional presence, enabling participation in African development and security initiatives (Donelli, 2021, p. 50), while expanding bilateral and multilateral diplomatic channels (Balcı, 2024, p. 75). At the security level, military training, intelligence exchange, and support for maritime security in the Horn of Africa emerged as strategic tools (Akpinar, 2013, p. 744), reflecting Ankara's transition toward what Donelli (2021, p. 52) terms "gradual securitization" — a characterization this article's Section 2.C treats with additional caution.

FIFTH TOPIC:

HUMANITARIAN DIPLOMACY AS A GATEWAY TO TURKISH INFLUENCE IN AFRICA

Humanitarian diplomacy has been a significant instrument of Turkey's expanding influence in Sub-Saharan Africa, linking humanitarian engagement with broader developmental, cultural, educational, and economic objectives. Through institutions such as TİKA and the Turkish Red Crescent, Ankara has combined immediate humanitarian assistance with long-term development cooperation, contributing to Turkey's image as a reliable partner while creating networks of institutional and societal interaction.

First requirement: Humanitarian and Development Aid

TİKA represents one of the core pillars of Turkey's African strategy, designing and implementing development projects across infrastructure, education, health, water, and agriculture (Donelli, 2021, p. 60), including reconstruction programmes in Somalia and the establishment of schools, hospitals, and training centres (Akpinar, 2013, p. 738). The Turkish Red Crescent provides emergency relief during disasters and conflicts and supports health, education, and nutrition programmes (Donelli, 2021, p. 61), enhancing Turkey's image as a committed partner without coercion or direct political interference (Akpinar, 2013, p. 740). Turkey's ability to integrate humanitarian and development aid into its strategic objectives has also helped prepare the ground for a transition toward security cooperation, particularly in the Horn of Africa (Donelli, 2021, pp. 63–64; Özkan & Akgün, 2010, p. 537).

Second requirement: Educational and Cultural Diplomacy

Educational and cultural diplomacy constitutes another key pillar, extending soft-power tools initiated through humanitarian diplomacy. Scholarship programmes for African students, expanded significantly since the mid-2000s (Donelli, 2021, p. 66), train future elites, build long-term cultural and diplomatic ties, and prepare the ground for future political, economic, and security cooperation (Akpinar, 2013, p. 742). The Yunus Emre Institutes complement this dimension by promoting Turkish language and culture (Balcı, 2024, p. 78), reinforcing the long-term sustainability of Turkish influence relative to more temporary economic tools (Donelli, 2021, p. 68).

Third requirement: Economic Diplomacy

Economic diplomacy is a further pillar of Turkey's influence in Sub-Saharan Africa. Bilateral trade expanded from $5.4 billion in 2003 to over $34 billion in 2021 (mfa.gov.tr, 2026), reflecting Africa's growing weight in Turkish foreign policy in sectors such as infrastructure, energy, manufacturing, and financial services (Donelli, 2021, p. 70). Turkey has combined free-trade and investment agreements, commercial centres, and trade fairs with support for local development through TİKA and the Turkish Red Crescent (Akpinar, 2013, p. 743). Studies indicate that this economic diplomacy is not an end in itself but a strategic instrument for political and geostrategic

influence, deepening relations with African elites and creating conditions favourable to security and development partnerships (Donelli, 2021, pp. 71–72).

SIXTH TOPIC

THE SOMALI CASE: HUMANITARIAN ENGAGEMENT AND THE QUESTION OF SEQUENCING

The Horn of Africa, and Somalia in particular, provides the empirical test of this article's central question. The 2011 famine in Somalia marked a critical turning point, giving Ankara an opportunity to intensify its presence through emergency assistance, reconstruction, and development. Beyond addressing immediate humanitarian needs, Turkey progressively combined these efforts with economic, educational, diplomatic, and, from 2017 onward, security cooperation. The question this section examines is whether the trajectory from 2011 to 2026 represents a linear shift from humanitarian to security engagement, or a cumulative and increasingly overlapping process in which the two dimensions had ceased to be clearly separable well before the 2024 agreements.

First requirement: Humanitarian Aid after the 2011 Famine

Through TİKA and the Turkish Red Crescent, Turkey launched initiatives providing emergency relief, food, water, and healthcare, to millions affected in Somalia (Akpinar, 2013, p. 745). These efforts extended to infrastructure reconstruction, schools, and hospitals, as well as agricultural and water development, contributing to improved living conditions for affected populations (Donelli, 2021, p. 74).

Second requirement: Strengthening Political and Economic Relations

Turkey leveraged these humanitarian initiatives to strengthen political ties with Somalia by signing agreements covering trade, investment, and infrastructure, contributing to mutual trust and positioning Ankara as a key partner in reconstruction (Balcı, 2024, p. 82). Somalia also served as a gateway for expanding Turkey's presence in the Horn of Africa (Donelli, 2021, p. 75).

Third requirement: Integration with Other Tools of Turkish Diplomacy

The Somali case illustrates an integration of humanitarian, economic, and educational diplomacy: humanitarian aid provided a foundation for investment, scholarships, and student exchanges, while also paving the way for security cooperation, including military training and anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden (Akpinar, 2013, p. 747). What the next subsection argues is that, from 2017 onward, this was less a sequence of gateways opening one after another than a set of tracks advancing in parallel.

Fourth requirement: From Convergence to Integration: The 2017–2026 Trajectory

The years following the 2011 famine response illustrate how difficult it becomes, empirically, to maintain a strict sequential reading. In 2017, only six years after the initial humanitarian intervention, Turkey opened Camp TURKSOM in Mogadishu, its largest overseas military base, which has since trained several thousand Somali soldiers, by some estimates roughly one-third of Somalia's military personnel, and has helped establish elite units such as Gorgor and Haramcad (Jamestown Foundation, 2026). Rather than following a completed humanitarian phase, this security build-up ran concurrently with continued TİKA and Turkish Red Crescent programming, with port- and airport-management contracts dating to 2014, and with expanding scholarship and cultural exchange.

This concurrence intensified further after 2022. By that year, roughly thirty African states had signed security-cooperation agreements with Turkey, nineteen of which included troop-training provisions (Atlantic Council, 2024) — a scale of institutionalized security engagement that, in several of these states, runs alongside rather than strictly after humanitarian programming. In Somalia specifically, the February 2024 Defence and Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement combined, within a single instrument, a reported ten-year naval-training and capacity-building mandate, provisions for reconstructing the Somali navy, and commitments related to protecting Somalia's exclusive economic zone (TRENDS Research & Advisory, 2024). This was followed within weeks by a March 2024 memorandum on offshore hydrocarbon exploration, granting the Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) exploration rights to roughly 15,000 km² of offshore blocks, later extended in April 2025 to approximately 16,000 km² onshore; by the transfer of Bayraktar TB2 and Akıncı drones and T129 ATAK helicopters and by direct Turkish air support against al-Shabaab (European Interest, 2026; Jamestown Foundation, 2026); and, by December 2025, a fisheries arrangement that some observers describe as amounting to a de facto Turkish position of control over aspects of Somalia's maritime resource sector (Geopolitical Monitor, 2026).

Read cumulatively, this sequence is difficult to characterize as the orderly succession of a humanitarian phase by a security phase. Humanitarian and developmental programming (TİKA reconstruction and health projects), commercial infrastructure management (the Mogadishu port and airport concessions), military training and hardware transfers (Camp TURKSOM, drones, naval reconstruction), and resource-extraction agreements (hydrocarbons, fisheries) instead appear as parallel and mutually reinforcing tracks of a single, opportunistic engagement. This reading is broadly consistent with Heibach and Taş's (2024) resource-control framework and with critical policy accounts describing Turkey as having progressed "from humanitarian responder to the operator of Somalia's core state infrastructure" (Geopolitical Monitor, 2026). It qualifies, without wholly discarding, the sequential narrative advanced in earlier scholarship: humanitarian diplomacy clearly opened the relationship and built

the initial trust on which later agreements rest, but from at least 2017 onward, humanitarian, commercial, and security instruments appear to have advanced together rather than in series, a pattern more consistent with the working hypothesis stated in the Introduction than with a strict two-stage transformation.

SEVENTH TOPIC

THE EXPANSION OF SECURITY AND MILITARY PARTNERSHIPS

This section documents the security and military instruments themselves in greater detail, irrespective of their precise sequencing relative to humanitarian diplomacy, on which Section 6 has already offered a qualified conclusion. As Turkey's presence in Sub-Saharan Africa deepened, security became a further instrument of geopolitical influence, particularly in regions facing crises and security threats, such as the Horn of Africa (Akpinar, 2013, p. 749).

First requirement: Security as a Tool of Geopolitical Influence

Turkey's initial focus on humanitarian, developmental, and educational diplomacy helped build networks with African governments and societies; the trust generated by this engagement was, in several cases, subsequently leveraged to expand military cooperation and intelligence sharing, addressing regional challenges such as terrorism, piracy, and arms trafficking (Donelli, 2021, pp. 78–79). This phase saw an expansion of military cooperation with several African countries through training programmes, provision of military expertise, joint training centres, and logistical and technical support (Balcı, 2024, p. 84). Somalia stands out as the key example, where Turkey established a military training base, modernized military equipment, and provided naval training to combat piracy in the Gulf of Aden (Akpinar, 2013, p. 751).

Second requirement: Military Bases and Defense Cooperation

One of Turkey's most significant achievements is the military training base opened in Mogadishu in 2017, Camp TURKSOM, considered the largest Turkish military base abroad. The base trains Somali armed forces according to modern military doctrines, provides logistical and technical support, and has expanded its training capacity to more than 10,000 soldiers, alongside continued efforts to develop maritime-security capabilities against piracy and to protect vital shipping routes in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea (Jamestown Foundation, 2026). Beyond the base, Turkey has expanded defence cooperation through bilateral agreements covering joint training, intelligence sharing, defence consulting, and joint exercises, and has supplied Bayraktar TB2 and Akıncı drones and T129 ATAK helicopters, with Turkish forces reported to have conducted direct strikes against al-Shabaab (European Interest, 2026).

Third requirement: Defense Agreements

In February 2024, Turkey and Somalia signed a Defence and Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement, reportedly aimed at modernizing the Somali army, enhancing combat capabilities, training forces for a period of up to ten years, supplying equipment, and helping protect Somali territorial waters in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea against piracy and to secure international navigation (TRENDS Research & Advisory, 2024). Much of the detailed substance of the framework agreement itself remains undisclosed (TRENDS Research & Advisory, 2024), which limits the precision with which its provisions can be assessed and is itself worth noting as a transparency constraint on this literature. The agreement built on trust established through more than a decade of humanitarian, educational, and economic diplomacy (Akpinar, 2013, p. 755), though, as Section 6.D argues, by 2024 these dimensions were already operating largely in parallel rather than in strict sequence.

Fourth requirement: Maritime Security and Natural Resources

Maritime security and the protection of natural resources are key pillars of Turkey's strategy in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. Turkey has focused on strengthening the naval capabilities of partner states against piracy, smuggling, and illegal fishing, training naval forces, and enhancing maritime surveillance (Donelli, 2021, p. 88). Since the March 2024 hydrocarbon-exploration memorandum, this has extended into the direct protection of Turkish-held exploration blocks, encompassing both offshore and, since April 2025, onshore concessions (Geopolitical Monitor, 2026), integrating security and resource-extraction efforts in a manner the earlier, more generic strategic literature (Donelli, 2021, pp. 89–90) anticipated only in broad outline.

EIGHTH TOPIC

DRIVERS OF THE TRANSFORMATION IN TURKEY'S AFRICAN POLICY

The transformation of Turkey's African policy cannot be attributed to a single factor but to the interaction of interconnected economic, geopolitical, ideological, diplomatic, and, as recent scholarship suggests, domestic drivers.

First requirement: Economic Drivers

The economic dimension is a primary driver, reflected in the growth of Turkish exports and investment in infrastructure, strengthening economic ties and supporting Ankara's strategic presence (Donelli, 2021, p. 91; Balcı, 2024, p. 86), while also contributing to job creation and Turkey's image as a development partner (Özkan & Akgün, 2010, p. 542). Access to natural resources, including Somali hydrocarbons since 2024, plays a growing role in supporting economic security (Donelli, 2021, p. 92; Geopolitical Monitor, 2026).

Second requirement: Geopolitical Drivers

Ankara recognizes the continent as a field of international competition and as a strategic location connecting the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, expanding its presence through diplomatic-network expansion and both soft- and hard-power tools (Balcı, 2024, p. 87; Donelli, 2021, p. 93). Military cooperation has been strengthened in sensitive areas such as the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden (Akpinar, 2013, p. 758), protecting interests and securing vital routes (Donelli, 2021, p. 94; Özkan & Akgün, 2010, p. 543).

Third requirement: Ideological and Diplomatic Drivers

Turkey has drawn on its Islamic identity and a discourse of partnership with Global South countries to strengthen its political and cultural influence, with shared values and educational and cultural programmes enhancing public acceptance and facilitating economic and security partnerships (Balcı, 2024, p. 89; Donelli, 2021, p. 95). Turkey has also promoted a narrative of cooperation, development, and respect for sovereignty, reinforcing its image as an alternative to traditional powers (Özkan & Akgün, 2010, p. 544; Donelli, 2021, p. 96).

Fourth requirement: Domestic and Regime-Related Drivers

A further, more recent, line of literature emphasizes that Turkey's external security partnerships in Africa cannot be fully explained by demand-side factors in recipient states alone. Soyaltın-Colella and Demiryol (2023) argue that, for "unusual middle powers" facing domestic contestation, high-visibility defence-industrial exports and overseas security deployments, including drone sales and military training missions, serve a regime-boosting function domestically, reinforcing the ruling coalition's nationalist and defence-industrial credentials independently of their strategic payoff in the recipient country. Applied to the Somali case, this suggests that the pace and visibility of Turkey's post-2024 security and resource agreements may be driven in part by domestic political considerations in Turkey itself, a dimension the earlier literature (Akpinar, 2013; Özkan & Akgün, 2010; Donelli, 2021) does not foreground and which this study's single-case, document-based design cannot fully test, but which merits investigation in future, comparative research.

NINTH TOPIC
EVALUATION OF TURKEY'S AFRICAN POLICY

Assessing Turkey's African policy requires a balanced examination of both its achievements and the constraints, empirical, theoretical, and political, that qualify claims about its sustainability.

First requirement: Achievements

Over the past two decades, several developments are consistently identified in the literature as achievements of Turkey's Sub-Saharan Africa policy. First, the expansion of diplomatic presence: the number of Turkish embassies increased from 12 in 2002 to over 40 by the early 2020s, facilitating political, economic, and educational agreements and reinforced by high-level visits (Donelli, 2021, p. 97). Second, the growth of economic cooperation: trade volume increased from $5.4 billion in 2003 to over $34 billion in 2021, alongside expanded direct investment and infrastructure financing (Balcı, 2024, p. 90). Third, the deepening of political and security ties through military training, the Mogadishu base, and the 2024 defence agreements, alongside a Global South partnership narrative that has allowed Turkey to become an accepted partner without provoking open conflict with established powers (Akpinar, 2013, p. 759; Özkan & Akgün, 2010, p. 545). These developments indicate a comprehensive strategy combining economic, political, and security instruments and sustained institutional presence, though, as the following subsections argue,the durability and equity of this presence remain open questions rather than settled conclusions (Donelli, 2021, pp. 97–98).

Second requirement: Challenges

Turkey's policy in Sub-Saharan Africa faces several challenges identified in the earlier literature. First, international competition: traditional and emerging powers, including the United States, France, China, and the United Arab Emirates, compete for resources and markets, the UAE, for instance, reportedly curtailed several of its own Somali security initiatives following Turkey's 2024 agreements (Atlantic Council, 2024), requiring Turkey to adopt flexible policies to balance its interests with those of major powers (Balcı, 2024, p. 91). Second, security challenges: terrorism, local insurgencies, maritime piracy, and smuggling continue to necessitate sustained investment in security partnerships (Akpinar, 2013, p. 760; Donelli, 2021, p. 99). Third, criticism regarding the politicization of humanitarian and development aid, with observers questioning the neutrality and transparency of aid distribution in politically sensitive regions (Özkan & Akgün, 2010, p. 546).

Third requirement: Limitations and Critical Perspectives

Beyond these established challenges, more recent scholarship and policy analysis raise two further concerns that qualify any positive assessment of Turkey's African policy. First, Heibach and Taş (2024) and subsequent policy analyses (Critical Threats Project, 2026; Geopolitical Monitor, 2026) suggest that the scale of Turkish control over Somali port, airport, fisheries, and hydrocarbon assets has created a degree of dependency that may limit Somalia's own bargaining leverage, while preferential treatment for Turkish firms with reported ties to the governing coalition raises transparency questions that go beyond the aid-neutrality concerns identified by Özkan and Akgün (2010). Second, the concentration of Turkey's African security portfolio in a small number of anchor states, Somalia foremost among them, means that

generalizing from this case to "Turkey's Africa policy" as a whole ,as much of the earlier literature, including the first version of this article, tends to do, risks overstating the breadth of a pattern that may be considerably more state-specific than continent-wide (Rugutt, Nzomo, & Okoth, 2023).

These limitations also apply reflexively to the present study. Its reliance on open-source, largely English-language policy analysis, rather than field research or Turkish- and Somali-language primary sources, constrains its ability to verify contested details of the 2024 framework agreement, much of which remains formally undisclosed (TRENDS Research & Advisory, 2024), and to adjudicate causal claims, for instance, about the relative weight of humanitarian trust-building, commercial opportunism, and Turkish domestic politics in driving the pace of post-2024 agreements.

Conclusion:

Based on the above, Turkey's engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa, and with Somalia in particular, offers an instructive, if not conclusively representative, case of how humanitarian, economic, and security instruments can become entangled in the foreign policy of a rising, increasingly assertive middle power. Rather than confirming a clean sequential shift from humanitarian diplomacy to security partnerships, the evidence reviewed here — particularly the overlapping humanitarian, commercial, and military agreements concluded in Somalia between 2017 and 2026 — suggests that these instruments have, for at least the past decade, operated as parallel and mutually reinforcing tracks rather than as discrete, consecutive phases. Framed this way, Turkey's experience aligns more closely with the process-oriented, resource-control account proposed by Heibach and Taş (2024) than with a strict soft-power-to-hard-power narrative, and only partially satisfies the discursive criteria that Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998) attach to securitization in the strict sense.

This reading also has implications for how Turkey's broader presence should be assessed. Rather than describing the Turkish experience as a "unique model" that has "succeeded" in building durable influence — claims that require a stronger evidentiary base than a single, open-source-based case can supply — this article suggests a more cautious formulation: Turkey has built a dense, multidimensional, and evidently effective presence in at least one anchor state, Somalia, whose long-term durability, distributional fairness, and replicability across Turkey's roughly thirty other African security partners remain open empirical questions rather than settled achievements (Atlantic Council, 2024; Rugutt, Nzomo, & Okoth, 2023).

These findings should be read with appropriate caution for reasons already flagged in Section 9.C. The analysis relies on a single, heavily documented case and on secondary and open-source material rather than field research, elite interviews, or Turkish- and Somali-language primary sources; it therefore cannot establish how representative the Somali pattern is of Turkey's approach elsewhere on the continent, nor can it fully adjudicate the causal weight of humanitarian trust-building relative to commercial and domestic political motives. Whether Turkey's engagement ultimately

consolidates into a durable and mutually beneficial partnership, or instead produces the kind of asymmetric dependency that recent critics have begun to highlight, remains an open question that will require sustained comparative research across additional cases, ideally combining Turkish- and local-language primary sources with the kind of longitudinal evidence that only becomes available with time.

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