

Tanriverdi Yaşar, Nebahat

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Unpacking Turkey's security footprint in Africa: Trends and implications for the EU

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SWP Comment

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Unpacking Turkey's Security Footprint in Africa

Trends and Implications for the EU

Nebahat Tanrıverdi Yaşar

African states are aspiring to strengthen their defence capabilities against the backdrop of ongoing instability in the continent. Turkey has lately added security and defence cooperation to its existing soft power instruments and laid the foundations for long-term strategic cooperation with African countries. Increasing drone sales are an important part of this cooperation, but they are not its only component. A mutually reinforcing policy design of arms exports, military training, and defence diplomacy allows the Turkish administration to build long-term and institutional bonds with African countries. Today, Turkey is one among many security providers that African states can choose from. Also, the European Union (EU), in its February summit with the African Union, committed to strengthening its role in addressing shared peace and security challenges in the continent. To achieve this goal, the EU and its member states should revisit potential cooperation areas with partners that are active in the continent and consider the benefits of potential cooperation with Ankara.

In recent years, Turkish arms sales to African countries have attracted widespread attention. Despite Turkey not having a long history of exporting its domestically made weaponry, sales to Africa are skyrocketing and have made Turkey a rising arms supplier in the continent.

Up until recently, Turkey's broadening involvement across much of Africa had a lower profile than its engagement in individual countries, such as its military intervention in Libya and its large-scale investments in Somalia. Today, Turkey is increasing its security outreach in the continent. In addition to several high-level

official visits paid by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to West and North African countries in recent years, Turkey has also leveraged participation in the African states' counterterrorism initiatives and increased its humanitarian aid, for example to Nigeria, Mauritania, and Niger. Additionally, Ankara has signed new arms deals with North African countries such as Tunisia and Morocco.

Turkish foreign policy in Africa combines security and economy, in a way reinforcing each other in its political design. Cooperation with Nigeria on illicit arms flows, financial aid to Mauritania to combat terrorism, a military cooperation agreement

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with Niger, and the recent drone deals with Morocco and Tunisia all fit into the overall pattern of Ankara's policy design. This signifies not only the transformation of Turkey's foreign policy towards Africa by adding another layer to its existing toolset, but also long-term strategic cooperation with states in the continent.

Security Component: Strategies and Patterns

Turkey's increasing domestic material capacities and its search for new security partners has intersected with African countries' pursuit of diversification in their security policies. Many African states are keen to take advantage of Turkey's experience in counterinsurgency, the modernisation of its security sectors, and the developments in its defence industry. Tellingly, the number of African embassies in Ankara rose from 10 in 2008 to 37 in 2021, and many of the African ambassadors appointed in Turkey are active or retired generals. Turkey's efforts in general show four patterns in terms of strategies that Ankara has adopted.

The most significant and striking among these efforts is the increase in Turkey's arms exports to African states. While Africa provides a market for Turkish-made weaponry such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), armoured vehicles, electro-optical sensor systems, surveillance systems, mine clearance vehicles, and rifles, Turkish defence companies offer competitive prices for their military hardware with a no-strings-attached policy. According to figures from the Turkish Exporters Assembly, Turkey's defence and aerospace exports to Africa reached \$460.6 million in 2021, compared to \$82.981 million the previous year. This more than five-fold increase in the course of one year shows the growing interest of African countries and the high potential of this market.

Secondly, there has also been an increase in Turkey's systematic efforts to sign different types of security-related cooperation agreements with African countries. For

example, Turkey has security personnel training agreements with Algeria, Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Libya, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, and Tunisia. Some of these agreements have also permitted Turkey to open training facilities, such as those in Libya and Somalia. Training programmes target different units of the security apparatus, including the military, gendarmerie, coast guards, and police forces.

Yet, Turkey's security agreements extend beyond training programmes. They also include an increasing number of security cooperation agreements, which are more comprehensive in scope, such as military framework agreements that cover training, technical, and scientific cooperation. In total, 30 African states have signed different types of security-related agreements with Turkey. The largest number of agreements, 21 in total, were ratified in 2017 (with Benin, Chad, DR Congo, Djibouti (1-2), Gabon, Gambia (1-2), Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast (1-2), Kenya, Libya, Mali (1-2), Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, Tanzania, and Uganda), followed by 16 agreements in 2018 (The Republic of Congo, Djibouti (1-2), Ghana, Madagascar, Niger (1-2), Nigeria, Rwanda (1-2-3), Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania (1-2), Tunisia). These agreements provide a framework for military and security cooperation at different levels among different stakeholders. The main Turkish state institutions involved in these agreements are the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of the Interior (which includes the police, gendarmerie, and the coast guard forces), and the Presidency of Defence Industries (SSB). Such a multiplicity of actors creates numerous channels for dialogue with their counterparts in Africa.

As a third layer, Turkey also engages in defence diplomacy with African states. In 2014, the Barbaros Turkish Naval Task Group, which is comprised of two frigates, a corvette, and a replenishment ship, travelled throughout the African continent, visiting 25 ports in 24 African countries; 19

of these were first-time visits. This mission both participated in joint training exercises in South Africa and supported anti-piracy activities in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, and adjacent regions. It also manifests the extent to which Turkey has interconnected different strategies such as defence diplomacy, the promotion of its defence industry, and military training. The 2014 mission was accompanied by the Undersecretariat for Defence Industries (SSM) and defence industry companies alongside the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) as well as other institutions. Introduced during the port visits were the TCG HEYBELİADA corvette, within the scope of the Patrol and Anti-submarine Warfare Ship (MİLGEM) Project, built by the Turkish Naval Forces; the Ship Integrated Combat Management System (GENESIS), developed by the Naval Forces Command; and the SSM. Later, to ensure the continuity of relations, the Multinational Maritime Security Centre of Excellence, based in Aksaz, provided capacity-building training to African states, alongside other distant countries, on maritime security.

Lastly, Turkey has also increased its participation in international peacekeeping missions in Africa. In the post–Cold War era, Turkey was eager to participate in international military operations and, as a result of its intense efforts, took over the command of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNOSOM) in 1993–94. This was the only international military mission in Africa in which Turkey participated during the 1990s. At that time, Turkey’s proactive participation in international crisis management operations was a strategy to guarantee its role in Western security structures, mainly concentrating on the Balkans. In the 2000s, Turkey started to contribute more to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the UN, and other joint security governance efforts in Africa. Since then, Turkey has contributed to similar multilateral efforts in Mali, the Central African Republic (CAR), Congo, Libya, Sudan, South Sudan, and Somalia.

The Drivers behind Ankara’s Security Engagement in Africa

The push factor: Developments in the Turkish defence industry

The increasing Turkish presence in the African arms market indeed reflects the progress of the Turkish defence industry in terms of developing and manufacturing relatively advanced military platforms and technologies. Since the 1970s, different governments – despite their differences in domestic and foreign policies – have made continuous efforts, with ups and downs, to develop the domestic defence industry with the aim of securing the arms supply for the Turkish Armed Forces. Accordingly, the pioneers of Turkey’s most rooted domestic defence companies were established in the 1970s: Turkish Aerospace (TAI) in 1973 and Military Electronic Industries (ASELSAN) in 1975. Towards the end of the 1980s, several private defence companies were created in cooperation with previously established companies and international companies. For example, Tusaş Engine Industries (TEI), an aerospace engine manufacturer, was founded in 1985 as a joint venture between TAI, General Electric, the Turkish Armed Forces Foundation, and the Turkish Aeronautical Association. Similarly, one of the leading Turkish defence manufacturers, FNSS Defence Systems, was founded in 1988 as a joint venture between the American firm FMC Corporation (later United Defense LP and now BAE Systems Land Systems) and Nurol Holding. Otokar, a Koç Group company, began manufacturing tactical wheeled vehicles under the licence of Land Rover Defender in 1987, which then led to the development of Otokar-made Akrep and Cobra armoured vehicles in the early 1990s.

Nevertheless, the most striking leap in the Turkish defence industry took place as a result of the economic boom in the mid-2000s. The boom enabled an increase in the resources allocated to defence projects and led to numerous development projects for military hardware. For example, Katmerciler,

another leading company exporting military hardware, began to develop and manufacture defence equipment in 2010. Consequently, the number of main and subcontractor domestic companies, their suppliers, and personnel employed in the sector scaled up. By 2020, an increasing number of small and medium-sized enterprises have entered the defence industry as subcontractors. In 2002, there were 56 defence industry companies, a number that increased to approximately 1,500 in 2020. Supportive government policies resulted in providing an impetus for self-reliance in defence manufacturing and developing a robust ecosystem in Turkey.

Since the mid-2010s, Turkish defence companies have set their eyes on the African market. Before, defence exports were in general limited to small arms and ammunition. Even though Turkish companies have in the last decade managed to export their goods such as armoured vehicles to African markets, it is only in recent years that they have managed to gain a more stable market share with relatively larger projects.

This sales success has been enabled by the changes introduced by the SSB towards strengthening the sustainability of the sector. This is marked as one of the goals of the SSB's Strategic Plan for the period between 2019 and 2023. To this aim, it has carried out intensive activities to support Turkish defence companies to increase their exports to regional markets. As part of this goal, the SSB has increased the number of defence industry consultancy/attaché staff; organised the "national participation" of defence companies at international fairs every year; held defence industry cooperation meetings regularly with the states with which Turkey has a Defence Industry Cooperation Agreement; and last but not least, has also signed Defence Industry Cooperation Agreements with new countries and opened offices around the world.

Although the SSB's Strategic Plan did not specify any geographical market, it seems that significant improvements have been made with African countries in terms of the targets set by the SSB to increase exports.

So far, Turkey has signed Defence Industry Cooperation (SSI) agreements with more than 25 African countries, including Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Congo, Mali, and Nigeria, which offer military technology transfer, cooperation, and joint production. In a similar vein, as of 2022, there are Turkish military attachés in 19 African countries, including Nigeria, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali, Algeria, Djibouti, Senegal, Tanzania, Sudan, Egypt, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, Somalia, Kenya, South Africa, Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya. This year the SSB also announced that it is organising national participation in eight military and defence exhibitions around the world, including the Africa Aerospace and Defence (AAD) expo in South Africa.

Undoubtedly, Turkey's policy to increase its export volume in a multifaceted way has been successful in recent years. On the other hand, this multi-layered and multi-actor policy is not limited to its desire to ensure the sustainability of the defence industry. Each component of the policy serves as a means for building strategic outreach towards positioning Turkey as a security provider for African countries. For example, Turkey has been training dozens of Kenyan police officers to support Kenya's counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics efforts since 2020. In 2021, the Kenya Defence Forces announced it would order 118 mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles (MRAPs) from Katmerciler, beating out firms from South Africa and the United States (US). Another example is Tunisia. Turkey has put considerable effort into securing a role in the modernisation of the Tunisian army and security sector by seeking to deepen defence industry ties and step up its military equipment exports. Tunisian security forces have operated BMC-made Kirpi, Nurol Makina-made Ejder Yalçın, and Otokar-made Cobra armoured vehicles and have become Turkey's largest buyer of armoured vehicles in the Maghreb. Also, Tunisia is the first country where TAI exported — for the first time — its ANKA medium-altitude long-endurance UAVs, which became operational at the beginning of 2022. The two countries

also conducted a joint military exercise in 2021 for the first time.

The pull factor: Diversification of security-providers in Africa

The developments in Turkey's defence industry are, however, not the only drivers behind Turkey's increasing security footprint in Africa. There is also an important pull factor. Turkey's approach to promoting further cooperation in diverse security-related areas as a deliberate strategy for long-term and stable relations with African countries overlaps with a growing tendency among African states to diversify their partners for military training programmes. While the US and the EU have been providing support to forces conducting counter-terrorism and counterinsurgency exercises, countries such as China, Russia, and India, which strategically aim to increase their leverage in the continent, are offering similar military training programmes to African countries.

Today, many African states have close security relationships with non-Western powers. More than 30 African states have signed military cooperation and arms deals with Russia. China and several African countries are also engaging in security cooperation activities such as military and police trainings and intelligence sharing. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), by the end of the 2017–2021 period, Russia had become the largest supplier of arms to Africa, followed by the US, China, and France. African states such as Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Mali have diversified the number of military equipment suppliers they buy from and have added countries such as Russia, China, Turkey, Ukraine, Pakistan, Brazil, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) since 2017.

Many African countries, especially in the Sub-Sahara, are taking initiatives to better train and equip their security forces in order to deal more effectively with the security problems they have been facing since the last decade. Especially the crisis in the

Sahel shows that the region's states are suffering from underperforming security forces and lack certain military capabilities for tackling security risks such as terrorism and insurgencies. According to SIPRI, states in Africa have allocated more funds to military equipment since 2012, but worsening economic conditions have pushed them to rearrange their spending periodically. Within this context, they are turning to more suitable options in terms of price–performance evaluation, which is the most advantageous feature of the Turkish-made weapons.

Diverging Paths in Africa between Turkey and the EU

Even though Africa is a region where both Turkey and the EU are increasingly striving to develop effective policies, mechanisms, and relations, they have minimal interaction with each other. Perhaps more importantly, they follow diverging – in some cases even conflicting – paths when establishing relations concerning security in African countries. This has various reasons.

Firstly, the stalemate in the membership process negatively affects foreign policy and security cooperation. When there was a chance for Turkey to become an EU member state, both sides were more eager to cooperate in different areas to boost the accession process. Ankara used Turkey's EU candidacy as a foreign policy resource while engaging with Middle Eastern and African countries. At the same time, in order to do that, it aligned its foreign policies with the EU to further accelerate the accession process.

For instance, Turkey was among the contributors to two missions of the EU in Congo – EUFOR RD Congo and EUPOL Kinshasa – between 2006 and 2007. Mehmet Vecdi Gönül, the Minister of Defence at the time, defined this cooperation in his speech at the Turkish Assembly in 2006 as a positive contribution to the EU's collective security efforts, which thus would help Turkey's membership bid.

In addition, Turkey's level of alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Secu-

rity Policy (CFSP) declarations was consistently high throughout this period, showing Turkey's political will to harmonise its foreign policy with that of the EU.

The EU, on the other hand, as reflected in European Commission progress reports, appreciated Turkey's increasing role as a stabilising power in neighbouring regions and its contribution to collective crisis management efforts. The high degree of convergence from the previous era was apparent in Turkey's foreign policy towards Africa. Turkey's policy back then generally pivoted on soft power and was in line with the EU's foreign policy approach.

For example, when the EU decided to implement the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in 1995 while aiming to create a free trade zone between Mediterranean countries of the Union and five North African countries (Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt), Turkey also sped up its economic engagement with these countries. In the first half of the 2000s, the EU's Neighbourhood Policy was as influential as Turkey's long-standing political initiatives in the free trade agreements signed with Tunisia and Morocco in 2004 and which entered into force in 2005 and 2006, respectively.

As the accession process began to stall, the security and foreign policy harmony of Turkey and the EU began to abate. As of 2010, Turkey's degree of alignment with the EU's CFSP priorities and actions began to decline. The number of confrontational policies in Africa have increased, as seen, for example, in Libya. Today, out of 18 missions and operations currently deployed under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) across the world, 11 are being conducted in Africa, and Turkey has contributed to none of these missions.

As the accession process entered a stalemate, the disagreements between Turkey and the EU over the framework for security cooperation resurfaced. Cooperation on security and peace is in general ad hoc. While Turkey has been contributing to the EU's CSDP missions on the basis of the framework participation agreement that it signed with the EU in 2006, it is also

demanding to participate in the decision-making procedures of the CSDP. The EU is, however, determined to restrict the decision-making process exclusively to the member states.

One outcome of this is that Turkey and the EU are carrying out their security engagements with African countries without cooperating or consulting with one another. Somalia is a good example of this lack of engagement. Both Turkey and the EU have been delivering tactical training support to the Somali National Army without any effective coordination between them. Turkey provides more comprehensive training packages with direct links to effective operational units in the field as well as military equipment options as compared to the EU. This also undermines the EU's overall impact.

In addition to the changing nature of EU-Turkey relations and, as a result, the resurfacing disagreements between the two, Turkey and the EU have different perceptions of – and reactions to – the emerging environment of complex multipolarity in the continent. While the US is downgrading its posture in the region, African states are increasingly partnering with regional states such as the Gulf States and Turkey as well as global powers, including Russia and China, among others. These new actors provide options and viable alternatives to Brussels and other European capitals. In the eyes of African decision-makers, this geopolitical transformation provides more space for negotiations and manoeuvring, and relatedly, an opportunity to exercise more agency and the increased possibility of asserting their own interests and priorities.

For Turkey, the emerging multipolarity in Africa is an opportunity to develop “strategic and long-term” relations based on “mutual interest, trust, and partnership” with African countries by positioning itself as a security partner.

In contrast, for the EU and its members, this new dynamic presents challenges. For one, the changing reality on the ground is perceived to further contribute towards destabilisation in Africa, and consequently,

to aggravate insecurity at the EU's borders and undermine the EU's ability to formulate and implement common action as a response to crises and conflicts. Turkey's increasing involvement in the multipolar competitions in Africa — especially those with the UAE in several military conflicts, such as in Libya and Somalia — strengthen this perception. Moreover, the laissez faire approach of China, Russia, and Turkey to African states contradicts the EU's heavy emphasis on conditionality.

Last, but not least, the conflicting interests of the member states vis-à-vis Turkey in Africa further accentuate the challenges for the EU. France, for example, increasingly perceives Turkey as a geopolitical rival in Africa and a destabilising actor that is spoiling France's economic and geopolitical interests, especially in West and North Africa.

Recommendations

Nevertheless, the EU's and Turkey's Africa policies in the continent are not necessarily irreconcilable. Both Turkey and the EU are eager to develop and deepen their relations with states in Africa and face comparable challenges, despite them perceiving the transformations in the continent differently.

Firstly, they are both being challenged by rivals offering competitive solutions to African counterparts' security and economic quests. Secondly, the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area indicate that African states aim to increase their ability to act collectively in order to manage their international partnerships. The recent summits between African states and China, Turkey, and the EU show that security will play an important role in future relations. Furthermore, an undoing of the new multipolar dynamics in Africa seems to be unlikely. Even Russia's invasion of Ukraine has not manifested in an "epochal turn" in Africa, as in the rest of the Global South.

Against this backdrop, the EU and Germany should factor these dynamics into

their approaches when engaging with Africa. These common challenges also require rethinking frameworks and partners, including Turkey, which could help the EU and Germany to strengthen its partnership with African states on security issues.

If both Turkey and the EU can overcome their disagreements and agree upon co-operation and coordination as a matter of common strategic interest, there will be a greater possibility of producing policies that better meet the security expectations of African countries. Such a direction would also be in line with the EU and the member states' commitment to implementing the new strategy on multilateralism and building new alliances with third countries based on this strategy.

The EU should address the divergence with Turkey regarding Africa, especially on security and defence issues, with a more structured foreign policy dialogue. In practice, the continuation of this existing divergence means that Turkey will continue to pursue its geopolitical agenda on its terms. In Africa, this direction will translate into a wider discrepancy between active forms of security engagement by Turkey and the EU with African states on the ground.

The challenge here is not only to overcome the EU's reluctance to collaborate with Turkey, but also to establish a multilateral framework with partners in a much more strategic way in Africa. This does not mean, however, advocating an ad hoc scenario of transactional, interest-based co-operation that differs from case to case. In such a scenario, cooperation out of necessity in some theatres without a strategic compass will keep the relationship away from the brink in the short term, but it cannot prevent Turkey-EU relations from moving in a more conflictual direction.

Hence, the EU should consider a formal partnership with Turkey under the CSDP as a non-EU NATO member. This can aid the EU in developing the defence capabilities and effectiveness of CSDP missions in Africa, as well as in converging the defence and foreign policies of the EU and Turkey in Africa.

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SWP

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3 – 4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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