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Part I of II: Türkiye's threefold approach to increased influence in West Africa: A double-edged sword for the EU?

Background

In the recently released “[White Paper for European Defence - Readiness 2030](#)”¹ by the European Union (EU), it is articulated that, besides building the EU's defence capacities, strengthening partnerships with like-minded countries in strategically important regions is also one of the cornerstones of future European security. Specifically, the white paper states that the EU should enhance partnerships in a mutually-beneficial way, to address a wide range of security challenges, among others, the increasing [security dilemma](#) in the Sahel, in which Türkiye is mentioned specifically as a key partner. Türkiye is a well-known actor in Africa, especially in Northern Africa and the Horn of Africa. In recent years, Türkiye has turned its attention to West Africa and the Sahel with great success. But what does this mean for European security, and can Türkiye be a trusted ally amidst increasing hybrid security threats from West Africa or will it show itself as a double-edged sword?

¹ European Commission. (2025). *White paper for European defence – Readiness 2030*.
https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6d5db69-e0ab-4bec-9dc0-3867b4373019_en

Türkiye shows greater involvement in West Africa in countries such as Guinea, Niger, Mali, Togo, Nigeria and Chad. From 12 embassies in 1998 to [44](#) today, Türkiye's African footprint has increased enormously. Similarly, African embassies in Ankara have increased from 10 in 2008 to 38 [today](#). President Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (JDP) have executed a threefold narrative to increase regional influence through cultural diplomacy, infrastructure, and military cooperation, showcasing the country's potent image vis-à-vis former colonial powers such as France. Türkiye's usage of local contract workers, along with the championing of the Muslim identity, employs its cultural soft power capacities against other countries such as China. Meanwhile, the reliability in providing security guarantees in the form of vital military components i.e., UAV's and PMC's, showcase Türkiye's reliability compared to Russia which have had difficulties since the war in Ukraine escalated in 2022, best exemplified by the [recently](#) worsened security situation in Mali and Burkina Faso.

The first of the subsequent two briefs on Türkiye in West Africa covers three sectors (i) Security Cooperation, (ii) Cultural Diplomacy, and (iii) Economic Diplomacy from which Türkiye has increased its influence in the region. The second brief addresses the relationship between Türkiye and the EU in West Africa by examining possible future avenues of cooperation.

Security Cooperation

As France has somewhat departed, Türkiye has slowly started to position itself as a viable option to close the security gap left behind in West Africa. Türkiye's military engagement in the region commenced in 2018 through its [€4 million](#) commitment to bolster the G5-Sahel² coalition. Military hardware – either armed or surveillance – have been highly appreciated in the Sahel and has since constituted the foundational elements of the security partnership between Türkiye and its Sahelian partners. In 2022, the Alliance of the Sahel States (AES) nations, namely Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, each received consignments of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones while littoral West African countries such as [Nigeria and Togo](#) also benefit from the TB2 in its counter-terrorism efforts. The TB2 drone is well-known to have played a pivotal role in Mali's 2024 reclamation of Kidal, a stronghold of insurgent forces located deep in the Sahara. Subsequently, Turkish drones gained a comparative advantage vis-à-vis US and Israeli drones due to its reduced manufacturing cost. Additionally, the regulatory policies pertaining to arms exports in Turkey exhibit a lower level of strictness when contrasted with those commonly found in the US and the EU.

² Consisted of Mauretania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad

Beside military hardware, the use of PMCs (Private Military Contractors) has also increased Turkish influence. The SADAT International Defense Consultancy, a Turkish private military company akin to the Russian Wagner Group/African Corps, has been growing in size and influence. Apart from acting as a key PMC for Ankara, it acts as ideological political movement powered by [Islamic beliefs](#) similar to those of Iraq's PMUs³ or Iran's IRGC⁴ thus playing a vital role in Türkiye's championing of the Muslim identity. SADAT argues that PMC's like Constellis/Bancroft (US), CorpGuard (FR), and Russian Core/Wagner (RUS) act from a pure profitable standpoint that serve an [agenda](#) plagued by a crusader mentality and neocolonialism.

SADAT's operationality reach is illustrated by them being spotted within the last year in [Niger](#), [Burkina Faso](#) and [Nigeria](#), [safeguarding](#) mines, oil facilities and military bases. In [Mali](#), SADAT seemingly train and work alongside Malian junta leader Col. Goïta's elite unit in a bid to heighten security and prevent a potential coups d'état. This comes after the Wagner group has been plagued with failures including preventing terrorist groups to gain control over large portions of the mid and northern part of the country which has paved the way for the fragmentation of the Malian state and the relationship between the Malian public and Junta.

During the early months of 2024, transitional military juntas from the AES nations also journeyed to Ankara, thereby indicating the durability of diplomatic relations despite the occurrence of governance issues, showcasing the political flexibility of Türkiye. It could suggest that the Sahelian Junta leaders are starting overlook Russian PMCs for military assistance in favour of SADAT. In Chad, the Chadian government [reportedly](#) struck a deal in which Ankara took control of the Abeche military base after [Paris left](#) it in February 2025. It is yet to be confirmed, but if true, it would be Türkiye's first base in the Sahel, marking a clear shift from military hardware-based influence to structured defense partnerships with security guarantees and an increased military presence – similar to those in Somalia.

Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy is another vital component in the expanding influence of Türkiye. It has augmented its cultural diplomacy through the [Yunus Emre Institutes](#), [Maarif Foundation](#), and [Turkish Scholarship System \(TBSS\)](#), to promote the Turkish language and cultural heritage. The TBSS is dedicated to fostering enduring relationships by providing scholarships to the most gifted students from Africa, irrespective of their

³ Popular Mobilization Unit

⁴ The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

socioeconomic status. More than 60,000 African scholars have been awarded scholarships to pursue their studies in Türkiye. Thus, Türkiye is following the same path as many other actors in Africa such as China, Russia, the US and the EU.

However, what sets Türkiye's diplomacy apart from that of competitors, is that of associating its programmes with - the Muslim identity in Africa. In its bid to amplify its soft power on the continent, Türkiye have financed the construction and refurbishment of mosques, wells, and fountains in nations with substantial Muslim demographics (Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Chad). In Ghana, Türkiye supported the construction of Ghana's national mosque in Accra – a replica of Istanbul's Blue Mosque. Similarly, it helped [restore](#) a part of the Agadez Sultanate in Niger. Despite these initiatives being mainly symbolic, it serves as a soft power tool for closer cultural relations. Most of these religious engagements are organized through the [Diyanet Foundation](#), a religious organisation under the Presidency of Religious Affairs. Throughout the continent, the Diyanet has helped establish Yunus Emre Institutes in 11 African countries⁵ while there are 160 schools in 25 sub-Saharan countries run by the Maarif Foundation. The latter has helped promote [Turkish Islam](#) in Africa by publishing translations of the Quran and promoted religious learning.

The focus on the civil society through education and cultural ties encompasses Türkiye's ability to gain influence through top-down and bottom-up approaches as they increase their influence with the West African elite through security guarantees and arms deals. In parallel, Türkiye also boosts its image with the local communities through, among others, better access to education and preservation of Islamic landmarks. Playing the Islamic identity card has been noted to give Turkish businesses a [notable advantage](#) over competitors when dealing with African counterparts due to Islam acting as a unifying mechanism. Thus, Türkiye also utilizes cultural and religious commonalities to establish mutually beneficial relationships while positioning itself as an alternative to France, China and the US thereby enhancing Türkiye's projection of power in the region.

Economic Diplomacy

Economic diplomacy has been a vital component of Türkiye's increased footprint in West Africa. Its approach sets it apart from competitors such as China's approach – one that has met much criticism for its [debt-trap](#) allegations. Instead of loans to African countries, Türkiye offers grants while its ODA (Official

⁵ Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, and Burundi

Development Assistance) is distributed through bilateral channels. At the same time, Türkiye is an active actor in peace processes across the continent. In Eastern Africa, Türkiye helped brokering a [deal](#) between Ethiopia and Somalia over Somaliland sea access, was involved in the [peace deal](#) between Ethiopia and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and [mediating](#) in the civil war in Sudan. Further, Türkiye views Africa as a vital component in its own political and economic global outreach. It does so by fostering mutual beneficial cooperation that seeks to promote Africa as a continent of opportunities rather than one plagued by conflict, corruption, and lack of opportunities. Ankara labels this as [South-South cooperation](#). that resonates with Africa's political and cultural outlooks on *African solutions to African problems*.

As Türkiye is perceived less paternalistic and more as a humanitarian actor, its approach differs from traditional donors such as the EU and US, and in some respects, China as well. Turkish companies such as [Yapi Merkezi](#) and [Summa](#) are involved in constructing railways, airports, and ports, as well as being involved in energy infrastructure projects while [Karpowership](#) has obtained an instrumental position in West African energy infrastructure with its hydrocarbon solutions in Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana. The infrastructure provided tends to be timely, cost-effective and of superior quality to that of Chinese companies while also operating locally by utilizing a substantial number of local workers. Operating in this manner gives Türkiye a comparative advantage and a narrative that aligns with the African solutions outlook. Furthermore, Selim Bora, owner of Summa, is a close ally of Erdoğan while JDP⁶ supporter Ali Metin Kazanci is head of Aksa Enerji which similarly has been awarded quite substantial [contracts](#) in i.e., Equatorial Guinea. This blurs the lines between the political level of the JDP in Ankara and business elites such as Bora and Kazanci as they work as para-diplomatic actors operating alongside formal diplomacy thereby linking Ankara to West African elites to construct valuable African-Turkish elitist networks to enhance Türkiye's geopolitical influence.

Conclusion

Turkey's ascent in West Africa epitomizes a strategy that fuses security pragmatism, cultural affinity, and economic influence into a unified foreign policy framework. Ankara's threefold approach of security cooperation, cultural diplomacy, and economic diplomacy has allowed it to step into geopolitical vacuums left by the retreat of traditional Western actors and the overextension of Russia's Wagner/Africa Corps.

⁶ Justice and Development Party

In doing so, Türkiye has emerged not merely as an alternative partner, but as a peer competitor to the European Union's (EU) own objectives on the continent. The subsequent second brief will examine the implications of heightened Turkish influence for European security, as well as explore the strategies the EU can develop to reap the possible benefits of cooperating with Türkiye in Africa.

Recommended reading:

Issouf, Binaté (2025). Turkey is stepping up its influence in west Africa – what's behind its bid for soft power. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/turkey-is-stepping-up-its-influence-in-west-africa-whats-behind-its-bid-for-soft-power-256929>

Brown, Will (2025). The Bear and the Bot Farm: Countering Russian Hybrid Warfare in Africa. *The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)*. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-bear-and-the-bot-farm-countering-russian-hybrid-warfare-in-africa/#burkina-faso>

Hussam, S. (2026). Redefining power systems: Turkish electric-sector engagement in Africa. *Washington, DC: Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/redefining-power-systems-turkish-electric-sector-engagement-in-africa/>

About the author:

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