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How Turkey plans to ramp up its engagement with Africa

Turkey is in a dire economic crisis and President Erdoğan is losing support. Will the upcoming Turkey-Africa Summit help solve the country's problems?

The Turkey-Africa Partnership Summit starting on 17 December takes place in a country neck-deep in an economic crisis. While the Turkish lira keeps losing value, African leaders will be making their way to Istanbul to discuss further co-operation. This comes at a time when President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is under pressure domestically – and he hopes a reinforced partnership with Africa will alleviate some of Turkey's problems.

Under pressure at home

Almost all the polls indicate that in the elections planned in 2023 neither Erdogan, nor his ruling party have a good chance of staying in power. At the start of his career, Erdoğan had a reputation for economic miracles. After almost two decades, few people including his core supporters continue to have faith in him. But Erdoğan continues to struggle for his political survival.

At the end of November, the Turkish president declared: 'We have moved to a new economic model. We will achieve production based economic growth. We will lure foreign investors. This is how the Chinese economy has grown.' According to his plan, low-interest rates or 'cheap money' will increase production and employment. The severe depreciation of the Turkish lira is supposed to attract the investors and compete with rival exporters.

On a separate occasion the President promised to his MPs – who were worried that they will have a hard time convincing their voters – that in six months' time 'they will begin to eat the fruits' and 'the citizens will feel it too.' In the meantime, the government must act quickly to get some quick results.
Erdoğan's first call for direct investment was a safe bet: He visited his

closest ally, the gas-rich Gulf country of Qatar. Although there is no public disclosure, it is not difficult to guess that Erdogan did not return empty-handed. During the 2018 currency crisis, Ankara received USD 15bn in investment and loan support from Qatar. The two countries have a history of co-operation: Turkey keeps a military base there since 2015 and sided with Qatar during the 2017-2020 embargo imposed by the other three Gulf countries.

Deepening involvement

Erdoğan was just as lucky when it comes to the search for a new market. For now, he doesn't need to go anywhere, as a huge market with a massive potential is coming to visit him – for the third Turkey-Africa Partnership Summit. Turkey has been cultivating ties with the continent for quite a long time. After being declared a strategic partner in 2008, Ankara's engagements further increased, activities diversified, and its efforts to expand its influence accelerated.

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Currently, Turkey has 43 embassies on the (54-nation) continent; the Turkish national flag carrier THY is serving more than 60 different destinations across 39 countries and Erdoğan has visited 30 African countries, more than any non-African leader. Yet when it comes to the economy, the numbers are not as striking: Turkey aims to nearly double its bilateral trade volume with Africa from last year's USD 25.3bn to USD 50bn, and later raise this even further to USD 75bn, Erdoğan said upon returning from his three-nation Africa tour in October.

Currently Egypt is the only African country among the top 15 trading partners of Turkey. Despite deteriorating political relations, the trade volume between the two has exceeded USD 5bn last year. In the same year, Algeria has become Turkey's second largest trade partner in the continent with exchanges reached USD 4.2bn with Morocco and Libya ranking third and fourth with trade volumes of USD 2.7 and USD 2.3 respectively. And the bilateral trade with Sub-Saharan countries stood at USD 10bn in 2020 with Nigeria at the top of the list.

Exceeding economic expectations

For Turkey, and especially for the president, Africa plays a role beyond mere numbers. In 2011 amid a devastating famine, Erdoğan became the first non-African leader that visited Somalia's war-torn capital in two

decades. Ankara immediately started an aid initiative that has since helped the country in each and every step of its massive state-building process.

This humanitarian approach combined with Islamic kinship, historical ties, or an anti-colonial discourse is still being used by the government in other countries. And this is how Turkey gained its much-publicised reputation as a benevolent and fair partner.

Ankara's 'win-win' formula does not stop there. Turkey's largest overseas military base is located in Somalia, where the Turkish armed forces train Somali soldiers. Be it military trainings, or the so called 'drone diplomacy', extending its security sector appears to be the name of the game. One of the main reasons for why the government did not want to withdraw its military presence from Libya could be because this approach serves its regional and global power projections better.

The Summit in Istanbul takes place in a city where two continents meet: Erdoğan will be aiming to add a third continent, Africa, to this junction. In his address, one can expect him to fulminate against the former colonisers of Africa and to denounce the domestic opposition as their collaborators. He will probably close with his infamous 'the world is bigger than five' motto, coined to criticize the United Nations Security Council's membership structure that grants veto power to only five of its (permanent) members, namely China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

However, and though he may hope for the opposite, it's not certain that his words will attract much attention in the streets. That's because most are busy either by counting the change in their pockets to figure out what it can buy that day; or absorbed by the sense of desperation that there is no money to buy anything at all.



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