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Beyond National Boundaries: Unpacking Türkiye's Role in the Sahel and Beyond Through Geopolitical Imagination

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ABSTRACT

For many scholars, Türkiye's foreign policy since the early 2000s has been seen as shifting from a West-oriented to an East-facing approach, with its engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa reflecting this change. This article offers an alternative perspective, arguing that Türkiye's geopolitical imagination and national role conception as a 'centre country' provide a deeper understanding of its policies in Africa and beyond. By examining Türkiye's involvement in the Sahel through expert and elite interviews and case studies of defence, education, and infrastructure, we demonstrate how these frameworks drive Türkiye's engagement as a civilisational state and aspiring leader in the Afro-Eurasian space. The research highlights the explanatory power of national role conception and geopolitical imagination in analyzing its motivations. It also offers nuanced insights that challenge simplistic East-West paradigms while advancing theoretical and policy-oriented debates on the role of nonWestern actors in global politics.

Introduction

On March 1, 2018, during a visit to Mauritania, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan pledged \$5 million to the G5 counterterrorism force composed of Sahel states. This pledge coincided with Türkiye signing a series of security cooperation agreements with Mauritania, Chad, Guinea, Nigeria, Benin, Gambia, and Niger. Emphasising Türkiye's intent to support the region, Erdoğan stated, 'Türkiye is one of the countries which best understands the dangers with which you are confronted in the Sahel'. His message was clear: Türkiye recognises your challenges, and we are here to help.

As a middle power with few interests in the Sahel and wider Sub-Saharan Africa only 20 years ago, Türkiye's meteoric rise as one of the continent's most visible and important external partners raises a critical question: Why has Ankara intensified its focus on Sub-Saharan Africa,

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and why now? To answer this question, the article examines deeper geopolitical and civilisational factors that shape Türkiye's engagement with the Sahel, thereby presenting the region as a test case for understanding Ankara's evolving foreign policy in the Global South.

To be sure, Türkiye's increasing role in Sub-Saharan Africa has garnered significant scholarly attention (Dal 2012; Kardaş 2010; Tepeciklioğlu, Vreÿ, and Baser 2023). Scholars often frame Türkiye's involvement in countries like Burkina Faso, Angola, and Kenya as emblematic of a rupture or shift in Turkish foreign policy since the early 2000s (Haugom 2019; Kutlay and Öniş 2021; Sözen 2013). Others attribute it simply to the rise of the Justice and Development Party (or JDP; Turkish, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) and its leader, Erdoğan, and view it as part of Türkiye's broader geopolitical realignment from West to East (Satanakis and Süss 2021; Talbot and Magri 2018). However, these explanations face two significant limitations: First, Türkiye's earlier geopolitical realities, such as Cold War constraints and domestic instability had historically limited its engagement with regions like Africa despite Ankara's intentions to do otherwise. Second, and relatedly, much of the JDP's foreign policy framework builds on pre-existing structures and shifts rather than marking a complete departure from historical patterns (Aydin 2013; Donelli 2020).

If these historical factors are considered, we must go beyond the 'new era' discourse of Turkish foreign policy under the JDP and explore underlying motivations. Accordingly, this article posits that Türkiye's engagement in the Sahel reflects its self-perception as a centre country and civilisational state over the *longue durée*, which in turn is mutually constitutive of its broader geopolitical imagination. To do so, we employ a critical geopolitics framework that focuses on the concept of geopolitical imaginations to analyse Türkiye's foreign policy. While traditional structural or materialist approaches – centred on polarity and national power indices – offer limited explanatory power, our research takes a more nuanced approach. By combining critical geopolitical theories with an exploration of Türkiye's national role conception, we aim to provide a more comprehensive understanding of its identity, intentions, and actions in the Sahel and beyond. This integrated methodology allows us to unpack the complexities of Türkiye's geopolitical strategy and its broader implications. This framework is combined with a series of expert and elite interviews that were carried out during the first half of 2024. Expert interviewees were selected based on their recognised expertise in Turkish foreign policy, identity, geopolitics, and outreach to Africa, with criteria including academic standing, publications, and insights into Türkiye's engagement with Africa. They were accessed via academic networks, prior collaborations, and targeted outreach. Additionally, we conducted an elite interview with a senior Turkish government official directly involved in Africa-focused foreign policy. This official was accessed through diplomatic and academic connections, with the interview aimed at uncovering motivations, strategies, and mechanisms

driving Türkiye's engagement in the Sahel to better bridge existing theoretical frameworks with contemporary practices.

The article proceeds as follows. First, geopolitical imagination and national role conceptions are defined and theorised in terms of explanatory power vis-à-vis Turkish foreign policy in the Sahel. The second section delves into the history of Türkiye's Sahelian imagination, catalogues literature related to it, and triangulates these with the interview results. Together, these demonstrate how Türkiye geopolitical imaginations of the Sahel – current and past – have influenced and encouraged its outreach and actorness there. Third, Türkiye's engagement with the Sahel is laid out in three cases: construction, education, and defence. The final section forms the conclusion.

Türkiye's Geopolitical Imagination and National Role Conception

Türkiye's engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa reflects the emerging multipolarity of global geopolitics (Del Sarto and Soler i Lecha 2024). As a state straddling Western and non-Western cultural, political, and social paradigms, Türkiye occupies a unique position (Bilgin 2009; Keyder 2016). Despite its NATO and OECD memberships, its near-but-not-quite EU accession, and strong ties to Europe and the United States (US), Türkiye's identity is often seen as split. This in-betweenness evokes historical parallels, such as Ottoman royals being regarded as exotic figures at European events like King Edward VII's funeral in 1910. Türkiye's majority-Muslim identity, geographic proximity to the Middle East, Turkic ethnicity, and Ottoman imperial legacy naturally draw its gaze eastward and southward but also conspire to leave it in untethered in terms of identity and belongingness – neither European nor Asian, but perhaps both (Edib 1935; Kasaba and Bozdoğan 2000).

For much of its first 75 years, Türkiye focused on Western partnerships rather than the east and south. Cold War dynamics constrained Türkiye's foreign policy, as its NATO membership and proximity to the Soviet Union shaped its priorities. Türkiye's material limitations – marked by economic crises, coups in 1960, 1971, and 1980, and high inflation – further hindered its ability to engage globally (Calis 1995; Tuncer 1975). Africa, in particular, remained a low priority due to Türkiye's limited resources and Africa's own lack of economic and political incentives for deeper engagement (Aras 2018; Robins 1997). A significant turning point came in the 1980s under Prime Minister Turgut Özal, whose economic liberalisation and political reforms aligned Türkiye's capabilities with its international ambitions (Öniş 2004).

This historical context informs Türkiye's post-2005 engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa. While structural explanations like material power indices and polarity shifts help outline these changes, they are insufficient on their own. Critical geopolitics and the concept of geopolitical imaginations offer a richer framework, we believe. Türkiye's national role conception – its perception of

itself as a civilisational state and leader within the Global South – can provide additional insight into its motivations and actions. As such, this identity-driven framework should offer greater explanatory value as to why Türkiye has prioritised regions like the Sahel, which lack direct strategic importance but offer symbolic and ideological significance.

Geopolitical Imagination

Geopolitical imaginations are constructed views of the world that mirror geopolitical visions of the role of a place, state, or a society in international affairs (Mamadouh and Dijkink 2006). Their emergence, as proposed by Agnew (2004, 12) and others (Brunn 1998; Güney 2015), largely coincided with the establishment of the modern inter-state system, where geopolitics functioned as a manifestation of state power across time and space. In doing so, it encompassed both domestic and international realms. Central to this focus were boundaries – tangible and intangible – that delineated states.

Modern geopolitical imagination has four important components (Agnew 2004). First, global visualisation, or the ability of people and states to visualise the world as a unitary whole. Second, time as space, where units of space are segregated and labelled ‘... with essential attributes of different time-periods relative to the idealized historical experience of one of the blocks’ (Agnew 2004, 11). These engendered binary geographies or dyads reify another dyadic set: self and other imaginations and narratives. Since the Renaissance, these have included industrialised and developed, rich versus poor, Communist versus Capitalist, Occident versus Orient (Kirsch and Flint 2015; Ó Tuathail 1997). Predating these, however, is the old conceptualisation of barbarian and Greek or, in Ancient Persia’s parlance, Iran versus Turan, a reference to the geographic region of what is now referred to as Central Asia and/or culture.¹ Current manifestations are Turk versus Armenian, Eritrean versus Ethiopian and the list goes on. ‘This practice tends to organize the geography of the world ethnocentrically into a hierarchy of spaces defined in terms of their degree of modernity, progress and development *vis-à-vis* the ordinary modernity of the hegemon’ (Ó Tuathail and Ó Tuathail 2002, 21). It also demonstrates that binary geographies and geopolitical imaginations have an ancient lineage as well as great currency in our present age, and thus align with Türkiye’s persistent self-perception as a centre country, shaped by its geographic centrality in Afro-Eurasia and a long historical narrative of bridging multiple worlds.

The third component of modern geopolitical imagination is its emphasis on states because they are imagined as being capable of maintaining exclusive authority over their territories through sovereignty. In addition, domestic and foreign affairs are imagined as separate with distinct rules, and state borders comprise the limits of a state’s

society and societal organisation (Ó Tuathail 2002, 21–22). In other words, Niger's society and sovereignty are confined by its borders within the framework of modern geopolitical imagination, even though the reality – particularly in post-colonial Sub-Saharan Africa, as noted by Herbst (2014) (2000) – is often radically different. While this notion is treated as axiomatic in realist and liberalist theories of international relations (IR), state-centric approaches often rely on overly simplistic assumptions. Constructivists and post modernists have quibbled with this approach (Kelly 2006). Nevertheless, it remains a cornerstone of geopolitical imagination for many, particularly in the context of contemporary foreign policies, because it 'function[s] in the practices of everyday statecraft to give world politics a geopolitical segmentarity and territorially defined sets of boundaries and identities' (Murphy 1996, quoted in Ó Tuathail 2002, 22).

Finally, Agnew (2004) isolated a fourth component that informs geopolitical imagination: striving for dominance or the pursuit of primacy. Again, this resembles major IR theories and their emphasis on the anarchical system which compels states to resort to self-help that includes building partnerships, balancing, and other survival behaviours (Glaser 2014). In short, geopolitics can be characterised as a specific approach to depicting global spatial dynamics. 'The containment of the dynamic currents of global space by territorial geometries and spatial dichotomies mobilizes a metaphysics of presence that makes borders, divisions, and frontiers possible' (Ó Tuathail and Ó Tuathail 2002, 22).

Despite its explanatory power, postmodernists have questioned the foundations of modern geopolitics (Castells 2011; Luke 1996; Ó Tuathail and Ó Tuathail 2002). They have problematised it so that conceptualising the evolving connection between humans and nature, along with the transformative environments and temporal-spatial structures they create, are unpacked. The entities that have emerged in the postmodern era, whether subjects, objects, or actors, are all characterised by impurity, hybridity, and boundary-crossing traits. Latour (1996, 370), for instance, developed actor-network theory whereby he claimed that 'modern societies cannot be described without recognizing them as having a fibrous, thread-like, wiry, stringy, ropy, capillary character that is never captured by the notions of levels, layers, territories, spheres, categories, structure, systems ... Literally there is nothing but networks'.

However, as Rygiel (2002) demonstrated, the Turkish state has constructed identity so that the Turkish nation is presented as coherent. National identity is synonymous with being a Turk, as encapsulated in Türkiye's national motto painted on walls and across mountain peaks throughout the country: 'How happy is the one who says I am a Turk!' (Turkish: '*Ne mutlu Türküm diyene!*').² While this has often marginalised the significant minorities that inhabit the

modern Republic, it has remained the primary strategy used to construct national identity for the past century (Ince 2012; Keskin 1998).

It follows then that geopolitical imagination – the constructed view of the world – shapes a state’s geopolitical vision. Newman and Peters (2002) noted that it encompasses representations of boundaries, borders, and geopolitical codes of conduct. For instance, Güney and Gökcan (2010) demonstrated how post-9/11 US foreign policy centred on combating terrorism, consistently promoting democracy and influence in the Middle East across administrations, reflecting a strategic vision rooted in the U.S.’s modern geopolitical imagination.

In Türkiye’s current engagement with the Sahel, previous research has demonstrated that the Ottoman historical past and the behavioralist geographic revolution have both shaped the Turkish geopolitical imagination (Aras and Fidan 2009). The geography of perception, for example, fostered the development of mental maps that were partly conditioned by the surrounding environment and partly by Türkiye’s latent imperial identity as remembered (rather than lived) from Ottoman times.³ During the Cold War, constrained by a bipolar world and domestic challenges, Türkiye’s foreign policy elites (FPEs) perceived their geopolitical reality as two-dimensional and prioritised relations with the West rather than their imagined imperial identity,⁴ and therefore practiced cautious diplomacy (Hale 2002; Hisarlıoğlu 2022). This approach stemmed from a legacy of Ottoman-era mistrust and encirclement fears. Even bold moves like Ankara’s 1974 Cyprus intervention reflected latent ambitions constrained by material realities (Karpas 1975).⁵

Since the 1980s, in contrast, Turkish mental maps have increasingly tended towards identity components and the imperial past. Turkish FPEs have gradually burnished and reified their Ottoman legacy and the identity and perceptions they bequeath. In doing so, they have adopted a more active (and activist) foreign policy (Kösebalaban 2011). Yet, while post-Cold War international transformations have favored states’ pursuit of greater autonomy within the international system, domestic constraints can still hinder their ability to achieve it. Türkiye is no different. The domestic political economy stymied Turkish multidirectional foreign policy projection for decades. But that did not put an end to Türkiye’s geopolitical imaginings, which are mutually constitutive with nationalism and Ottoman imperial legacies.

The relevance of Turkish nationalism in all its forms – Muslim, Turkic, and Turkish, among others – has led to a reemphasis and rethinking of the geographical perception of Türkiye as the heart of a Turkish-speaking area (Akdeniz and Göker 2011). According to Kurşun (online interview, 2024), a scholar of Turkish foreign policy, for example, while Türkiye’s initial 1980s outreach to former Soviet republics via a common Turkic ethnicity, language group, and culture was itself partially a product of American cajoling, its

outreach to both the Balkans and Central Asia after 1991 fits snugly within an imagined past of similar Ottoman outreach, cooperation, and cooptation.⁶

It was in the 1990s that the gradual rehabilitation of Ottoman historical memory encouraged a shift in Türkiye's geopolitical imagination towards its imperial identity. The reshuffling of Türkiye's political elite between 1997 and 2003 also catalysed the emergence of new groups of FPEs (Başer 2015). They began to reshape Turkish mental maps by restoring geographic centrality to the country's macro- and multi-regional projection. As a result, a proactive and ambitious foreign policy oriented towards a variety of regional contexts was not so much developed as taken off the shelf and dusted off. This is why so many scholars see a rupture in Türkiye's foreign policy beginning with the ascendance of the JDP in 2002.

The applicability of Agnew's four components to Türkiye's geopolitical imagination provides a robust conceptual framework for understanding its engagement in the Sahel. Türkiye's self-perception as a centre country in Afro-Eurasia, which we discuss below, reflects the component of global visualisation, as Ankara's foreign policy elites have made it clear they view Türkiye as the centre where continents and civilisations meet. The concept of time as space also resonates in terms of Türkiye's invocation of Ottoman imperial nostalgia. This enables it to frame its foreign policies in regions like the Sahel within a historical continuum (imagined or real) of influence and leadership. Furthermore, the emphasis on states and sovereignty aligns with Türkiye's strategy of supporting capacity-building and development efforts in the Sahel, particularly in defence, construction and education, and reinforces its image as a partner that respects sovereignty and territoriality. Lastly, pursuing primacy underpins Türkiye's ambitions on both the global and regional levels as it seeks to build its 'Century of Türkiye' and 'Türkiye Axis' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye 2023). This motivation is clear in its multipronged approach to foreign policy in areas like the Sahel and Ankara's increasingly frosty relations with Paris as it posits itself as anti-colonial and a Global South state.

A critical element in Türkiye's geopolitical imagination, nevertheless, is still missing – Türkiye's national role conception. As Güney and Gökcan (2010, 23) noted, if '[t]he geopolitical vision is thus the main element which determines what kind of geopolitical imaginations a state may have', then there is a clear connection to a state's national role conception. This will therefore be the subject of the next section.

National Role Conception

National role conception (NRC) can be broadly defined as a state's self-perception of its role, responsibilities, and identity in the global arena. A state's NRC can exhibit both continuity and dynamism and generally influences its foreign policy objectives and actions (Wish 1980). Based on

the work of scholars like Başer (2015), Pehlivanurk (2019), and Cannon and Donelli (2024), we see Türkiye's NRC – that of the centre country (*merkez ülke*) – as the primary variable that explains both Türkiye's geopolitical imagination and its geopolitical shifts. This is because its foreign policy decisions are fundamentally shaped by its FPEs' self-perception as the inhabitants and heirs of a civilisational state with a historical and cultural stake in Afro-Eurasia (Gokay 2015). This perspective illuminates the continuity of Türkiye's aspiration to be a powerful actor in the broader Afro-Eurasian context.

Türkiye's NRC as a centre country and civilisational state transcends specific ruling ideologies and finds its roots in enduring historical and geographic realities. It is rooted in its strategic geography at the confluence of Afro-Eurasia, historically tied to its legacy as the heir to the Ottoman Empire, which itself succeeded the Byzantine and Roman empires. This geographic centrality cultivated a self-perception of leadership and mediation among diverse civilisations. Specifically, the Ottomans adopted many of the aspects and trappings of the Byzantine Empire and understood the power that came from ruling at the confluence of Afro-Eurasia in Constantinople/Istanbul (Yelçe 2021). The Ottoman mental map naturally flowed east (and southeast), and west, evidenced by military campaigns in the 16th and 17th centuries that alternated between these directions.

This continuity in Türkiye's NRC is neither fundamentally religious nor rooted in imperialistic nostalgia. Nonetheless, the Ottoman legacy – though remembered differently across time periods – provides an enduring narrative of agency and influence. According to a scholar of Turkish Islam, Türkiye as a civilizational state, and Turkish identity and foreign policy practice, the late Ottoman Empire's sense of responsibility as the seat of the caliphate and its leadership in the Muslim world established foundational elements of this NRC, which were reinterpreted during the Republican era (Yavuz, online interview, 2024). The Kemalist elites, despite rejecting Ottoman imperialism, retained this sense of centrality by emphasising Türkiye's unique role as a modern, secular bridge between East and West. Similarly, the conservative Islamists under the JDP inherited and reframed this NRC to align with Islamic and anti-colonial solidarity. Thus, the NRC's persistence is grounded in Türkiye's enduring belief in its geographic centrality and leadership rather than any single ideological framework, whether Ottoman, Kemalist, or Islamist.

It is for this reason that despite Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's decision – as founder of modern Türkiye – to move the capital to Ankara to emphasise Anatolia's centrality to the new Türkiye, Istanbul remained (and remains) the metropolis that houses the vestiges of pre-Ottoman, Ottoman, and post-Ottoman splendour and power. In short, Türkiye's political elite understand what Constantine and Mehmet II both knew: control of the centre allows the ruler geopolitical leverage and the ability (though not

necessarily the intent) to exert influence over adjacent Afro-Eurasian regions (Ulusoy 2024; Yavuz 2020). This concept underpins Türkiye's contemporary foreign policy, currently referenced under the guise of the 'Century of Türkiye' and the 'Türkiye Axis' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye 2023).

Explored initially by Holsti (1970) and subsequently expanded by other foreign policy scholars (Hollis and Smith 1986; Walker 1987), theories of national role conception describe the factors that influence a state's overall decision-making processes, norms, commitments, and enduring international responsibilities. NRCs encompass policymakers' interpretations of the decisions, obligations, rules, and behaviours deemed appropriate for their state (Adigbuo 2007). They outline the ongoing functions that a state should perform within the international system or subordinate regional frameworks. In Türkiye's case, these functions have consistently reflected its historical experiences, collective memories, and interpretations of its geographic centrality (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012; Volkan 2000).

Building on Pehlivanurk's (2019) work, Türkiye's NRC shows both continuity and phases shaped by Ottoman history, the subsequent trauma induced by the (never implemented) Treaty of Sèvres, and Türkiye's continuing but uneasy alliance with the West. Systemic factors such as geographic centrality and historical interactions with diverse civilisations have collectively cemented this NRC. Despite material constraints, Türkiye's NRC reflects its historical vision of agency rather than a mere alignment with contemporary power indices (Cannon and Donelli 2024).

This continuity underscores Türkiye's NRC not as a function of abrupt shifts but as an evolving expression of its civilisational centrality. The rehabilitation of the Ottoman past and the Islamic character of Turkish identity, introduced after the 1980 coup and reinforced by the JDP's electoral victory in 2002, reflect extensions of this continuity rather than departures from it. From its earlier framing as a bridge country, Türkiye has increasingly positioned itself as the Afro-Eurasian macro-region's centre country (Başer 2015; Davutoğlu 2004). This progression, including its pivot towards Sub-Saharan Africa, represents the logical evolution of Türkiye's NRC rather than a fundamental departure.

Türkiye's engagement with the Sahel is therefore best understood through the lens of its geopolitical imagination and NRC, which reflect its enduring vision as a civilisational state and centre country in the Afro-Eurasian space. This is not a recent phenomenon but part of an evolving narrative that stretches back to Ottoman suzerainty over regions such as Tripoli, Tunis, and Algiers and their hinterlands, as discussed below (Chérif 1999). Importantly, while Türkiye faced significant domestic challenges following the 2016 attempted coup and subsequent economic crises, its NRC – rooted in historical narratives and geographic centrality – has remained resilient.

Notably, Türkiye's outreach to Sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel signals both continuity and a deepening of this role, even in an era of constrained material realities.

Since 2000, Türkiye's geopolitical imagination and NRC have increasingly aligned and subtly shaped the mental maps deeply embedded in its strategic and foreign policy culture. Türkiye's pivot to Sub-Saharan Africa is an evolution of its self-perception as a civilisational state, enabled by improved material capabilities and opportunities within the international system (Öniş and Yılmaz 2009; Cannon and Donelli 2024). This engagement underscores Ankara's view of the Sahel as a natural extension of its sphere of influence as the centre country. Understanding how these mental maps drive Türkiye's strategies in Sub-Saharan Africa, and particularly in the Sahel, is the focus of the next section.

Imagining the Sahel

The story of Türkiye's interest in the Sahel dates back centuries. However, it was only in the late 19th century, during the waning days of the Ottoman Empire, that the region gained prominence as Istanbul sought to reassert itself in reaction to European imperialism in Africa and the Middle East. Article 34 of the 1885 Berlin Conference's General Act, known as the Hinterland Doctrine, became critical for the Ottomans as they attempted to secure their place in the 'family of nations'. This geopolitical imagination was binary: states either belonged (e.g., Germany and Belgium) or did not (e.g., Japan). Ottoman belonging was contested, as it was a once-powerful, non-Christian empire weakened in comparison to many rapidly modernising European states.

According to Minawi (2016), Article 34 allowed a power controlling a littoral region to claim adjacent African inland territory by demonstrating 'minimal governmental authority' over it. The Ottomans sought to assert control over the Sahel's Lake Chad basin and linked it to coastal Libya to consolidate their African presence and bolster their imperial image. To this end, the Ottomans leveraged their Islamic credentials and ties to the Sanusi religious order in Libya. However, their efforts were limited, and their claims were rejected by European powers. Despite Sultan Abdülhamid II's attempts to revive Ottoman authority with an Islamic focus, they ultimately failed in both Libya and the Sahel.

Nonetheless, the Empire's emphasis on religious ties established a lasting geopolitical perception of the Sahel as part of the broader Muslim community. This perception influenced Türkiye's modern geopolitical imagination and its NRC. For instance, the centrality of Istanbul as the seat of the last caliphate remains significant for many of Türkiye's more pious FPEs with JDP ties (Georgeon 2003) As Yavuz (online interview, 2024) noted, 'Türkiye sees itself as a centre country, a civilizational state. It is an Islamic civilizational state, and

it can lead the supra-national Islamic nation, or Ummah'. This statement underscores how Türkiye's FPEs conceptualise its identity as multifaceted, encompassing Islamic, anti-colonial, and Ottoman legacies. By strategically employing these overlapping identities, Türkiye embeds regions like the Sahel into its mental maps and geopolitical vision.

Following the Ottoman collapse, Türkiye's interest in the Sahel diminished for decades due to economic and political weaknesses during the Cold War. Material and systemic constraints relegated Türkiye to a subordinate position within the Western bloc, influencing its perceived global hierarchy (Tomuş and Aygenç 2017). However, this relegation never fully satisfied Turkish FPEs, whether Kemalist or Islamist, who consistently sought to restore Türkiye's prominence. During the Özal era, Türkiye's foreign policy began to emphasise its imperial history selectively, reintroducing narratives of Ottoman outreach and influence. This shift laid the groundwork for Türkiye's renewed engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa, facilitated by successful re-establishment of ties with former Ottoman regions in the Balkans, the Middle East, and Central Asia (Yavuz 2020).

Türkiye's mental maps, however, portrayed the African continent as two distinct regions (Özkan 2012). The Maghreb was seen as a natural zone of influence due to its historical Ottoman connections and Turkish national (security) interests, while Sub-Saharan Africa was perceived as 'dark, backward, and dangerous' (Donelli 2021). This divide underscored the ideational challenges Türkiye faced in imagining the Sahel as part of its sphere of influence. Kardaş (online interview, 2024), an expert on Türkiye in the international system and its geopolitics, strategy, and ideology, emphasised:

There is definitely an attempt to insert Türkiye's NCR and geopolitical imagination in its foreign policy towards the Sahel. They are the drivers. This is because this region is not at the centre of Türkiye's historical zones, i.e., the Balkans and North Africa. Therefore, Türkiye's engagement in the Sahel is not akin to its reconnecting with history in places like Skopje or Aleppo. It's very different. It's more like helping those in need. Türkiye sees itself as a capable humanitarian actor who is there [in the Sahel] to help the underdeveloped.

This analysis aligns with Türkiye's positioning of itself as a humanitarian actor, emphasising benevolence rather than historical ties in regions like the Sahel. Kurşun (online interview, 2024) concurred with Kardaş, and observed, Türkiye's engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa, unlike its outreach to the Balkans and Central Asia, was not encouraged by international actors. 'The international system has not championed Turkish foreign policy in Africa. Instead, this engagement has developed internally'. This self-driven process reflects Türkiye's NRC as a civilisational state, projecting humanitarianism and anti-colonial solidarity in its foreign policy.

None other than President Erdoğan encapsulated this narrative during his speech in Mauritania, referenced above. Similarly, a senior Turkish government official (online interview, 2024) emphasised, ‘We [Türkiye] continue to assist countries in the [Sahel] region through bilateral programs in order to build up their capacities in various domains from security to economic and social development through our various agencies and private sector’. This reiterates how Türkiye seeks to distinguish itself from Western colonial powers, emphasising cooperation and capacity-building as a cornerstone of its engagement.

Yet, Türkiye’s engagement with the Sahel is not purely altruistic. The region’s political instability, exacerbated by the early 2020s coups in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali as well as a reduced French presence, presents an opportunity for Türkiye. Officially, Ankara opposed such overthrows but advocated constructive dialogue and regional ownership. A senior Turkish government official (online interview, 2024) explained:

We [Türkiye] are against the overthrow of elected governments by illegal means. But isolation of these countries will not contribute to finding solutions. Strengthening regional and international cooperation is vital to end conflicts and ensure stability in crisis areas. In this direction we encourage regional ownership. [Türkiye] will continue to encourage the international community to favour constructive dialogue with these countries to the benefit of the African populations.

This dual approach of officially advocating stability while leveraging diminished French influence reflects Türkiye’s ambitions as a resurgent actor in the Sahel. Yavuz (online interview, 2024) baldly noted, ‘Türkiye wants to replace France and push it out of the Sahel. This is why anti-French protests in Niger and other African countries are often closely followed by the Turkish media’. This framing positions Türkiye as a liberator of African states from Western dependency and aligns with its NRC as a centre country that is also a benevolent actor, which dovetailed with Kardaş’ (online interview, 2024) analysis: ‘This is not a grand strategy. Humanitarian and developmental NGOs from Anatolia were going places before the Turkish government did. Indeed, Turkish society drives the discourse and foreign policy in many ways’. This underscores the organic evolution of Türkiye’s Sahelian engagement, driven by its NRC, rather than purely security-driven national interests.

In summary, Türkiye’s geopolitical imagination and NRC drive its engagement with the Sahel. The combination blends historical narratives, humanitarian ideals, and national interests. While material constraints persist, Ankara’s evolving vision positions it as a civilisational state and centre country capable of balancing its historical identity with contemporary ambitions in Sub-Saharan Africa. These ambitions and the outreach that define them form the focus of the next section.

Engaging the Sahel

The convergence of Türkiye's NRC and its geopolitical imagination has led to an engagement with the Sahel characterised by pragmatism, state and civil society collaboration, and an appreciation for the limits of Turkish power. This engagement is infused with Islamic overtones and serves dual purposes: leveraging cultural and religious affinities to forge relationships while presenting Türkiye as an alternative to Western colonial legacies (Martin 1985; Schritt 2016). This duality ties closely to the theoretical framework, as Türkiye's NRC



Figure 1: Türkiye in relation to the ten countries of the Sahel. Authors' composite map based on United Nations' definition of the Sahel region.

and geopolitical imagination underscore its identity as a civilisational state and a central actor in the Afro-Eurasian macro-region. The motivations behind Türkiye's actions in the Sahel reflect economic interests, political ambition, and a sense of manifest destiny (Figure 1).

Under the JDP, Türkiye has developed a multi-track foreign policy in the Sahel, incorporating state-led initiatives, business activities linked to the JDP, and humanitarian efforts from civil society. This combination pursues financial gain while also seeking to boost political influence and status. Türkiye's belief in manifest destiny drives its efforts to assert its vision and expand its reach, convinced of its role in shaping the future. This dynamic shapes Turkish policies and informs decisions by the JDP elite as they navigate challenges to achieve their goals.

The defence industry, education sector, and infrastructure construction have emerged as critical areas of Türkiye's expansion. In just a few years, these sectors have become not only focal points of Turkish activism in Africa

but also tools for broadening Türkiye's geopolitical presence in the Sahel. These sectors were selected as case studies to illustrate how Türkiye's JDP-affiliated foreign policy plays out on the continent. With active involvement from JDP members and supporters, they provide a sharper insight into this dynamic than other areas, such as humanitarian aid.

Türkiye's Arms Sales

The growing interest in Turkish unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) since 2019, such as the Bayraktar TB2, and other defence equipment, including armoured vehicles, has positioned Ankara as a significant player in African defence markets. These systems, developed with substantial state input and funding, gained global recognition for their battlefield successes in Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Ukraine, and showcased their performance and cost-effectiveness (Kurç 2024). The display effect of Turkish drones outperforming Chinese-made drones and destroying Russian-made tanks further solidified their reputation among African states. In the Sahel alone, countries like Senegal, Nigeria, Niger, Togo, Chad, Mali, and Burkina Faso have procured Turkish UCAVs, with Ethiopia, Morocco, Libya, and Angola also becoming major buyers (Monde 2024; Rossiter and Cannon 2022).

This burgeoning defence trade reflects Türkiye's broader geopolitical ambitions as the centre country building a Türkiye Axis. It is guided by President Erdoğan who has centralised his control and now directly supervises the Presidency of Defense Industries (Turkish: *Savunma Sanayii Başkanlığı*, SSB), which oversees all exports of military technology and hardware.⁷ Affiliated with the Office of the Presidency since 2018, the SSB exerts significant influence over the Defense Industry Manufacturers Association (Turkish: *Savunma Sanayii İmalatçılar Derneği*, SaSaD), which connects private companies, state-owned corporations, and the Turkish armed forces with the JDP political elite (Donelli 2022). This centralised apparatus also promotes defence sales in Africa through military attachés stationed in 18 African countries and financial incentives from Türk Eximbank, which facilitates purchases of Turkish-made defence products, including those from Otokar, BMC, and Roketsan (Cannon 2021; Millî Savunma Bakanlığı 2024).

The strategic promotion of defence exports is what Kurç (2024) has termed multi-track diplomacy. It involves diplomatic outreach, trade missions, and defence expositions. This coordinated effort has been pivotal to Türkiye's exponential growth in arms sales. Beyond hardware, Türkiye has positioned itself as a provider of security training. Turkish officers are training approximately one-third of the Somali National Army (SNA) and special police forces like the *Haramcad* unit in Somalia (Cannon and Rossiter 2019). Over the next decade, Türkiye

aims to expand its role as a security provider across African states and reinforce its image as a partner capable of addressing security challenges.

Türkiye's growing presence in African defence markets underscores its ambition to project influence as a macro-regional power. By actively promoting arms sales, security cooperation, and military training, Ankara aligns its defence strategy with its NRC and geopolitical imagination as centre country. This approach reflects Türkiye's vision of transcending traditional nation-state boundaries and asserting its presence across the Afro-Eurasian macro-region. Notably, Türkiye's military engagements in Africa resonate with historical parallels. Ankara's emphasis on security provision harks back to Ottoman assistance to the Muslim Adal Sultanate (in today's Republic of Somaliland) against the Portuguese in the 16th century. Similarly, its current focus on relatively weak Sahelian states threatened by non-state actors reflects a geopolitical imaginary of Türkiye as uniquely equipped to address such challenges. Accordingly, the defence sector represents a tangible expansion of Türkiye's geopolitical presence in Africa and combines economic interests with historical narratives. The supply of defence equipment and security training allows Türkiye to cultivate elite-to-elite relationships and goes some way in reviving imagined connections with its Ottoman past while navigating contemporary political realities. This strategic interplay of hardware supply, military cooperation, and historical resonance underscores Ankara's ambition to consolidate its role as a trans-regional power and security provider in Africa.

Education Outreach

The education sector exemplifies how Türkiye's engagement in Africa initially stemmed from civil society initiatives before transitioning into state-led efforts. During the early 2000s, organisations affiliated with the Fethullah Gülen movement pioneered educational outreach, establishing schools aimed at the children of African elites (Shinn 2015). These schools catered to upper-middle-class families and offered scholarships to the children of senior bureaucrats to gain leverage with local officials (Angey-Sentuc 2015). This elitist approach sought to create networks among future African ruling classes to expand the movement's base and advance its economic and political objectives.

Following the 2016 coup attempt, the Gülen-affiliated schools became a liability for Türkiye's JDP-affiliated rulers. Ankara quickly identified the movement as a national security threat and made the dismantling of Gülen-linked institutions a central plank of its foreign policy (Donelli 2019; Yavuz and Koç 2016). The Turkish government established the Maarif Foundation,

a hybrid public-private entity tied to the Ministry of Education, to assume control of Gülenist schools abroad. However, this process required the cooperation of local authorities, which sometimes caused tensions with African governments. In mid-2016, for example, Gülen-linked schools operated in 36 African countries, with significant penetration in the Sahel and West Africa, including over 40 institutions in Mali, Niger, and Senegal. Since then, Türkiye has leveraged its diplomatic and economic relationships to replace these schools with Maarif-run institutions in countries such as Somalia, Cameroon, Sudan, and Senegal (Akgün and Özkan 2020).

Parallel to the Maarif Foundation's activities, Türkiye expanded its public diplomacy through Yunus Emre Institutes (Turkish: *Yunus Emre Enstitüsü*), which promote Turkish language and culture, and the Turkish Scholarship System (Turkish: *Türkiye Bursları Sistemi*, TBBS). The latter focuses on cultivating long-term relationships by offering scholarships to Africa's most talented students, regardless of socioeconomic background. Since the programme's inception, over 60,000 African students have received scholarships to study in Türkiye (Yahya 2023). Graduates are encouraged to maintain ties with Türkiye upon returning to their home countries or joining the Turkish labour market, fostering future economic, political, and cultural links.

Education outreach also underscores Türkiye's use of cultural and religious dimensions to enhance its soft power. As part of this effort, Türkiye has financed the construction and renovation of mosques, wells, and fountains in countries with significant Muslim populations, including Burkina Faso, Mali, Djibouti, and Chad. Notably, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Turkish: *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) supported the construction of Ghana's national mosque in Accra. These projects serve dual purposes: reinforcing Türkiye's religious ties and asserting its civilisational identity in Africa. However, while these initiatives often evoke Ottoman connections, they also highlight the gaps between Türkiye's geopolitical imagination and reality. For instance, the restoration of the Sultan Valida Mosque in Serbia demonstrates how cultural restoration serves as a tool for fostering closer relations with former Ottoman territories (Todorović 2021). Similarly, Türkiye's promotional work for the Agadez Sultanate in Niger reflects an effort to integrate far-flung historical connections into its narrative, even as such ties remain largely symbolic (Bulur 2018).

In the broader geopolitical context, the education sector reveals Türkiye's ability to adapt and leverage both bottom-up and top-down approaches. Civil society organisations like the Gülen movement initially played a pivotal role in expanding Türkiye's educational footprint. They created ties aligned with their vision of Türkiye as a Muslim leader and civilisational state. However, the JDP consolidated these initiatives post-

2016, and redirected them to align with its own vision of Türkiye as a macro-regional power and centre country.

This evolution in Türkiye's education policy aligns closely with its NRC and geopolitical imagination by projecting Ankara as a civilisational state and centre country with a mission and mandate to forge people-to-people ties. By providing alternatives to Western education models, Türkiye has now positioned itself as a unique partner capable of addressing local needs while challenging dominant Western narratives in Africa.

This strategy also reflects Ankara's geopolitical rivalry with other major powers in Africa. By offering alternatives to French- and English-speaking schools, Türkiye positions itself as a distinct partner in education. Its scholarship programmes and cultural projects not only challenge Western influence but also amplify Türkiye's projection of geo-cultural power in regions like the Sahel. These efforts demonstrate Ankara's ability to integrate its NRC into practical policy, creating lasting connections that contribute to Türkiye's growing influence in Africa.

Finally, Türkiye's emphasis on education illustrates its adaptability in navigating complex political landscapes. For instance, while Ankara initially outsourced much of its public diplomacy to non-state actors, it has since centralised these efforts under state agencies like Maarif and Yunus Emre. This shift reflects Türkiye's ambition to shape its relationships in Africa while addressing domestic security concerns.

Infrastructure Engagement

The construction sector exemplifies Türkiye's elite-to-elite diplomacy in Africa. It also reflects just how JDP-affiliated business people have leveraged civil society's initial openings and state-led multi-track diplomacy. This strategy underscores Türkiye's NRC and geopolitical imagination, as infrastructure projects serve as a tangible extension of its macro-regional ambitions. Summa, for instance, is a multi-sector Turkish company led by Selim Bora that has played a pivotal role in Türkiye's construction activities across Africa. Bora, a close confidante of Erdoğan, reportedly met Equatorial Guinea's President Teodoro Obiang Nguema in Tripoli in 2010, leading to a contract for the construction of a conference centre used for the 2011 African Union (AU) summit (Africa Intelligence 2019). Following this initial success, Summa secured additional contracts for shopping malls and government buildings in Equatorial Guinea, along with a three-year tax exemption. Bora's relationship with Obiang eventually facilitated closer ties between Obiang and Erdoğan, with Obiang attending Erdoğan's presidential

inauguration in 2018. Beyond Equatorial Guinea, Nguema's associates, including relatives, have favoured Turkish companies, awarding contracts to firms like Aksa Enerji, owned by JDP supporter Ali Metin Kazancı (Africa Intelligence 2020).

Elsewhere in the Sahel, Summa has expanded its footprint with significant projects, including a new airport, a conference centre for the 2019 AU summit, and government complexes in Niger. It has also renovated hotels in Benin, managed Dakar's airport in Senegal, and completed additional infrastructure projects. These activities reflect the broader dynamic of Türkiye's construction sector, where decades of JDP rule have blurred the lines between political and business elites. Figures like Bora and Kazancı epitomise how the sector has evolved into a vehicle for Turkish influence abroad, supported by state-to-state diplomacy and the groundwork laid by ambassadors and defence attachés (Esen and Gumuscu 2018).

Türkiye's infrastructure projects, from railroads in Tanzania to stadiums in Rwanda, illustrate how its NRC and geopolitical imagination shape foreign policy across the Afro-Eurasian macro-region. These efforts, initially driven by civil society educational outreach in the 1990s, have been consolidated by JDP-affiliated business elites, who forge elite-to-elite connections. This shift highlights the marginalisation of grassroots initiatives as the state and political elites exert greater control over Türkiye's foreign engagements.

By building critical infrastructure, Türkiye competes with major powers like China and France to position itself as a macro-regional power. This strategy reflects its Ottoman legacy, where influence was projected by connecting the centre with the periphery. Today, this vision is embodied in infrastructure projects and the strategic role of Turkish Airlines in linking African capitals to Türkiye and beyond.

Türkiye's construction activities combine NRC, economic interests, and geopolitical aspirations. Beyond fostering trade and diplomatic ties, they reinforce Türkiye's self-image as a benevolent and resourceful actor, projecting soft power while strengthening relationships with African elites.

In summary, Türkiye's infrastructure engagements exemplify its strategic use of elite-to-elite diplomacy to expand its geopolitical influence. These initiatives align with its ambition to position itself as a macro-regional power, blending economic pragmatism with historical narratives of grandeur and connectivity. The construction sector thus demonstrates how Türkiye integrates its geopolitical imagination into actionable policies.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates the unique explanatory power of integrating geopolitical imagination and NRC to analyse Türkiye's engagement with the Sahel. The study of foreign policy has all-too-often relied on geopolitics to explain

the behaviour of FPEs. In this article, the application of NRC theory provides a systematic understanding of the internal and external factors shaping FPEs' perceptions. Additionally, geopolitical imagination highlights the constructed mental maps and historical narratives that inform state behaviour. By applying this combined framework to Türkiye's foreign policy, particularly in the Sahel, the research and findings advance our understanding of non-Western actors in global politics and offers an original analytical lens for examining Türkiye's motivations, strategies, and growing role in reshaping regional power dynamics.

Contrary to the perception of Türkiye's Sahel policy as a recent phenomenon, our analysis reveals an embedded historical continuity rooted in Türkiye's self-perception as an Afro-Eurasian centre country. This vision, blending historical destiny and pragmatic adaptation, has evolved from the Ottoman period to the present and reflects Türkiye's enduring geopolitical aspirations. However, the study also reveals Türkiye's limitations: while Ottoman outreach to the Sahel in the 19th century was thwarted by European imperial dominance and internal fragility, the Cold War-era Turkish Republic faced material constraints and external pressures that limited its ambitions.

The convergence of geopolitical imagination and NRC helps explain Türkiye's dual approach in the Sahel. On one hand, Türkiye positions itself as a benevolent, Islamic alternative to Western former colonial powers, drawing on Islamic symbolism and anti-colonial rhetoric to amplify its global positioning. On the other hand, pragmatic economic and strategic interests, at times, drive its actions. For example, defence exports and military training reflect Türkiye's ambition to address regional security challenges and position itself as a security provider. Simultaneously, educational and infrastructure projects cater to local development needs while reinforcing Türkiye's image as a unique partner, capable of competing with more powerful actors like China and France.

Under the JDP, Türkiye has increasingly leveraged shifting global dynamics and enhanced material capabilities to pursue its aspirations in the Sahel. Yet, this expansion also reflects deeply ingrained mental maps and historical narratives that align Türkiye's foreign policy with its self-perception as a civilisational state. The Turkish narrative resonates internationally by distinguishing Türkiye from Western powers and domestically by bolstering the JDP's claim to fulfil Türkiye's historical mission of leadership across Afro-Eurasia.

This study makes significant contributions to the foreign policy literature. First, it highlights how the convergence of NRC and geopolitical imagination can explain state behaviour, particularly in non-Western contexts. Second, it provides a nuanced understanding of Türkiye's foreign policy in Sub-Saharan Africa that underscores the interplay of national identity, NRC, and

aspirational goals alongside material constraints. By framing Türkiye's actions in the Sahel as an evolution of its geopolitical imagination and NRC, the study demonstrates how Türkiye challenges traditional power hierarchies and offers alternative models of engagement.

In conclusion, Türkiye's engagement in the Sahel emerges as a compelling case study that underscores the enduring influence of NRC and geopolitical imagination in a state's foreign policy practice and trajectory. Türkiye's self-perception as a centre country and civilisational state not only acts as one of the most powerful drivers of its foreign policy but also reveals the persistence of historical narratives and the evolving nature of its strategic ambitions. While structural and material constraints remain significant, the research results affirm that Türkiye's foreign policy trajectory is guided as much by identity and historical aspiration as by contemporary geopolitical realities.

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Notes

1. After the Turkification of Central Asia, interestingly, Turan became a reference and mobilising force among Pan-Turkic movements in the form of Turanism (Arai 2021).
2. The founder of modern Türkiye, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, used this phrase in a speech delivered on 29 October 1933 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Republic's founding.
3. For more on lived versus remembered identity, see (Mansbach and Rhodes 2007; Panossian 2002)
4. We define Türkiye's imperial identity as one that privileges historical continuity (rather than emphasising the Kemalist rupture), pan-Muslim identity and cultural affinity, and cooperative and/or humanitarian initiatives. See (Çınar 2020; Walker 2009; Yavuz 2020).
5. For a fascinating account of imperial puppeteering and 'cartopolitics' that have invented the Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots as identity categories and perpetuated their antagonism, see (Bueno-Lacy and van Houtum 2022)
6. For more on cooptation as a distinct form of cooperation, see (Kruck and Zangl 2019).
7. The English name was changed in May 2022 to Defence Industry Agency.

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