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Turkish-African Defense Agreements: Developing a Win-Win Partnership

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Abstract

Turkey's ascent as a significant global player has been markedly evident in its strategic engagement with Africa, particularly in the Horn of Africa. As a rising middle power, Turkey has expanded its influence through a comprehensive approach that includes diplomatic, economic, and military dimensions. This paper explores Turkey's growing role in the Horn of Africa, focusing on its defense agreements and strategic partnerships with countries such as Somalia, Ethiopia, and others in the region. Central to this engagement is the 10-year defense agreement with Somalia, aimed at bolstering maritime security and enhancing naval capabilities, as well as Turkey's establishment of its largest overseas military base in Mogadishu. The partnership between Turkey and various African nations presents a strategic win-win scenario, addressing mutual security concerns and fostering regional stability. Turkey's military pacts have not only strengthened defense capabilities across the continent but have also contributed to economic development through increased foreign direct investment and infrastructure projects. However, this partnership faces significant challenges, including criticisms of Turkey's foreign policy motives, potential difficulties in sustaining long-term engagements, and the impact of geopolitical rivalries.

This paper argues that while Turkey's involvement in Africa represents a mutually beneficial relationship that promotes security and economic growth, it must navigate complex geopolitical dynamics and address criticisms to sustain its influence and contributions in the region. The analysis underscores the multifaceted nature of Turkey's strategy and its implications for both regional stability and international relations.

Key Words Turkey, Africa, Pacts, Horn of Africa, Red Sea

Introduction

In recent years, Turkey has emerged as a significant global power, transcending its traditional role as a regional influencer. Its strategic geopolitical positioning, robust economic growth, and proactive foreign policy have enabled Turkey to expand its influence across multiple continents (Rubin & Kirişci, 2001). This ascent is particularly evident in Africa, where Turkey has forged strong political, economic, and security ties. The Horn of Africa, a region marked by geopolitical instability and competition for resources, has become a focal point of Ankara's engagement efforts.

Turkey's strategic engagement in Africa is multifaceted, encompassing diplomatic outreach, economic investments, and humanitarian assistance. The number of Turkish embassies on the continent has significantly increased, reflecting Ankara's commitment to strengthening bilateral relations (Donelli, 2021). Economic initiatives have positioned Turkey as a key investor in several African nations, while its humanitarian efforts have provided much-needed aid in times of crisis, such as the severe drought and famine in Somalia.

Central to this burgeoning relationship are defense agreements between Turkey and various African countries. These agreements extend beyond traditional arms sales to include comprehensive military cooperation, such as training programs, intelligence sharing, and infrastructure development (Cannon, 2021). Notably, Turkey's largest overseas military facility in Mogadishu underscores its commitment to supporting regional stability.

The complex geopolitical dynamics in the Horn of Africa, exemplified by recent tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia, highlight the strategic importance of these defense agreements. Turkey's proactive stance in signing a defense pact with Somalia, aimed at protecting its waters and enhancing its naval capabilities, reflects a broader strategy of addressing mutual security concerns (Abdulle & Gurpinar, 2019).

This paper argues that the Turkish-African partnership, underpinned by these defense agreements, represents a win-win proposition. By addressing shared security challenges and

promoting economic development, this alliance not only strengthens regional stability but also fosters long-term growth and cooperation.

Historical Context

Turkey's Historical Ties with Africa

Turkey's relationship with Africa dates back centuries, rooted in the Ottoman Empire's interactions with the continent. The Ottomans established a presence in North Africa, particularly in regions like Egypt, Libya, and Algeria, where they exerted significant influence from the 16th to the 19th century (Donelli, 2021). These historical ties laid the foundation for contemporary relations, characterized by cultural exchanges and shared historical experiences. The legacy of the Ottoman Empire continues to influence Turkey's diplomatic and economic engagements with African nations.

Evolution of Turkey's Foreign Policy Towards Africa

The evolution of Turkey's foreign policy towards Africa can be traced through several distinct phases:

1. **Cold War Era (1945-1990):** During the Cold War, Turkey's foreign policy was primarily focused on its alliances with Western powers, particularly NATO (Stone, 2018). Africa was not a major focus of Turkish diplomacy, and relations with the continent were limited.
2. **Post-Cold War Period (1990-2000):** With the end of the Cold War, Turkey began to diversify its foreign policy (Stone, 2018). The 1998 "Opening to Africa" policy marked the beginning of a more structured engagement with the continent. This policy aimed to establish stronger economic and diplomatic ties with African nations.
3. **21st Century Strategic Engagement (2000-present):** The 2000s saw a significant shift in Turkey's approach to Africa. Under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey has pursued an assertive and multifaceted foreign policy. Key initiatives include the 2005 declaration of the "Year of Africa," the establishment of new embassies, and the launching of Turkish Airlines flights to numerous African destinations (Donelli, 2021).

These efforts have been complemented by increased economic investments, development aid, and cultural exchanges.

Key Milestones in Turkey-Africa Relations

Several key milestones highlight the growing depth and breadth of Turkey-Africa relations:

1. **2005 "Year of Africa"**: This initiative marked a turning point in Turkey's engagement with Africa, leading to the establishment of numerous embassies and the expansion of diplomatic missions across the continent (Wheeler, 2011).
2. **Turkey-Africa Cooperation Summit (2008)**: The first Turkey-Africa Cooperation Summit, held in Istanbul, brought together leaders from 49 African countries and set the stage for enhanced cooperation in various sectors, including trade, investment, and education (Orakçi, 2022.).
3. **Turkish Airlines Expansion (2010s)**: Turkish Airlines' expansion into Africa, with flights to over 50 destinations, has facilitated greater connectivity and economic exchange between Turkey and African countries (Matila, 2018.).
4. **Humanitarian Aid and Development Assistance (2011-present)**: Turkey's humanitarian aid efforts, particularly in response to crises such as the Somali famine, have strengthened its soft power and built goodwill across the continent (Ali, 2011.). The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) has played a crucial role in implementing development projects in health, education, and infrastructure.
5. **Defense and Security Cooperation (2010s-present)**: The establishment of Turkey's largest overseas military base in Mogadishu and various defense agreements with African nations underscore the strategic importance of military cooperation in Turkey's Africa policy (Cannon, 2021).

These historical and contemporary developments highlight Turkey's evolving and deepening relationship with Africa, driven by a strategic vision that encompasses diplomatic, economic, and security dimensions. This multifaceted engagement positions Turkey as a key player in the continent's ongoing quest for stability and development.

Turkey's Strategic Engagement in the Horn of Africa

Turkey's emergence as a global power has been marked by its proactive and multifaceted foreign policy, which has expanded its influence far beyond its regional borders. A key area of focus in Turkey's foreign policy is Africa, particularly the Horn of Africa, a region of significant geopolitical importance (Dahir, 2021). The Horn of Africa, comprising countries such as Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti, is strategically located at the intersection of major maritime routes connecting the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. This positioning enhances its value in international trade and military logistics, while its proximity to the Arabian Peninsula and the Suez Canal adds to its strategic significance. Despite this, the region is often fraught with instability, making it a focal point for global and regional powers, including Turkey.

Turkey's engagement with the Horn of Africa is characterized by a blend of diplomatic, economic, and security initiatives. Over the past two decades, Turkey has significantly increased its diplomatic footprint in Africa, raising the number of its embassies from 12 in 2005 to 44 in 2024 (Dahir, 2021). This diplomatic expansion has been accompanied by substantial economic investments and humanitarian aid, particularly in crisis-hit areas such as Somalia, where Turkey has been a key player in relief efforts since 2011.

Central to Turkey's strategy in the Horn of Africa are its military agreements with regional nations. These pacts extend beyond traditional arms sales and encompass comprehensive military cooperation, including training programs, joint exercises, intelligence sharing, and the development of security infrastructure. For instance, Turkey's defense agreement with Somalia, is a crucial pact that focuses on maritime security and naval training (Sıradağ, 2024). This agreement underscores Turkey's commitment to enhancing Somalia's defense capabilities, particularly in protecting its extensive coastline from piracy and other maritime threats.

In Djibouti, another strategically located nation, Turkey's military cooperation aims to enhance naval and air capabilities to secure vital maritime routes. Similarly, in Ethiopia, Turkey supports military training, intelligence sharing, and infrastructure development to stabilize the country's internal security situation and bolster its regional influence (Cannon, 2021). Turkey also has

significant military agreements with Kenya and Uganda, emphasizing counter-terrorism cooperation and capacity building. These partnerships are crucial for addressing security challenges posed by extremist groups in the region. Additionally, Turkey maintains strategic military ties with West African nations such as Nigeria and Ghana, focusing on counter-insurgency operations and military modernization, reflecting Turkey's broader security interests across the continent.

A pivotal element of Turkey's military strategy in the Horn of Africa is the establishment of its largest overseas military facility in Mogadishu, Somalia. Inaugurated in 2017, this base serves as a comprehensive training center for Somali forces and a hub for Turkey's military operations in the region. The facility provides extensive military training, logistical support, and serves as a staging ground for humanitarian missions (Siradağ, 2024). This base symbolizes Turkey's long-term commitment to Somalia's security and development, enabling Turkey to project power, protect its interests, and support allied nations in maintaining regional stability

Turkey's strategic engagement in the Horn of Africa thus reflects an approach aimed at securing its strategic interests, enhancing regional stability, and fostering mutually beneficial relationships. By addressing shared security challenges and promoting economic development, Turkey positions itself as a key player in the region's ongoing quest for stability and growth (Wheeler, 2011). This strategic win-win partnership not only strengthens the defense capabilities of African nations but also contributes to their economic and infrastructural development, highlighting the importance of sustained cooperation in the pursuit of regional stability and prosperity.

Case Study: Ethiopia-Somaliland MOU and Its Implications

Background of the Ethiopia-Somaliland MOU

In January 2024, Ethiopia and Somaliland signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that granted Ethiopia access to a 20-kilometer stretch of Somaliland's coastline. This agreement was significant because it marked a rare instance of formal cooperation between Somaliland, a self-

declared independent region of Somalia, and a neighboring country (Abegaz & Habtewold, 2019; BBC, 2024). Historically, Ethiopia and Somaliland have shared a pragmatic relationship, driven by mutual interests in trade, security, and regional stability. The MOU was intended to enhance economic cooperation and provide Ethiopia, a landlocked nation, with critical access to maritime trade routes.

Somalia's Response and Condemnation of the MOU

The MOU between Ethiopia and Somaliland were met with strong condemnation from the Somali federal government. Somalia viewed the agreement as a violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, arguing that Somaliland, despite its de facto independence, is still internationally recognized as part of Somalia. The Somali government denounced the MOU as illegitimate and an affront to its authority over Somaliland (Aljazeera 2024.). This reaction was compounded by historical animosities and territorial disputes dating back to conflicts in 1964 and 1977, further complicating the geopolitical landscape of the Horn of Africa.

The Geopolitical Implications of This Agreement for the Region

The Ethiopia-Somaliland MOU has significant geopolitical implications for the Horn of Africa. Firstly, it underscores the complex and often contentious relationships between the region's states and semi-autonomous entities. The agreement highlights Ethiopia's strategic interests in securing maritime access and its willingness to engage with Somaliland as a separate entity, potentially undermining Somalia's sovereignty claims. This development may embolden other regions within Somalia seeking greater autonomy or independence, thereby exacerbating internal divisions.

Secondly, the MOU could shift the balance of power in the Horn of Africa, with Ethiopia potentially gaining increased influence over maritime trade routes. This could lead to heightened competition with other regional powers, such as Kenya and Djibouti, who also have vested interests in controlling key trade corridors. Additionally, the agreement might provoke a

response from global powers with strategic interests in the region, including Turkey, China, and the United States, further complicating the geopolitical dynamics.

Turkey-Somalia Defense Agreement

Details of the 10-Year Defense Agreement Between Turkey and Somalia

In February 2024, Turkey and Somalia signed a landmark 10-year defense agreement aimed at strengthening Somalia's security infrastructure and enhancing its maritime capabilities. The agreement includes provisions for Turkey to provide comprehensive military training, logistical support, and modern equipment to the Somali armed forces (Mohamed, 2024). One of the key aspects of this agreement is the focus on maritime security, addressing the persistent threats of piracy and illegal fishing in Somali waters. Turkey's commitment to building and maintaining a capable Somali navy is a central component of this defense pact.

Analysis of the Agreement's Provisions for Maritime Security and Naval Training

The maritime security provisions of the Turkey-Somalia defense agreement are designed to protect Somalia's extensive coastline, which is the longest in mainland Africa. The agreement entails the training of Somali naval personnel by Turkish experts, equipping them with the skills necessary to patrol and secure their territorial waters effectively (Cannon, 2024). This includes counter-piracy operations, surveillance, and interdiction of illegal activities. Additionally, Turkey has pledged to assist in the development of naval infrastructure, such as ports and shipyards, which are crucial for maintaining a robust naval presence.

The naval training component of the agreement is particularly significant given Somalia's historical challenges in maintaining a functional navy. By leveraging Turkey's expertise and resources, Somalia aims to rebuild its naval forces and assert greater control over its maritime domain (Cannon, 2024). This not only enhances Somalia's national security but also contributes to regional stability by mitigating threats that can spill over into neighboring waters.

The Strategic Significance of Turkey's Military Presence in Somalia

Turkey's military presence in Somalia, underscored by the establishment of its largest overseas military base in Mogadishu, holds considerable strategic significance. This base, operational since 2017, serves as a central hub for Turkey's military and humanitarian operations in the region. It provides a platform for Turkey to project power and influence, ensuring a sustained presence in the Horn of Africa.

The strategic location of the base allows Turkey to monitor and respond to security challenges in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, critical maritime routes for global trade. Additionally, Turkey's military involvement in Somalia enhances its soft power, positioning it as a key ally and benefactor in the eyes of the Somali government and its people. This deepening military cooperation strengthens bilateral relations and underscores Turkey's commitment to supporting Somalia's sovereignty and stability.

Moreover, Turkey's presence in Somalia can serve as a counterbalance to the influence of other regional and global powers, such as the United Arab Emirates and China, who also have strategic interests in the Horn of Africa. By solidifying its role as a primary security partner for Somalia, Turkey aims to secure its geopolitical interests, contribute to regional stability, and foster a mutually beneficial partnership that promotes long-term growth and development.

Mutual Benefits of the Turkish-African Partnership

Security Benefits

Enhanced Regional Stability

The Turkish-African partnership, particularly through defense agreements, has significantly contributed to regional stability. By providing military training, intelligence sharing, and security infrastructure development, Turkey helps African nations address internal and external threats. This collaborative approach enhances the overall security landscape, reducing the incidence of conflicts and promoting a stable environment conducive to economic growth and development.

Strengthened Defense Capabilities of African Nations

Turkey's defense agreements with African countries have led to substantial improvements in their defense capabilities. Turkish military expertise, advanced training programs, and modern equipment have enabled African armed forces to become more proficient and effective. These enhanced capabilities not only allow these nations to better protect their sovereignty but also contribute to regional security by addressing common threats such as piracy, terrorism, and organized crime.

Economic Development

Increased Foreign Direct Investment from Turkey

The strategic partnership between Turkey and African nations has fostered a significant increase in foreign direct investment (FDI). Turkish businesses are actively investing in various sectors across the continent, including construction, manufacturing, and energy (Tepeciklioglu, 2017). These investments are vital for economic development as they bring in capital, technology, and expertise, which drive industrial growth and economic diversification.

Infrastructure Development and Job Creation

Turkey's involvement in Africa has led to substantial infrastructure development, which is crucial for economic progress. Turkish companies are engaged in building roads, airports, ports, and other critical infrastructure projects. These developments not only improve connectivity and logistics but also create numerous job opportunities for local populations. The construction of new infrastructure facilitates trade, boosts local economies, and improves the quality of life for many Africans.

Regional Stability

Contribution to Peacekeeping and Conflict Resolution

Turkey's active role in peacekeeping and conflict resolution initiatives has had a positive impact on regional stability. Through its diplomatic efforts and participation in international peacekeeping missions, Turkey contributes to resolving conflicts and fostering peace in volatile regions. These efforts are complemented by Turkey's support for local peacebuilding initiatives, which aim to address the root causes of conflicts and promote sustainable peace.

Support for Rebuilding Public Institutions and Governance Structures

Turkey's partnership with African nations extends beyond security and economic development to include support for rebuilding public institutions and governance structures. By providing technical assistance, capacity building, and training for public officials, Turkey helps strengthen governance and institutional resilience in partner countries. This support is crucial for creating effective and transparent institutions that can deliver essential services to citizens and uphold the rule of law.

Challenges and Criticisms

Criticisms of Turkey's Foreign Policy Motives in Africa

Turkey's expanding influence in Africa has not been without criticism. Some critics argue that Turkey's foreign policy motives in the continent are primarily driven by strategic interests rather than genuine concern for regional development. Skeptics claim that Turkey's military agreements and investments are aimed at projecting power and securing resources rather than fostering authentic partnerships (Sıradağ, 2024). This perspective suggests that Turkey's engagement might be seen as a form of neocolonialism, where the focus is on leveraging Africa's strategic importance and resources for Turkey's benefit rather than contributing to sustainable development.

Additionally, there are concerns that Turkey's foreign policy could be influenced by domestic political considerations. For instance, Turkish leaders may use the African engagement to bolster their international standing and consolidate support within their own country. This could lead to an imbalanced approach where the primary goal becomes showcasing Turkey's global influence rather than addressing the pressing needs of African partner countries.

Potential Challenges in Sustaining the Turkish-African Partnership

Maintaining the Turkish-African partnership presents several challenges. One significant challenge is the fluctuating political and economic stability within African nations. Political instability, economic downturns, or changes in leadership could impact the continuity and effectiveness of agreements between Turkey and its African partners (Eyrice Tepeciklioğlu et al., 2024). For instance, if a partner country undergoes a change in government, new leadership might reassess or renegotiate existing agreements, potentially disrupting Turkey's strategic plans.

Another challenge is the logistical and operational complexities of managing and coordinating extensive projects across diverse and often challenging environments. Infrastructure development, military training, and humanitarian aid require substantial resources and careful planning (APRI, 2023). Ensuring that these initiatives are executed effectively and deliver tangible benefits can be difficult, especially in regions affected by conflict or logistical constraints.

Furthermore, there is the risk of dependency. As African nations increasingly rely on Turkey for military, economic, and developmental support, there could be concerns about the sustainability of such dependency and the implications for sovereignty (APRI, 2023). Balancing the support provided with the need for local capacity building is crucial to avoid fostering dependency.

Geopolitical Rivalries and Their Impact on Turkey's Role in Africa

Turkey's growing influence in Africa is occurring against a backdrop of intense geopolitical rivalries. Several global and regional powers, including China, the United States, the European Union, and regional actors such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, are also competing

for influence on the continent. These rivalries can impact Turkey's role and strategies in Africa in several ways:

Competition for Resources: As Turkey competes with other powers for access to Africa's resources, there may be friction over trade agreements, investment opportunities, and strategic partnerships. This competition can lead to diplomatic and economic tensions, affecting Turkey's ability to secure favorable terms or maintain existing relationships.

Strategic Alliances: Rival powers may seek to counterbalance Turkey's influence by forming their own strategic alliances with African nations. This could lead to a geopolitical tug-of-war, where African countries might be pressured to choose sides or navigate competing interests.

Diplomatic Challenges: Geopolitical rivalries can complicate diplomatic efforts and negotiations. For example, Turkey's growing presence might be viewed unfavorably by other powers, leading to diplomatic challenges or sanctions that could hinder Turkey's activities in the region.

Security Dynamics: The presence of multiple external actors can influence regional security dynamics. Competing interests and interventions by various powers could exacerbate conflicts or create power imbalances, impacting Turkey's ability to achieve its security and development goals in Africa.

Conclusion

Turkey's strategic pivot towards Africa has yielded a multifaceted partnership marked by economic cooperation, humanitarian aid, and security collaboration. Defense agreements have emerged as a cornerstone of this relationship, with Ankara forging robust ties with numerous African nations. The Horn of Africa, a region grappling with instability and resource competition, has been a focal point of Turkey's strategic engagement. The case of Somalia, particularly in light of the Ethiopia-Somaliland dispute, highlights the complex geopolitical dynamics at play and the critical role Turkey plays in supporting Somalia's sovereignty and security.

This analysis underscores the notion that Turkey's defense agreements with African nations constitute a win-win partnership. These agreements not only address shared security challenges

but also contribute to economic development, capacity building, and regional stability. By investing in Africa's security infrastructure, Turkey is simultaneously enhancing its global stature and expanding its economic opportunities.

Looking ahead, the prospects for Turkish-African cooperation are promising. Continued collaboration in areas such as counterterrorism, maritime security, and infrastructure development can further deepen the partnership. As Africa's economic potential continues to grow, Turkey is well-positioned to capitalize on these opportunities. However, challenges such as competition from other global powers, internal political dynamics within African countries, and the evolving security landscape will require careful attention and strategic adaptation.

By fostering a mutually beneficial relationship grounded in shared interests and values, Turkey and its African partners can build a resilient and prosperous future together.

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