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DİPLOMATİK İLİŞKİLER ve POLİTİK ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ
CENTER for DIPLOMATIC AFFAIRS and POLITICAL STUDIES

ANALYSIS

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THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA FOR TÜRKİYE

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In recent years, Sub-Saharan Africa has increasingly attracted the attention of actors in the international system as a geography of strategic importance at both regional and global levels. The richness of natural resources, the size of the young population, economic potential and geopolitical position are among the key elements of this region. In this context, especially the young and dynamic population of Sub-Saharan Africa offers significant opportunities for labour potential and consumer markets. Economic growth potential and consumer demands make the region attractive for international companies and investors. This situation increases foreign direct investments in the region and strengthens economic relations.

In addition to its economic potential and dynamic young population, Sub-Saharan Africa stands out as a region rich in energy resources, mineral reserves, agricultural potential and water resources. This situation increases the interest in the region in terms of international energy security and resource diversification. At this point, the geopolitical position of Sub-Saharan Africa is also important in terms of security due to its proximity to the intersection points of maritime routes and its role in strategic corridors. Issues such as counter-terrorism, migration management and border security encourage international actors to engage in regional cooperation. With these dynamic components, Sub-Saharan Africa stands out as an important player on the international political and economic scene. Therefore, international interest and engagement in the region involves not only an economic but also a strategic and security-oriented perspective.

The increasing importance and attractive potential of Sub-Saharan Africa in the international system has attracted the attention of Türkiye as well as many other actors, and Türkiye's interest in this region has intensified in recent years. In this respect, from a historical perspective, it is possible to say that Sub-Saharan Africa has gained strategic importance for Türkiye, especially in the last decade. At this point, the region has become an increasing priority in Türkiye's foreign policy and an important actor in the country's economic, political and cultural relations.

Türkiye takes a comprehensive approach to Sub-Saharan Africa not only from an economic perspective but also in the fields of security, energy and diplomacy. Türkiye's interest in the region is concretely expressed through the increase in trade volume, diplomatic initiatives and

development projects. In this context, Türkiye's strategic cooperation with Sub-Saharan Africa aims to contribute to the stability of the region, strengthen bilateral relations and increase Türkiye's influence in the global arena. These developments emphasise that Türkiye views Sub-Saharan Africa and the countries of the region not only as an economic partner but also as a long-term strategic partner. At this point, before going into more detail, it is important to go back to 1998, when Türkiye made moves to increase its presence in the African continent and Sub-Saharan geography in various ways, and to reveal how the importance of the region has evolved for Türkiye from a historical perspective.

Historical Background of Türkiye and Sub-Saharan Africa

Historically, we can say that Türkiye's interaction with the African continent and the countries in the region was quite limited, especially before 1998. This was mainly due to the fact that Türkiye's foreign policy was more orientated towards the West. At this point, during the period when African countries got rid of colonial rule and declared their independence, it was observed that Türkiye did not give much priority to developing relations with these countries, both because Türkiye's primary goal was to take part in the Western alliance system and because it was not considered necessary and important at that time.

However, it should also be noted that the year 1998, which signalled the beginning of a change in the region's relegation to the background for Türkiye, was a milestone for Türkiye and Sub-Saharan African countries. In this period, it was seen that the state mind and administrators of the period, especially upon the idea that there was not enough interaction with the countries in the African continent, made a move in this regard and endeavoured to improve the deficient and insufficient relations. In this respect, the 'Action Plan for Opening to Africa', which was implemented in 1998, constituted an important turning point in Turkish foreign policy. This strategic plan aimed to strengthen Türkiye's relations with African countries and included effective measures in various fields. This action plan reflects Türkiye's determination to increase its presence in the African continent and to establish closer co-operation with these regions. In this framework, it is possible to say that the steps taken to expand the vision of Turkish foreign policy towards

Africa and to strengthen regional co-operation have become more visible since 1998.

On the other hand, as a reflection of Turkish foreign policy towards the African continent, the 'Action Plan for Opening to Africa' adopted in 1998 included various political, economic and humanitarian measures. At this point, to mention Türkiye's steps, in the political field, actions such as increasing the number of embassies and organising mutual visits have been taken. At the same time, policies such as increasing contacts with African countries through international organisations and directing humanitarian aid have been adopted.

In addition to the political sphere, at the economic level, objectives such as the signing of trade and tax agreements, the establishment of aid programmes, the organisation of business visits and the establishment of joint business councils or chambers of commerce have also emerged. In addition, various incentive measures to encourage Turkish firms to invest in the continent and strategies to improve air and maritime transport were also included in the plan. This policy can be considered as an endeavour to strengthen Türkiye's relations with Sub-Saharan Africa. Because basically, it can be said that interventions in these various fields were aimed at increasing the capacity and volume of Turkish-African co-operation.

On the other hand, it can be said that 2005 is another important turning point in Türkiye - Sub-Saharan Africa relations, which gained momentum with the Africa Initiative plan in 1998. With the 2002 administrative change in Türkiye, it is possible to say that Türkiye's interest in the African continent and the countries in the Sub-Saharan Africa region and the capacity

of its relations have expanded and gained momentum. The biggest proof of this situation is the declaration of 2005 as the 'Year of Africa' by the Erdoğan government. In this respect, it would not be wrong to say that the process that started with the declaration of the 'Year of Africa' in 2005 has led to significant changes in Türkiye's foreign policy towards Africa.

Similarly, in the same period, Türkiye obtained observer country status in the African Union and became one of the strategic partners of the AU in 2008. One of the most significant developments in Türkiye-Africa relations during this period was the First Türkiye-Africa Cooperation Summit held in Istanbul in 2008, which played a crucial role in bringing together representatives of around 50 African countries and 11 international and regional organisations. It can be argued that this summit strengthened relations by further emphasising Türkiye's cooperation with Africa. After 2005, it can be seen that 2008 was also an important year in terms of establishing and expanding relations. In this year, there was a significant increase in the number of Turkish representative offices in Sub-Saharan African countries and the presence of Turkish representative offices in the continent was increased. From this point of view, the diplomatic and strategic steps taken in this period can be considered as important steps taken to deepen Türkiye's ties with Africa.

On the other hand, in the following process, Türkiye has tended to improve its steps and moves in the region, especially in political, cultural and economic terms, with the African Opening action plan it has adopted, and it has been seen that this action plan was transformed into a more detailed form in 2013. In this context, it can

be seen that Türkiye's "African Opening Policy", which was officially announced in 1998, changed its name in 2013 and was replaced by the "African Partnership Policy". After the implementation of this policy, Türkiye organised summits with Sub-Saharan actors in 2014 and 2021, respectively, to increase cooperation in the field of Partnership and Development. It can be said that these two summits have historically played a key role between Türkiye and Sub-Saharan countries. This is based on the fact that they are seen as a platform aiming to maximise relations and cooperation between Türkiye and African countries. The activities organised by Türkiye within the scope of these summits were carried out in order to create a strong communication and cooperation environment between the parties aiming to increase their presence in the continent.

At this point, it can be seen that Türkiye tends to increase its presence in the region with both its Africa policy, which it elaborated and updated in 2013, and the summits it organised. In addition, it can be said that Türkiye is trying to build its cooperation with regional actors on a win-win basis, especially by increasing its contacts with the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa on the basis of leaders and administrations. In addition, this situation can be read as important in terms of creating an attractive situation that paves the way for Sub-Saharan countries to approach Türkiye in many respects. In this context, it is possible to say that the reflections of Türkiye's moves for the region in the past years continue to increase its influence and presence today.

Türkiye's Current Sub-Saharan Africa Perspective and Vision

Sub-Saharan Africa represents not only a geographical area for Türkiye, but has also become a strategic priority over the years. Türkiye's relations in this region have been shaped by a combination of historical roots, economic co-operation, cultural interaction and strategic partnerships. In this context, Türkiye's current perspective and vision towards Sub-Saharan Africa includes not only a regional but also a global understanding. In this respect, it can be said that Türkiye's moves and policies towards Sub-Saharan Africa continue to manifest themselves in concrete ways today. In the past, Türkiye attached importance to its presence in the region, especially in political, economic and humanitarian terms, and has recently taken and continues to take steps to make itself felt in the region, especially in military terms. Both the security problems in the Red Sea and the political crises between countries such as Somalia and Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa play a key role in Türkiye's recent approach to the region both militarily and in terms of defence cooperation.

In this context, when Türkiye's current relations with the region are analysed, it is possible to say that Türkiye's military presence, among other areas, has increased significantly compared to the past. As the most concrete evidence of this situation, Türkiye's military agreements and cooperation with the countries in the region and the military bases it has opened can be cited as examples.

Going deeper, it can be seen that Türkiye, as an actor closely following the recent developments in Sub-Saharan Africa, has both analysed the political status and

governance weaknesses in the countries of the region and exploited the vacuum created by the lack or insufficient presence of other great power actors in the international system in the Sub-Saharan region by making moves in its own interests. This situation also made Türkiye more visible in the international arena and played a key role in increasing its popularity in the Sub-Saharan region.

In this respect, it can be said that the most recent agreement signed between Türkiye and Somalia in February 2024 has attracted a lot of attention recently in terms of showing Türkiye's visibility in the region and has imposed a key mission on Türkiye in the regional sense. With this agreement, it can be said that Türkiye has seized a very important opportunity in Somalia, which is located in the geography called the Horn of Africa and attracts attention with its proximity to the Red Sea. At this point, with the signed agreement, Türkiye will provide strategic co-operation in the field of military equipment that will both train Somali naval forces and Somali soldiers and equip the troops militarily. This situation can be seen as a very important development in terms of leading to the use and spread of Turkish defence industry products in Somalia.

On the other hand, with this agreement, Türkiye has gained access to the coastline to ensure the security of the Somali coast and to prevent possible terrorist acts and attacks. Therefore, this situation means Türkiye's military patrolling in a strategically important region and can be said to offer Türkiye an important strategic card.

In this context, to analyse Türkiye's current perspective and vision towards the region, it is noteworthy that with its recent moves,

Türkiye has both increased its visibility in the international system and diversified its market in East Africa, including the Horn of Africa. In addition, Türkiye's current presence in Sub-Saharan Africa seems to continue to increase in the future, and it can be said that Türkiye gives the impression of an effective and strong actor in various fields, especially in military and security cooperation, by utilising the gaps in the region.



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