

# Turkey-Africa Relations and Turkey's National Role Conception as the Centre Country: Continuity or a Break with the Past?

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## ABSTRACT

The increase in Turkey's visibility and power in Sub-Saharan Africa has attracted great attention. The rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the AK Party, the story goes, engendered an abrupt shift from a cautious to a proactive foreign policy. We posit, however, that the seeds of Turkey's opening to Africa date back decades and are an extension of its centre country (*merkez ülke*) national role conception. Turkey only appeared cautious prior to the 2000s because of resource constraints. Instead, Ankara's political leaders of all stripes have shared a common conception of Turkey as something far bigger than the nation-state, and have fostered policies aimed at enhancing its agency of action (limited by structural and resource constraints) so as to resume Turkey's role as Afro-Eurasia's centre country. This national role conception coupled with an increase in Turkey's national power since the 1980s have resulted in its opening to and subsequent engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa.

## KEYWORDS

national role conception; Turkey; foreign policy; Africa; national power; international relations

## Introduction

The theory that Turkish foreign policy experienced a 'breakout' moment when the Justice and Development Party (Turkish: *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, hereafter AKP) came to power in 2002 dominates the literature.<sup>1</sup> The narrative goes that Turkey's foreign policy, from the founding of the Republic in 1923, was cautious, inward looking, and ambivalent about areas outside its near abroad until the AKP, led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, came to Ankara. At that point, almost overnight, Turkish foreign policy became adventurous and proactive within increasingly larger concentric circles emanating outwards from the country.

While our description of the literature is overly simplistic, it nonetheless explains why so many see Turkey's opening to Sub-Saharan Africa as a fundamental break with the past.<sup>2</sup> Relatedly, the central place of systemic and structural factors as well as the definition and mobilizing power of Turkey's national role conception are overlooked. Taken together, changes in national power and continuity in national role conception, we argue, form the drivers of Turkey's engagement with the African continent. The deeper analysis offered here, accordingly, uncovers a national role conception 'thread' that runs through the past century of Turkish Republican history that is contextualized within the

evolution of structural and systemic factors that conspired to constrain Turkey's potential as an Afro-Eurasian power for the first 75 years of the Republic.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it contextualizes Turkey's engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa historically in terms of its national role conception and national power (resource) constraints. An analysis of Turkey's opening to Africa in the context of Turkey's manifest destiny as the centre country (*merkez ülke*) follows and includes the results of interviews with subject matter experts. The penultimate section illuminates the *raison d'être* of Ankara's Africa engagement: its national role conception as the 'centre country'. In doing so, the primacy of historical memory, national power, and national role conception as drivers of Turkey's opening to Africa is unveiled. We conclude the article with some prescriptive analysis about the future of Turkey-Africa relations.

## National role conception

Turkey's political elite, from founders of the Republic like İsmet İnönü to mild Islamists like Necmettin Erbakan, have been characterized by their supposed inability to choose between East and West. This either-or perception by outsiders has failed to recognize Turkey's place and role in great power politics stretching back to the early nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Whipsawed between Western attempts to dismember it or save it from Russian/Soviet territorial aggrandizement, Turkey's rulers found themselves—like the Ottoman sultans before them—omnibalancing to please a diverse and often mistrustful domestic constituency and the overweening demands of great powers like Great Britain or the United States.<sup>4</sup>

Out of this cauldron came Turkey's Janus-faced international affairs stance, one that privileged partners in the West for national security reasons but was also anti-West in terms of the international order.<sup>5</sup> In short, Turkish leaders from Adnan Menderes to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have possessed the desire to influence, if not overturn, the post-War US-led order. Turkey's NATO membership, rather than being understood as an exception in Ankara's foreign policy, should therefore be viewed as the rule. That is, Turkey's leaders have fought to maintain as much agency—sovereignty of action—as possible, despite facing considerable systemic and structural constraints. Ankara's leaders—secular, religious or otherwise—share this goal, and have paid it a considerable price and even endured punishment in its pursuit.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Ankara's tentative moves to reassert itself in its own region—most glaringly in its military intervention in Cyprus in 1974—should be understood in this light in that it resulted in Western opprobrium and arms embargoes.

This historical continuity is mutually constitutive of Turkey's national role conception as the centre country. In other words, Turkey's 'natural' role as the centre country has been omnipresent but, due to various factors, has rarely been able to materialize. That Turkey has only recently fitted into this role, we hold, does not mitigate its explanatory power in terms of Ankara's opening to, first, the Middle East, then Central Asia and the Balkans and now, Sub-Saharan Africa.

First analysed by Holsti,<sup>7</sup> and then refined by other scholars,<sup>8</sup> theories of national role conception identify elements that shape the general types of decisions, rules, commitments, and long-term international functions associated with a single state. Within International Relations literature, there is broad understanding that a state or

person's 'role' expectations (i.e., the role the state is expected to play) and performance (i.e., state performance in terms of the state's role) constitute its national role conception. Importantly, Holsti emphasized state agency within this construct and posited that the actions of a particular state are also informed by '... policymaker's own conceptions of their nation's role in a region or in the international system as a whole'.<sup>9</sup> They are also derived from geographic location, resources, leader personality, domestic opinion and national values/ideology.<sup>10</sup> According to Krotz and Sperling, 'national role concepts result from national historical experiences and memories and from the dominant interpretation of what these remembered experiences mean or imply [...]'.<sup>11</sup> In turn, these historical memories—both chosen glories and traumas—influence the perceptions of foreign policy elites in terms of their country's position and status within the international system.<sup>12</sup> National role conceptions are, therefore, the sum of policymakers' perceptions about the role of their state in the international system. Their conceptions may thus determine the guidelines and norms that their state attempts to implement and therefore national role conception has a significant impact on the state's foreign policy behaviour and provides a useful explanatory variable in terms of a state's formation of interests and its foreign policy conduct.

National role conception theory has been criticized for its emphasis on foreign policy elites as representative of a state as well as its lack of emphasis on other systemic and structural factors that may influence a state's national role conception and, thus, its foreign policies.<sup>13</sup> To strike a balance between structural factors and the black box of elite decision making, we subscribe to the view that roles are a '... two-way process between structure and actor'.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, in the main, we agree with Aras and Gorener that '... what matters most for foreign policy is the role conceptions that shape the ruling elite's imagination'.<sup>15</sup> This is particularly the case in Turkey where dominant elites, whether Kemalists (civilian or military) or the more current conservative Islamists, have determined Turkey's foreign policy direction,<sup>16</sup> despite the overall political liberalization that has occurred, with fits and starts, since the mid-1980s.<sup>17</sup>

We build on the work of Pehlivanurk and other scholars that shows Turkey's national role conception as having continuity, on the one hand, but also exhibiting phases with, relatedly, different levels of international activism on account of structural or international systemic factors such as the Cold War rivalry.<sup>18</sup> Both the continuity and phases were, in turn, heavily influenced by memories of Ottoman centrality and power within the European system of states, the trauma of the unimplemented Treaty of Sèvres (Sèvres syndrome), as well as its uncomfortable security alliance with the West.<sup>19</sup>

Because successive Turkish political elites have tended to mirror their population's mistrust of the West—despite Kemalist attempts to societally engineer a Western-looking society—commitments to what are viewed in the West as broadly incompatible national roles, whether pan-Islamist, non-internationalist, or regional leader, lead to some considerable difficulty in determining which national roles were being performed in any set of circumstances. Part of this stems from Turkey's relative material shortcomings (national power) vis-à-vis the West, which, in turn, has dictated its place in the international hierarchy of states.<sup>20</sup> This, we assess, in part, explains why Turkey's national role conception has exhibited the phases à la Pehlivanurk, from non-internationalist circa 1923–1945 to regional subsystem

collaborator during the Cold War to regional leader circa 2000–2016 and finally to revisionist and reformist, to date.<sup>21</sup>

Our departure from previous research on Turkey's national role conception in our assessment is twofold. First, while each phase has been marked by the ideas and preferences of the different ruling elites (east vs. west, secular vs. religious), Turkey's desired role—its ideal national role as the centre country—has been out of reach on account of systemic and/or domestic resource constraints. Second, we see continuity across leaders in both Turkey's national role conception as centre country and its attempts to maintain and expand Turkey's 'actorness' and agency. For example, Ankara's mayor, Nevzat Tandoğan (1929–1946) argued: 'If nationalism is necessary, we [Turkey] will peddle it. If communism is required, then we will indeed make sure that it is introduced', in reference to the agency of the state vis-à-vis society.<sup>22</sup> But the same could be said for the way Turkey has prosecuted its foreign policies to maintain the primary national interests of the Turkish state. Decades later and echoing Tandoğan, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu identified Turkey's national role conception as the centre country (*merkez ülke*) and defined it as an expression of Turkey's 'mobility and actorness' within its wider region, first, and in the international system, subsequently.<sup>23</sup> While the term, in Turkey, has not figured in policy discourse much until the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is manifest in related terms such as bridge, crossroads, regional leader, protector, and global player.

The efforts to maintain mobility and actorness, however, have not always produced the desired results. Turkey's leaders, to maintain agency of action, put into practice autarkic policies that exacerbated the already severe resource constraints brought on by its defeat in 1918, its victory in Turkish War of Independence in 1923, the Great Depression and, finally, World War II. As such, the desire of Turkey's leaders to reintroduce the country to what they believed was its proper international standing—the centre country—was stymied until later in the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Nevertheless, evidence of their general aim to first reassert Turkey's primacy in its near abroad and then within progressively wider concentric circles of geography emanating outwards from its position at the juncture of Afro-Eurasia does emerge via a cursory reading of history beginning with 1922's National Pact,<sup>24</sup> followed by the Saadabad Pact of 1937,<sup>25</sup> the Baghdad Pact of 1955,<sup>26</sup> and 1958's Phantom Pact,<sup>27</sup> as well as Turkey's decision to send a delegation to 1955's Bandung Conference, also known as the African-Asian Conference. While the first can be viewed as reaction to immediate conditions after the First World War and the others tied to the rubric of multilateralism decreed by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, it and the others also appear as points along an evolutionary national role conception line. The same is true of the Bandung Conference. Turkey's delegation came with an anti-Communist agenda and argued that non-alignment was tantamount to giving up a state's sovereignty.<sup>28</sup> This tarred Turkey with the brush of being America's Trojan Horse at Bandung. But Turkey's decision to send a delegation should only partially be understood in this context given the asymmetrical nature of US-Turkey relations.<sup>29</sup> In addition, such analysis fails to take into account Turkey's own interests in maintaining its agency of action: It could better do so if the Bandung attendee countries remained part of a non-Communist 'Rest'.

## The place of Africa in Turkish foreign policy

It is within the context of Turkey's national role conception as the centre country that Africa, in general, and Sub-Saharan Africa, more particularly, finds its place in Turkish foreign policy. Turkey's multitude of policies implemented in Africa over the decades, such as the growth of its diplomatic presence, are viewed (and are purposely meant to be understood), inside and outside the country, as proof of the country's growing political, economic, and military power and, concomitantly, its rising international stature. In this, the weight of Turkey's imperial past, what Samir Puri has termed the 'imperial hangover',<sup>30</sup> should not be dismissed lightly.

Leaving aside the far-too-simplistic neo-Ottoman rhetoric employed by media that sees Turkey's role from Somalia to Bosnia as teleological ('we were there then and so we're back now'),<sup>31</sup> we can see vestiges of the legacy of Ottoman Turkey's clash with Europe and Russia and its subsequent fall from imperial grandeur. 'Any evocations of so called neo-Ottomanist tendencies in Turkey foreign policy [over the past 20 years] would be too generalized and would disregard the traditionally existing relations' between Turkey and its near abroad, particularly Muslim-majority states, as early as the first decades of the Turkish Republic.<sup>32</sup> Like China, Turkey faced its own 'century of humiliation', a trauma that runs shallower on account of Turkey's successes in its independence war against Greece and its Western supporters. Nevertheless, Turkey has defined and continues to redefine itself in terms of its national role conception against these historical high and low points and couples these with its strategic geography at the meeting point of Afro-Eurasia. It is in this vein, we argue, that Turkey's emergence as a resident power in its wider region (Central Asia, the Balkans, the Middle East, North Africa) should be understood.

Sub-Saharan Africa plays an admittedly more peripheral and opportunistic role for Turkey, but one that is nonetheless engendered and informed by Turkey's national role conception as the centre country. When Turkey's actions and presence across Africa are placed alongside Turkey's G20 membership and its role as armed drone exporter par excellence, they are considered appropriate and commensurate with Turkey's centre country national role conception—its proper place internationally according to both its political elite and citizenry.<sup>33</sup> This more globalized national role conception should, thus, not be viewed as a rupture with previous political ideologies or an identity shift. Rather, it is an extension of what Öniş and Yılmaz saw as a move from 'Europeanism' towards 'soft-Euroasianism' or, as we term it, 'soft-Afro-Eurasianism'.<sup>34</sup> In other words, according to Turkey's centre country role, Turkey is living up to its destiny, and its actions in Sub-Saharan Africa bolster this conception. Thus, the key variable to explaining Turkey's foreign policy in Sub-Saharan Africa, we hypothesize, lies squarely in the realm of national power rather than within international systemic constraints, as was the case with Turkey's historical engagement (or lack thereof) with the Balkans and Central Asia.

## Turkey's opening to Africa

Turkey's outreach to Sub-Saharan Africa began after the Cyprus War in 1974 which left Turkey internationally isolated and exacerbated its economic and fiscal weaknesses.<sup>35</sup> To limit its isolation and maintain agency, Turkey briefly engaged in aid and diplomacy in

Africa. Begun in 1978 under Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit, it opened embassies in Somalia and Tanzania and signed a flurry of cooperation agreements.<sup>36</sup> Turkey's third coup, in 1980, brought an end to these efforts and the military junta attempted to reengineer the domestic political landscape via a new, politically restrictive constitution. Simultaneously, it promoted a state ideology known as the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis.<sup>37</sup>

Because the junta favoured conservative forces (as opposed to leftists), a soft rehabilitation of certain religious elements began that was accompanied by a more laissez faire economic space, relative to the previous decades, within the country. It was in this climate that Turgut Özal (Prime Minister, 1983–1989) emerged. During the so-called Özal decade, Turkey's foreign policy began to exhibit what many have termed an 'opening'. This reflected Turkey's greater material capabilities and confidence, which followed the International Monetary Fund's prescriptions, the so-called January 24 decisions,<sup>38</sup> and the Özal government's opening of the Turkish economy to investment as well as its encouragement of direct exports to more markets. In turn, it favoured the emergence of a new ruling class that represented conservative groups (*muhafazakârlar*) that had been traditionally excluded in Turkish Republican politics, society, and economy.<sup>39</sup>

Supported by petrol-dollars from the Arab Gulf states, the so-called Anatolian Tigers with their *Mittelstand* focus on quality, niche products complemented the entry of new, more outwardly pious cadres from the Anatolian heartland into government ministries.<sup>40</sup> This empowered counter-elite possessed identities connected to Turkey's Islamic Ottoman past in a way that their West-looking Kemalist, secular counterparts did not.<sup>41</sup> What both largely agreed on, however, was that Turkey's sovereignty of action should be maximized and its regional and international status should be raised. In short, they were all Turkish nationalists with imperial memories, albeit with different outlooks and ideals.<sup>42</sup>

During the Özal years, Turkey's foreign policy and its role within the international community of states were reimagined as Turkey's stately past and the chosen memories of Turkish centrality in world affairs began to take centre stage. The combination of greater resources coupled with the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and Soviet Union formed a crucial watershed in Turkey's advancement of its centre country role. 'A dam broke when the Soviet Union fell apart and this allowed Turkey to act in places that had been off limits for decades', such as Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Balkans.<sup>43</sup> However, Tunçer recalled, 'We [Turkey] were not ready for the USSR's collapse. We did not have the tools or resources to fully engage with Central Asian countries, for example. Government ministries like TİKA did not exist and there were shortcomings at first'.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, Turkey's clumsy efforts eventually paid off as it built up its machinery of government and mobilized greater resources to operationalize its national role conception.

It was around the same time and in this way that Sub-Saharan Africa, while marginal, truly re-entered the mental map of Turkish foreign policymakers. Özal introduced Turkish soft power as part of Ankara's renewed relations with the former Ottoman dominions or places with Turkic populations. Specifically, his Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*, ANAP) promoted TİKA's work in the development and education sectors, such as Turkish language courses and schools that acted as vanguards of Turkish cultural diplomacy.<sup>45</sup> However, Özal was constrained in his intentions to promote Turkey, like the country's previous leaders, on account of a chronically unreliable economy.

A pan-Islamist foreign policy interlude followed in the late 1990s, after a series of True Path Party (*Doğru Yol Partisi*, DYP) and ANAP leaders. Led by Necmettin Erbakan



(Prime Minister, 1996–1997) and his Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*), Turkey's outreach to the Middle East and Africa via Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood began to take shape.<sup>46</sup> After the military-backed 'Post-modern coup' removed Erbakan and his party from power in 1997, the Kemalist elite again gained ascendancy. Led by Turkey's foreign minister, İsmail Cem, they developed a vision with two objectives. First, to revitalize Ankara's relationship with Europe (to which Turkey belonged, historically, geographically, and economically),<sup>47</sup> and second, to again turn Turkey into a pivotal, crossroads country—the region's undisputed power – à la Özal's vision.<sup>48</sup>

According to Cem, Turkey was called upon to expand its areas of activity and interest as a nation at the core of the so-called Afro-Eurasia regional macro-area. The foreign minister, thus, understood Turkey as an Afro-Eurasian state both integral and belonging to three continents. This conception followed a commercial and political logic and foreshadowed some of the traits of what would become known as the trading-state foreign policy.<sup>49</sup> He was convinced that Turkey had the right credentials for such a role: it was an industrial country with a diversified economy, a democracy, and possessed a well-trained and equipped military.<sup>50</sup>

The multi-oriented approach led to a definitive opening to other regions, and Cem pioneered Turkey's first comprehensive agenda to engage with Africa politically and economically. The Foreign Ministry organized a series of meetings involving interested parties, including the few Turkish ambassadors to African states, in order to discuss the topic of 'Opening a Gateway to Africa'.<sup>51</sup> As a result, in 1998, Cem promoted the drafting of Turkey's 'Opening to Africa Action Plan' (*Afrika'ya Açılım Eylem Planı*).<sup>52</sup> The plan was based on the finding that the level of relations between Turkey and Africa was too low and too underdeveloped.<sup>53</sup> It aimed to raise the level of cooperation and bilateral relations with African countries by opening three new embassies, among others.<sup>54</sup> Yet, this was not a top-down agenda pushed by Ankara. Rather, the plan noted private sector criticism of Ankara's lack of engagement with Africa and the many missed opportunities. Economic measure were central, therefore, and Turkey aimed to sign agreements with various states on trade, double taxation avoidance, protection of mutual investments, and businesses visits.<sup>55</sup> On security-related issues, the plan aimed at improving cooperation in military training, the Turkish contribution to UN peacekeeping activities, and the invitation to African countries for military exercises in Turkey.<sup>56</sup>

Everything seemed ready for the start of a fresh era of Turkey-Africa relations, but resources were again lacking. In addition, while a handful of policymakers seemed positively visionary when it came to developing ties with states in Sub-Saharan Africa, no radical shifts in the Turkish publics' perception of Africa had occurred; Africa was still too peripheral and unimportant to Turkey. This also was the case for the majority of Turkey's political elite, to which Africa south of the Sahara remained unknown. Turkey's opening to Africa was therefore postponed on account of continuing domestic instability, severe economic recession between 1999 and 2001, and naiveté.<sup>57</sup>

## The AKP era and Turkey's manifest destiny

At the beginning of the new millennium, Turkey's relations with Sub-Saharan Africa were poor despite some modest signalling on the part of Ankara under Cem. The beginning of the AKP era with Erdoğan's election in 2002, led to an invigoration of

Turkey's ongoing opening to Africa, albeit with changes as civil society became more integrated into the ruling bureaucracy.<sup>58</sup> By 2005, for example, foreign policymaking had become the preserve of more diverse, outwardly pious, civilian bureaucrats who were informed by their Islamist worldviews.<sup>59</sup> Rather than being isolationist or somehow opposed to Turkey's centre country national role conception, however, they were complementary and supportive. Anatolia's pious bourgeoisie understood Turkey's centre country within the context of global Islam, with Turkey playing a leading role as it had in Ottoman times. Their worldview and actions were, in turn, mutually constituted by career diplomats who, despite their Kemalist culture and ideology and differing tactics, broadly supported the same strategy of maintaining Turkey's agency of action and maximizing its centre country role.

With the change of many foreign policy elites in the 2000s, the preferences about and perceptions of Turkey and its international context also changed.<sup>60</sup> The most indicative (and influential) figure was Ahmet Davutoğlu, at the time Prime Minister Erdoğan's foreign policy adviser. According to Davutoğlu, Turks must claim their historical and geopolitical status as *the* centre country (*merkez ülke*).<sup>61</sup> Davutoğlu, like Cem, rejected the passive bridge narrative, but he also rejected Cem's idea of Turkey as a crossroads and a country that was peripheral rather than central to Afro-Eurasia.<sup>62</sup>

The idea of being at the centre influenced Turkey's multidirectional foreign policy that is, in hindsight, understood as a specific feature of the AKP's foreign policy.<sup>63</sup> But it also built on previous diversification efforts. Crucially, the AKP epoch dovetailed with the development and definition of a foreign policy that synthesized Turkish Islamist global conceptions of Turkey as a global, civilization state. Remarkably, as Turkey emerged from recession with strong economic growth, the government now possessed the national power necessary to transform Turkish foreign policy.<sup>64</sup> Successive AKP-led governments in the 2000s, for instance, experienced favourable economic growth that not only rehabilitated the country's international image but empowered the AKP's peculiar twist on Turkey's national role conception.<sup>65</sup> This was clothed with a rhetoric and symbolism that recalled Turkey's leading political role in the Islamic world during its Ottoman past. In other words, Erdoğan and his cohort saw (and continue to see) Turkey as a civilization state, not merely a nation-state defined by its borders.<sup>66</sup>

Although it is often portrayed as a neo-imperial strategy, the AKP's championing of neo-Ottomanism and Turkey as a civilization state should be understood as part of Turkey's manifest destiny from which it neither can nor should escape. Rather than attempting to re-establish territorial control à la the Ottomans, Turkey's ruling elite takes inspiration from selective memories of the trappings of Ottoman grandeur and prestige and its role as the centre country spanning both East and West. And like the Ottomans before them, the AKP elite builds monuments to itself such as the presidential 'White Palace' in Ankara or Istanbul's third bridge across the Bosphorus (named after Ottoman Sultan Yavuz Sultan Selim). From this national role conception comes not only the idea of being central in world politics but also a series of burdens and responsibilities.<sup>67</sup> According to Yavuz:

There is a dream of empire in Turkey; it has never fully internalized the nation-state concept. Turkey is bigger than its boundaries. In addition, Turkey increasingly sees itself as only gaining security if it has influence from Sarajevo to Baku and beyond. In short, there



is this imagined Turkish cultural space that has a major impact on and is pronounced among the wider population, not just the elite. Turkey's engagement with Africa is representative of this. It employs Islamic symbols and language because Turkey's rulers and much of its population see themselves as leader of the Muslim World.<sup>68</sup>

Our research is partially borne out by an analysis of transcripts, speeches, interviews, and articles that show Turkey's 21<sup>st</sup> century foreign policy has increasingly been informed by its national role conceptions of regional leader, protector, and global player.<sup>69</sup> This sense of destiny engendered by its national role conception as the centre country is particularly evident in how Turkey has approached the continent since Erdoğan proclaimed the Year of Africa in 2005.<sup>70</sup> Ankara's policies have shown a mix of paternalism and partnership. They have also been a source of inspiration as seen in Turkey's championing of several demands by African regions or states.<sup>71</sup> This, in turn, has helped place Ankara within a group of states that aim to claim a greater say in global governance,<sup>72</sup> a trend summarized by Erdoğan's oft-repeated mantra to African leaders that 'the world is bigger than five'.<sup>73</sup> Davutoğlu himself summed up his country's self-image, back in 2007, when he claimed that '... Turkey is a Middle Eastern, Balkans, Caucasian, Central Asian, Caspian, Mediterranean, Gulf, and Black Sea country all at the same time' in terms of its sphere of influence.<sup>74</sup> That Africa was not included in this statement is unsurprising. Sustained and progressively greater engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa can be dated to Erdoğan's visit to Somalia in late 2011. Rather, in 2007, Davutoğlu and the ruling AKP were still attempting to consolidate—with varying results—their position of prominence within these regions stretching from Adriatic to the western border of China, and from Astana to Abu Dhabi.

### Turkey and Africa in three stages

Turkey's AKP-era foreign policies and engagement with Africa south of the Sahara occurred in three stages. During the first stage (2005–2011), Turkey used various tools to consolidate its diplomatic and economic relations with African countries. In a few years, Ankara's multitrack approach to the continent favoured Turkey's rapid opening to a growing number of African countries, allowing it to increase its popularity in the eyes of Africans and, critically, their ruling elites.<sup>75</sup> Turkey also began to reap its first political and economic gains. Since 2010, the Turkish presence on the African continent has grown exponentially, multiplying the number of diplomatic representations (from 12 embassies to 43) and increasing trade volume with Sub-Saharan Africa (from \$1.35 bn/2003 to \$15.6 bn/2022).<sup>76</sup>

The second stage (2012–16) began during the Arab Spring, which highlighted the ambiguities of Turkey's multidirectional foreign policy in North Africa with its emphasis on political Islam. But in Sub-Saharan Africa, Turkey found spaces that were free from historical baggage. It managed to present itself as a political and economic alternative to both the traditional western donors as well as newcomers like China.<sup>77</sup> By evoking its own, remembered historical role and reinterpreting its Ottoman past, Turkey has successfully leveraged its lack of a colonial past in Sub-Saharan Africa to distance itself from western states like France.<sup>78</sup> 'We know there is prejudice against former colonial powers [in Africa]', noted Ülgen. 'We don't have any colonial baggage, so we are taken as an equal partner'.<sup>79</sup> In other words, since 2012, Turkey has entered the geopolitics of

postcolonial trust. At the same time, bolstered by more than a decade of progressive economic growth and political stability, Ankara presented what it billed as a uniquely Turkish formula for economic growth, the so-called Ankara consensus.<sup>80</sup> This consensus is a mixture of the traditional western and Chinese development models through which Turkey attempts to beat a middle path, one that offers bilateral investment and aid without conditionalities and avoids multilateralism. Turkey, thus, has attempted to establish horizontal relations based on knowledge sharing with the stated aim of reducing African dependency on outsiders. It has done so using the typical tools and narratives now associated with the South-South approach.<sup>81</sup> This has manifested in various ways, such as an emphasis on Turkey's role as a member of the Global South, but one with clout in the Global North. This is not just Ankara's imagined view of itself. Rather, Turkey's championing of various causes celebre in Africa have led Africans to describe Turkey thusly. Naledi Pandor, South Africa's foreign minister, reportedly told a visiting Turkish official that Turkey is seen as a country from the West and the Global South. In the eyes of South Africa's leadership, according to Pandor, Turkey is also a 'Southern country' in terms of its morals and its goals.<sup>82</sup>

Finally, a mixture of internal and external factors led to a third phase of Turkey-Africa relations (2016-present). This has been characterized by Turkish foreign-policy making becoming more exclusive and restricted to a small, trusted AKP-affiliated elite, including official and informal advisors of Erdoğan.<sup>83</sup> Accordingly, the choices taken in the international realm have increasingly responded to the preferences of this powerful clique rather than a strategy developed in concert with non-governmental and ministerial groups.<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, Turkey's Africa foreign policies remain informed by Turkey's national role conception as the centre country and what is viewed by the ruling AKP and Turks, in general, as Turkey's rightful place in the international order. Turkey's foreign policies in Sub-Saharan Africa, despite having much to do with political elites like Erdoğan, is not only about them. Rather, according to Ülgen, '... foreign policy strategies on the continent are state policies. They are not the whim of any party'.<sup>85</sup> This was echoed by Özkan:

Our global mentality,<sup>86</sup> originating from Ottoman State, has never disappeared. Check any newspaper. Why should we have news from Chile and Gabon, even in the most secular newspapers? Instinctively, as Turks, we think we should know about these things because we have interests. In addition, with the support of civil society, the state is expanding further in faraway places now than it was pre-2000 and certainly pre-1980. The AKP did help to foster and make this visible but it did not create this new self-confidence. Rather, this self-confidence was already there at the social level. But the state had a smaller mindset in terms of global politics pre-2000, and was disassociated from conservative civil society.<sup>87</sup>

Certainly, the AKP operationalized and has capitalized on Turkey's opening to Africa. It possessed the material and political resources to do so where previous state elites did not. However, the topic of Turkey's partnership with Africa has never evolved into a partisan policy issue, and largely stays above the domestic political debate.<sup>88</sup> As such, we should continue to witness the channelling of what Özkan referred to as three different 'languages' emanating from Ankara, Istanbul, and Anatolia about perceptions of Africa in Turkey—with none of them dominant.

Ankara speaks Turkey's bureaucratic language. Those [AKP elite] who went from Istanbul to Ankara became statesmen and ... their language naturally became more pragmatic and

narrower, as they must deal with day-to-day issues. They are [now] part of the state. Istanbul is still the 'old state'; it's like Turkey was twenty years ago. The language is different in Istanbul: both pessimistic and utopian at the same time. Anatolia, for the first time [since 1923], ignores both. It found a place in global politics by itself. Civil society does work in Africa from Konya, Kayseri, Gaziantep without any connection to Istanbul or Ankara.<sup>89</sup>

Over the course of the past decade, Sub-Saharan Africa has become an object of pride for much of Turkey's domestic constituency, and therefore the actions Ankara has taken to broaden and energize the AKP's domestic elite and polity hungry for evidence of Turkey's return to regional, even global prominence seems to be paying off.<sup>90</sup> The result is that Turkey now appears to have 'evidence' to support its national role conception as the centre country. This is not entirely novel and does have precedent in history, according to Ülgen, when asked whether she agreed that Turkey's primary national role conception since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923 can be summed up as centre country. 'I can tell you this is not wrong. We believe we are in the centre of everything. Our geography and our geostrategic location are a testimony to this'.<sup>91</sup>

## Conclusion

National role conceptions are the cognitive constructions of decision-makers of 'what the nation naturally stands for and how high it naturally stands, in comparison to others in the international arena'.<sup>92</sup> The research shows that the *raison d'être* of Turkey's opening to Africa was informed by Turkey's national role conception which itself is a product of the fusion of various strains of Turkish national consciousness commonly held by ardent Kemalist secularists and pious Muslim bourgeoisie. In their minds, Turkey, as a diminished power after World War I, was not meant to remain so. Its 'rightful' role is larger than the confines of the nation state. Rather it rests on dreams of empire that place Turkey at the centre of Afro-Eurasia.

Rather than being viewed as a rupture with the previous decades, Turkey's initial openings to Africa, in 1978, 1998, or 2008, followed a logical progression of engagement—political and economic—to the outside world beginning in the 1970s in Libya and eventually stretching from the Balkans to Central Asia and finally to Africa which, in turn, was made possibly by shifts in the international system.<sup>93</sup> These progressive openings were driven by the national role conception and domestic economic situations inherited by Özal and his predecessors which, as demonstrated, were largely similar but remained unfulfilled on account of material constraints.

Turkey's new-found status and presence in Sub-Saharan Africa is, then, not necessarily all that new. Rather, Turkey's conceptualization of itself as a civilization state and centre country coupled with rises in its material resources resulted in its foreign policy evolution that progressively expanded in scope and style and resulted in Turkey's outreach to Sub-Saharan Africa. There are, nevertheless, several challenges that may limit Turkey's continued engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa. First, Turkey's inability to achieve its national role in the past has come from resource limitations. There are few reasons to think this may not be the case in the future given Turkey's frequent economic and political crises. Second, Turkey's engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa may soon face opposition from domestic political actors who are sceptical of Turkey's foreign policy priorities or who wish to concentrate on

different objectives. Precisely because Turkey's involvement in Africa began with and has been promoted by Erdoğan and the AKP, it is suspect, and opposition parties waiting in the wings may seek to implement changes. In addition, domestic events such as the February 2023 earthquake led to populist posturing that sought to demonize Ankara's largesse to Africa and its inability to send tents and other supplies to its own citizens. The combination of these could limit Turkey's ability to sustain and expand its engagement with the continent over time.

Third, Turkey's bureaucratic capacity and expertise vis-à-vis Africa have always been light. This, dovetailed with resource constraints and/or the politically motivated sacking of capable officials or non-state actors may create challenges in coordinating efforts across different ministries in a host of African states. Finally, despite the appearance of robust bilateralism with Sub-Saharan African states, Turkey has not cemented strong relations with powerful states such as South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya. While Ethiopia may be an exception given Turkey's support of the federal government during the Tigray War, Turkey still fails, at times, to speak the broadly common but highly nuanced language of the continent. A new language is required and Turkey, while perhaps closer than other external states to achieving it, has yet to do so.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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