



Approfondimento n. 30/giugno 2024

Italy and Türkiye's Presence in Africa

A Multifaceted and "Non-Conventional" Approach

Samuele C.A. Abrami
and
Riccardo Gasco



Con il sostegno di



Fondazione
Compagnia
di San Paolo

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
1. The Renovated Geopolitical Importance of Africa	2
2. Türkiye in Africa	3
2.1 The Turkish Historical Approach.....	3
2.2. Türkiye’s Mode of Engagement with Africa	5
2.2.1 Economy and Trade.....	6
2.2.2 Diplomacy, Humanitarian Aid, and Education	8
2.2.3 Security and Defense Cooperation	10
3. Italy in Africa.....	11
3.1 The Italian Historical Approach.....	11
3.2 Italy’s Mode of Engagement.....	13
3.2.1 Security and Migration	14
3.2.2 Economy, Trade, and Energy.	16
3.2.3 Diplomacy, Humanitarian Aid, and Education	18
Conclusion. The Potential of an Italian-Türkiye Synergy	21

Abstract

Over the past two decades, the global landscape has transformed significantly, leading to a restructuring of international relations. Africa has emerged as a vital economic and political force, attracting the attention of middle powers like Italy and Türkiye. Both countries consider Africa crucial for advancing their geopolitical, economic, and security interests. Italy's strategic initiatives, including the Italy-Africa Initiative, and Türkiye extensive diplomatic and economic efforts reflect their commitment to strengthening ties with Africa. However, compared to other international players, Rome and Ankara’s strategies seem to suggest a new mode of engagement based on precise principles. This report examines how their collaborative approaches may provide a sustainable alternative to traditional powers, fostering mutual prosperity and redefining Africa's relationship with external actors.

Introduction

The shifting global landscape of the last two decades, characterized by the emergence of a new balance of power, multiple crises, and renovated areas of interest, has nurtured a restructuring process of international relations. Within this context, the rise of Africa as an economic powerhouse, a demographic giant, and an area with increasingly important political forces has prompted various actors to reassess their approaches to the continent. For middle powers and “non-conventional actors,” Africa represents a crucial arena for advancing their geopolitical, economic, and security interests. Among them, Italy and Türkiye emerge as two interesting actors.¹ With its strategic location at the crossroads of Europe and Africa, Italy recognizes the opportunities presented by Africa's economic growth and demographic dividends. More pronouncedly, in the last decade, the Italian government embarked on a concerted effort to deepen its engagement with the continent, leveraging initiatives such as the Italy-Africa Initiative and bolstering diplomatic ties through bilateral visits and the establishment of new embassies across the continent.

Moreover, Italy's emphasis on economic and humanitarian diplomacy underscores its recognition of Africa as a vital partner for trade and investment, aligning with its broader foreign policy objectives. Similarly, Türkiye's growing engagement with Africa reflects its aspirations to diversify its global partnerships and enhance its regional influence. Building on historical ties and cultural affinities, Türkiye has pursued a substantial diplomatic and economic agenda in Africa, encompassing initiatives such as the Türkiye-Africa Partnership Summit and expanding trade and investment cooperation. Türkiye's multifaceted strategy ranges from its increased presence in the fields of education and cultural initiatives to more strategic interests in security and counterterrorism that align with Africa's evolving security realm, driving closer collaboration in areas such as capacity building and military cooperation.

In light of these premises, this report aims to stress how Türkiye and Italy's modes of engagement might pave the way to re-conceptualizing the relationship between Africa and external actors. This is fundamental when considering that a wider framework that allows to go beyond mere national interests seems to lack, especially in light of the EU's objective to elaborate a more sustainable approach towards the Global South. Türkiye's engagement with Western and European partners over the past two decades has been constrained by its perceived assertive foreign policy, which often seems aimed at exploiting crises for its own benefit. This perception has fostered mutual distrust, hindering the healthy expansion of its relationships. In parallel, while Italy's relations with the EU and global partners have not lived the same ebbs and flows, internal and external challenges affecting Europe have presented many obstacles for Rome to highlight the importance of a broader common strategy towards the Mediterranean and Africa as well as to engage with third countries and strategic partners with renovated forms of political conditionality.

Nonetheless, from a historical perspective, there are bases for a renewed collaboration. For example, when the EU implemented the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in 1995 to create a free trade zone between Mediterranean countries of the Union and North African countries, Türkiye also sped up its economic engagement with these countries. In this sense, in the first decade of the 2000s, at the pick of the cordial EU-Türkiye relations, Ankara was considered a reliable and fundamental partner in advancing the EU's Neighborhood Policy. Italy was among the strongest supporters of Türkiye's EU membership in such a context. This

¹ Michaël Tanchum, “Italy and Türkiye's Europe-to-Africa Commercial Corridor Rome and Ankara's Geopolitical Symbiosis Is Creating a New Mediterranean Strategic Paradigm.Pdf,” *AIES* 10 (2020).

highlights that, although the last years have created new challenges and showed problematic relations between Ankara and other global actors, Rome has typically displayed a more balanced stance, leaving room for new modes of engagement. At the same time, while its foreign policy has assumed a more assertive stance, Türkiye remains a crucial partner with a privileged geostrategic position and can provide substantial global outreach capabilities in complicated scenarios.

Therefore, this report highlights how Italy and Türkiye's more cooperative and mutual approaches in their engagements with Africa may represent an alternative to the actions of other countries that, for their stronger colonial past or their ambiguous current stance, are perceived as opportunistic. Italy's emphasis on soft power diplomacy and economic cooperation, coupled with Türkiye's multifaceted approach involving economic partnerships, diplomatic initiatives, and humanitarian aid, presents a distinct departure that can foster a new enlarged engagement mechanism. This stance suggests that Ankara and Rome may serve as potential and more equal partners in Africa's development, prioritizing sustainable relationships and shared prosperity over exploitative agendas.

1. The Renovated Geopolitical Importance of Africa

The post-Cold War era culminated in a significant shift in Africa's international relations, marking the end of an era defined by geopolitical rivalries and superpower competition. As the geopolitical dynamics evolved, the continent found itself at the nexus of emerging global challenges and opportunities, shaping its interactions with a diverse array of international actors.² However, the end of Africa's "geopolitical solitude" coincided with a period of ferment and change, setting the stage for the continent's resurgence and a "renaissance" on the global stage.³ The concepts of a "rising Africa" or "emerging Africa" gained traction, reflecting a significant portion of the continent's readiness to embrace globalization and participate in global dynamics as a protagonist. Beyond macroeconomic reforms and governance improvements, African countries became attractive to foreign investments, particularly in developing intra-state and continental-level infrastructures. Overall, the importance of Africa nowadays is highlighted by its demographic and economic trajectory, nearing 2.5 billion people and a combined GDP of three trillion dollars by 2050.⁴ The establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in 2018 can boost intra-African trade by over 50%⁵, underlining the Continent's increasing economic significance on the global stage. At the same time, Africa is not void of challenges. Dynamics of uneven and combined development are still prompting grievances for its population (famine, sanitary issues, lack of democracy), and the competition for natural resources often leads to civil wars or inter-state disputes (like in Libya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, or between Eritrea and Ethiopia, Somalia). Moreover, the combination of these disruptive phenomena represents

² Charles Mutasa and Dawn Nagar, eds., *Africa and the World: Bilateral and Multilateral International Diplomacy*, 1st ed. 2018 (Cham: Springer International Publishing: Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62590-4>.

³ Jean-Léonard Touadi, La solitudine geopolitica dell'Africa, 11 Marzo 2024. <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/la-solitudine-geopolitica-dellafrica/#:~:text=Dopo%20la%20caduta%20del%20Muro,contesa%20tra%20i%20due%20blocchi.>

⁴ <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2023/09/PT-african-century>.

⁵ <https://www.tralac.org/resources/our-resources/6730-continental-fretrade-area-cfta.html>

a push factor that increases the numbers of internally displaced people and migrants from different areas of the continent, representing a challenge for recipient countries in Africa and Europe.

In this evolving context, driven by geopolitical, economic, energy, and security interests, various international actors have intensified their engagements with Africa. Overall, this has led to what has been labeled a “New Scramble for Africa,” where different actors are now competing and sustaining local actors to increase their leverage in the continent. While China has emerged as Africa's primary trading partner, leveraging initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and bilateral cooperation, its post-COVID-19 economic slowdown has impacted its engagements with the continent. Similarly, Russia has expanded its cooperation in Africa, particularly in security sectors (e.g., in Libya with the private military agency Wagner and Sahel). At the same time, the United States remains an influential actor, albeit with a secondary focus on Africa in its foreign policy agenda. Arab states, notably the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have pursued economic and security interests in Africa, reflecting a broader trend of increased international engagements with the continent. France continues to be a relevant player in African dynamics as well, yet with a reduced margin of maneuver and influence compared to the past decades.⁶

Within this context, the next sections will analyze the presence of Italy and Türkiye in Africa to highlight how their multifaceted and “non-conventional” approaches follow similar paths, instruments, and values. Then, the final section tries to synthesize these common points to show in which camps a Turkish-Italian synergy can further contribute to a more sustainable development for Africa, more equal partnerships in line with the continent’s interests, and a renovated mode of engagement of the EU and other actors.

2. Türkiye in Africa

2.1 The Turkish Historical Approach

Türkiye's engagement with Africa has undergone a transformative journey over the past two decades, reflecting the country's evolving foreign policy dynamics and its aspirations for a more robust presence on the global stage. Türkiye's historical connection with North Africa through its Ottoman heritage laid the groundwork for its later engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa. In the late 20th century, Türkiye's interest in this region grew significantly due to a combination of domestic and international factors. Domestically, the rise to power of Turgut Özal ushered in a period of economic liberalization, opening Türkiye's economy to the world⁷. Internationally, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union dissolved the strict bipolar global order, creating opportunities for Türkiye to explore new regions for cooperation. Türkiye's interest in Africa can be divided into three main historical periods. The first relates to the Ottoman state relations with Africa until 1923, the year of the foundation of the Turkish Republic. The second, also considered to be the lowest period in

⁶<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/12/27/africa-geopolitics-sudan-niger-nigeria-mauritania-brics-wagner-prigozhin-2023/>.

⁷ Turgut Özal (1927–1993) was a prominent Turkish politician, bureaucrat, engineer, and statesman who held the office of the 8th President of Turkey from 1989 to 1993. During his tenure, Özal spearheaded a series of economic reforms that significantly advanced the liberalization of the Turkish economy.

terms of relations, goes till 1998. The third started in 1998 and culminated in 2005, continuing till today.⁸ During the Ottoman era, the empire had strong ties with North African territories. However, its influence in Sub-Saharan Africa was limited. Nevertheless, the Ottoman presence in regions like Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Sudan, and Ethiopia left a cultural and historical legacy, shaping perceptions and relationships that endure today. In the Republican period, Türkiye's relationship with Africa was not as prominent, as it was influenced by internal factors and colonial history. During the Cold War, Türkiye began to prioritize Africa, recognizing and establishing diplomatic connections with newly independent African nations starting in the late 1950s. For instance, Türkiye established its first consulate in Lagos in 1956 and recognized Ghana's independence in 1957, subsequently opening an embassy in Accra.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Türkiye worked to enhance its economic, cultural, and political ties with Africa. However, it played a minor role in the independence movements of countries like Namibia and Zimbabwe. Türkiye's involvement in Africa during this period was more about forming new relationships rather than having a deep, longstanding engagement in the region.⁹ The revitalization of Türkiye's African policy in the late 20th century marked a strategic shift driven by domestic and international factors. In 1998, amidst efforts to diversify its international relations, the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Ismail Cem initiated the "Africa Action Plan," outlining a comprehensive strategy encompassing diplomatic, political, economic, and cultural dimensions to deepen the ties with the continent.¹⁰

However, initial implementation challenges, including coalition government issues and economic downturns in the early 2000s, delayed the plan's execution. It was not until the ascent of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in 2002 under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that Türkiye's engagement with Africa regained momentum. Subsequent decades witnessed a concerted effort by successive AK Party-led governments to foster closer relations with African nations, culminating in the declaration of 2005 as the "Year of Africa" and the following expansion of Türkiye's footprint on the continent. The importance of this plan was underscored by Erdoğan's visit to Ethiopia and South Africa in March 2005 as the first Turkish Prime Minister officially visiting a country south of the equator.

A significant milestone in Türkiye's engagement with Africa occurred in 2008 with a historic summit in Istanbul. Hosted by then-President Abdullah Gül, the first Türkiye-Africa Summit took place under the theme "Solidarity and Partnership for a Common Future." This event brought together representatives from 50 countries, cementing Türkiye's commitment to fostering a collaborative relationship with the African continent. This summit was a pivotal moment, showcasing Türkiye's dedication to building stronger ties based on mutual benefit and cooperation with African nations.¹¹ Following the 2008 global financial crisis, the appeal of the West slowly started to fade. Coupled with heightened challenges in Türkiye's EU accession process, this prompted a reassessment of its foreign policy priorities. As a result, Türkiye turned its attention to Africa, recognizing the continent as a promising partner for

⁸ Federico Donelli, *Türkiye in Africa: Türkiye's Strategic Involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa*. (London: I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2021), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/PublicFullRecord.aspx?p=6470303>.

⁹ Mehmet Özkan and Birol Akgün, "Türkiye's Opening to Africa," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 48, no. 4 (2010): 525–46, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40961827>.

¹⁰ Mehmet Öztürk and Melih Duman, "A Founding Role in Türkiye's Africa Policy: The Action Plan for Opening to Africa," *Insight Türkiye* 25, no. Summer 2023 (September 30, 2023): 223–40, <https://doi.org/10.25253/99.2023253.12>.

¹¹ Mehmet Ozkan, "What Drives Türkiye's Involvement in Africa?," *Review of African Political Economy* 37, no. 126 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2010.530952>.

trade, investment, and geopolitical cooperation. Additionally, Türkiye's desire to assert its independence from traditional Western allies and promote its model of sustainable economic development further fueled its engagement with Africa.¹² That is why it is important to unpack Türkiye's involvement in the continent by looking at its multidimensional approach based on a distinct model that entails economic cooperation, cultural influence, and security/military engagement.

2.2. Türkiye's Mode of Engagement with Africa

In the late 90s, The Turkish government initiated an "Opening up to Africa" policy as a component of its multifaceted foreign policy approach, championed by former Foreign Minister Ismail Cem. The policy included several key guidelines that shaped Türkiye's engagement with Africa, encompassing diplomatic, political, cultural, and economic spheres. From a diplomatic perspective, it was decided to increase the number of Embassies, which reached 43 in 2022. From a political perspective, it aimed to bolster political connections with African nations through frequent high-level visits and enhanced interactions within international organizations. It also advocated for mutual parliamentary visits and support for UN technical and humanitarian programs in Africa. Economically, the plan sought to establish a framework for cooperation between Türkiye and Africa, facilitating trade, investments, and the establishment of a specific fund for technical assistance. Key initiatives included prioritizing Türkiye's integration into the African Development Bank and the African Export and Import Bank and promoting the formation of a Joint Business Council to foster closer economic ties. The Action Plan also included several initiatives to foster cultural and educational cooperation with Africa. It proposed signing cultural agreements, enhancing university partnerships, and offering scholarships to African students. Additionally, the plan suggested inviting African scholars to seminars and establishing an Institute of African Studies in Türkiye to broaden understanding of Africa among the Turkish population. Other measures included supporting military training, contributing to UN peacekeeping efforts, and inviting African personnel to participate in military exercises in Türkiye.¹³

The adoption of this plan for Africa has paved the way for Türkiye's new approach on the continent, introducing a model of engagement that differs from traditional powers by combining ideological and practical aspects. This ideational dimension is characterized by Türkiye's lack of a "Western" colonial past, allowing for a "clean slate" approach bolstered by historical and religious ties. Unlike Western powers, whose colonial histories often hindered the development of relations, Türkiye can leverage its imperial past to rekindle old historical and identity links.

As such, Türkiye's approach has been termed the "Ankara consensus", representing a new model for African countries' economic, political, and social development. This model offers an alternative to the neoliberal economic and developmental discourse dominated by the so-called "Washington consensus," as well as the "Beijing consensus," which focuses on state-led economic growth and prioritizes stability over democracy.¹⁴ Türkiye advocates for a balanced, or "third way," approach in Africa, which encompasses peace-building efforts and policies of mutual empowerment as in the case of conflict-ridden Somalia. At the same time,

¹² Federico Donelli, "The Ankara Consensus: The Significance of Türkiye's Engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Global Change, Peace & Security* 30, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 57–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2018.1438384>.

¹³ <https://nordicmonitor.com/2024/05/Turkiye-will-train-ugandan-army-provide-special-forces-mentoring/>

¹⁴ Donelli.

Ankara acknowledges the benefits and opportunities of global capitalism without outright rejection. Through this approach, Türkiye aims to share with African nations the development strategies that have contributed to its rapid economic growth.

Another important factor of the Turkish engagement model employed since the beginning is the religious one. Türkiye's relationship with Africa is distinct among emerging powers due to its use of religious references, particularly the concept of Muslim kinship, to foster closer ties with Muslim communities. This approach, akin to the Arab development aid model, focuses on African Muslim communities. This is evident in Somalia, a member of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), where religious ties are central to Türkiye's engagement. Türkiye emphasizes fraternal ties based on the Islamic notion of universal brotherhood among Muslims, framing its involvement as a moral imperative and positioning African counterparts as equals in faith. Turkish diplomacy aims to build trust and legitimacy through non-coercive means, distinguishing itself from Western colonial histories. This religious dimension of Türkiye's "Opening to Africa" policy also links to the Ottoman past and is used by civil society and state actors for legitimization. Additionally, many African actors have requested Türkiye's involvement in Islamic education, further enhancing Türkiye's influence and highlighting the pull factor of shared religion in these diplomatic efforts.¹⁵

However, while religious ties are important, they should not be overestimated. Religion serves more as a tool than the driving force behind most Turkish initiatives, providing a legitimate basis for Türkiye's involvement. Türkiye's presence in Africa positions it as a hybrid actor, combining traits of traditional and emerging players. Initially focused on development aid, trade, and humanitarian assistance, Türkiye's engagement expanded into political mediation and state-building efforts, particularly in conflict-ridden regions like Somalia. This multidimensional approach underscores Türkiye's growing influence and strategic importance in Africa, as evidenced by its observer status in the African Union and its role in regional initiatives.¹⁶

2.2.1 Economy and Trade

Over the past two decades, Türkiye's economic cooperation and trade with Africa have been one of the most crucial aspects of its foreign policy. Mirroring the strategies of global powers like China, the US, the EU, and India, Türkiye has actively pursued access to Africa's burgeoning markets, strategic locations, and resources through significant infrastructure investments and the export of finished goods. This strategic engagement has led to a remarkable expansion in Türkiye's economic relations with the continent. Türkiye's economic strategy in Africa aims to achieve two main objectives: to extend its political influence and to bolster domestic support by facilitating opportunities for Turkish businesses. This includes gaining access to the continent's abundant natural resources and tapping into its swiftly expanding markets.¹⁷

Since launching its African Policy in 1998, Türkiye's trade with Africa has soared, with total trade volume increasing from 4.09 billion in 2000 to 29.45 billion US dollars in 2021. Imports from Africa grew from 2.71 billion to 8.23 billion, and exports surged from 1.37 billion to 21.21 billion US dollars during the same period. Nevertheless, Türkiye's overall participation in the African market is relatively small: in 2021, Türkiye accounted for only

¹⁵ Buğra Süsler and Chris Alden, "Türkiye and African Agency: The Role of Islam and Commercialism in Türkiye's Africa Policy," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 60, no. 4 (December 2022): 597–617, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X22000349>.

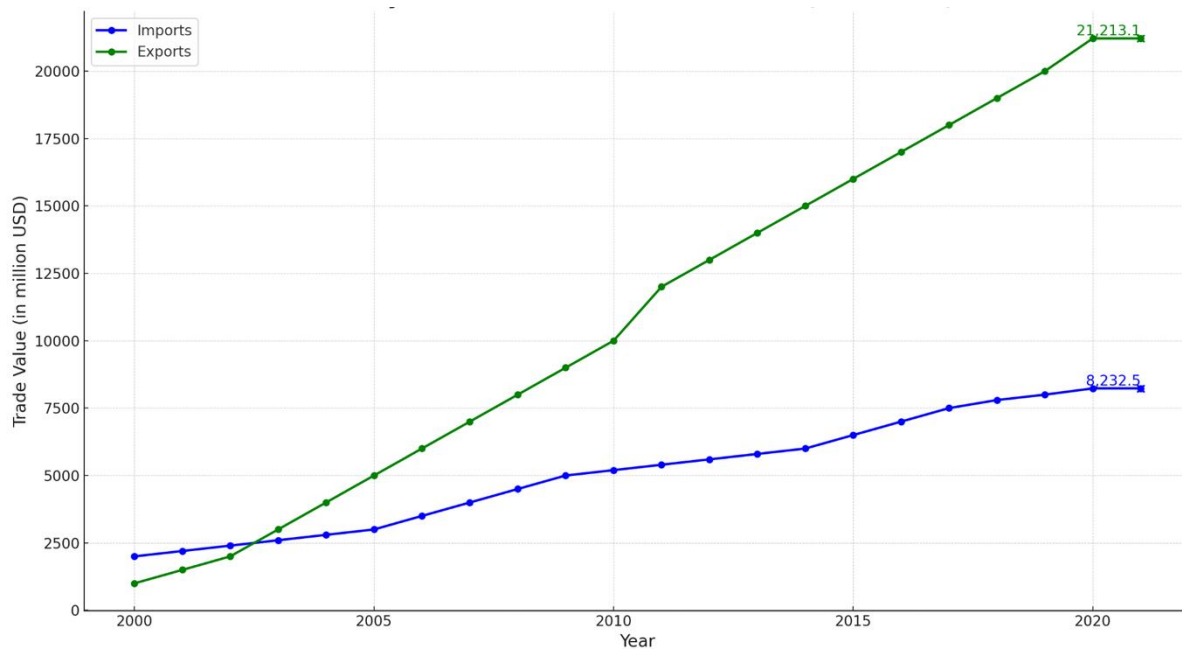
¹⁶ Donelli, "The Ankara Consensus."

¹⁷ https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_182.pdf

1.55% of Africa's imports and 0.5% of its exports. This is modest compared to China, which held approximately 18% of the market share in imports and exports.

Despite the economic benefits, Türkiye's growing trade surplus with Africa, which has increased by 291% from 2005 to 2020, poses potential diplomatic challenges due to the emerging trade imbalance. This issue underscores the need for careful management to maintain healthy and mutually beneficial bilateral relations. Türkiye hosts Türkiye-Africa economic and business forums in collaboration with the African Union to further bolster economic ties. The first meeting in 2016 in Istanbul drew ministers and over 2000 businessmen from 42 African countries.

Figure 1. Türkiye's Trade with Africa (2000-2021).



Source: Authors elaboration on IMF and TUIK sources.

The subsequent forums, including one in 2018, which was themed "Investment in the Sustainable Future Together" and the Türkiye-ECOWAS Business and Economic Forum, aimed to deepen economic connections, particularly with West African nations. Türkiye's Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEIK) oversees 45 business councils across Africa, promoting bilateral trade and investment. Turkish Airlines supports these efforts by connecting 61 destinations in 40 African countries, facilitating business and economic engagements.¹⁸ Türkiye's direct investments in Africa are nearing 10 billion US dollars, demonstrating its commitment to fostering long-term economic partnerships. Energy cooperation is another growing area of Türkiye-Africa relations. Türkiye imports significant quantities of oil and LNG, with Algeria and Nigeria as major suppliers. The strategic importance of these relationships was highlighted in 2017 when Chad and Somalia invited Turkish companies to participate in oil extraction projects. In agriculture, Türkiye aims to enhance relations through strategic partnerships and initiatives like the Türkiye-Africa Agriculture Ministers Meeting and Agribusiness Forum, held for the first time in Antalya in

¹⁸ https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_182.pdf.

2017.¹⁹ This event brought together 40 agriculture ministers from 54 countries to discuss vital issues such as food security and agricultural development.

Türkiye's official development agency, TİKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency), is critical in supporting these initiatives by providing agricultural supplies to improve local farming capabilities in Africa. TİKA operates 22 offices across Africa and has executed numerous projects in diverse fields such as health, agriculture, and animal husbandry. Between 2017 and 2022, TİKA completed a total of 1,884 projects. The agency established its first African office in Ethiopia in 2005 and has since expanded its operations to 54 African countries. Recently, TİKA signed a cooperation agreement with the African Union. Türkiye's comprehensive approach to deepening relations with Africa encompasses a wide range of sectors, from trade and energy to agriculture, highlighting its commitment to a sustainable and prosperous partnership with the continent.

2.2.2 Diplomacy, Humanitarian Aid, and Education

Türkiye's strategy for expanding its influence in Africa centers on using soft power tools, which encompass economic and humanitarian aid, as well as providing health and education services. These efforts are often highlighted by a commitment to non-conditionality, setting Türkiye apart from other global powers that may face challenges due to historical colonial ties or pursue interests perceived as exploitative. Türkiye's approach is particularly evident in its engagement in sub-Saharan Africa, where it emphasizes its benevolent approach, and in Northern Africa, where it draws on shared religious and historical bonds. This distinction is crucial in Türkiye's narrative, positioning its involvement as primarily humanitarian and mutually beneficial, contrasting with the more extractive approaches attributed to both Western and non-Western powers.²⁰

The impact of Türkiye's approach is most visible in Somalia, where, following the 2011 famine, Türkiye emerged as a key donor and political ally. Since then, Somalia has been the primary recipient of Turkish Official Development Aid (ODA) in Africa, with contributions totaling around 1 billion US dollars over the past decade. This substantial aid has not only facilitated numerous development projects but also positioned Türkiye as a significant political and military partner to the Somali government.²¹

Türkiye's commitment to addressing the developmental disparities in Africa is reflected in the activities of TİKA, which operates coordination offices in 22 African countries and various Turkish NGOs active in providing humanitarian aid. These organizations are instrumental in funding and managing essential services like schools, madrasas, hospitals, and clinics across the continent. In Somalia, Türkiye's influence extends beyond humanitarian aid to encompass significant infrastructural and economic projects. Turkish entities manage major transportation hubs in Mogadishu, which generate a substantial portion of the Somali government's revenue. Additionally, Türkiye contributed to Somalia's IMF debt relief efforts and collaborates on health projects, including the largest hospital complex in the Horn of Africa.²² Beyond Somalia, Türkiye's health diplomacy includes running major hospital complexes in partnership with local governments in regions like Darfur and Tripoli, showcasing its commitment to the health sector across Africa. TİKA supports various development projects, with a particular focus on healthcare, to enhance development, welfare, and peace across the continent. In the past five years, TİKA has implemented 228

¹⁹<https://www.deik.org.tr/press-releases-first-meeting-of-turkish-and-african-agriculture-ministers-and-agribusiness-forum>

²⁰<https://www.cats-network.eu/topics/visualizing-Turkey's-activism-in-africa>.

²¹ https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Türkiye_Somalia_Afr.pdf

²² Donelli, *Türkiye in Africa*.

health projects aimed at improving maternal and infant health. Notable projects include the Libya Physiotherapy Hospital, Somalia Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Hospital, and Niger-Türkiye Friendship Hospital. TİKA also played a crucial role in supporting Africa's health sector during the pandemic, completing 65 health-related projects from 2017 to 2022.²³ The educational sector is another significant area of Türkiye's soft power, with the Maarif Foundation operating 175 schools across 26 African countries.²⁴ Türkiye has also ramped up scholarship opportunities for African students, offering alternatives to European education destinations. According to recent data, thousands of African students have benefited from full scholarships for higher education in Türkiye, reflecting its strategic emphasis on nurturing the next generation of African leaders and professionals.

Additionally, state institutions and affiliated institutes play a vital role in enhancing Türkiye's cultural presence through educational centers, language training, and exchange programs.

Among them, the Türkiye Diyanet Foundation (TDV) stands as one of the main actors in paving the way for such strategies. A religious organization dedicated to strengthening historical, cultural, and religious ties with countries sharing a common heritage, TDV organizes various social, cultural, and religious activities both in Türkiye and internationally. Initially active in only 30 countries before 2010, TDV now operates in over 140 countries and manages 18 schools worldwide. In Africa, TDV has constructed 294 water wells across 26 countries and operates four schools in Somalia, including Somaliland. Additionally, TDV provides scholarships to thousands of African students studying in Türkiye through the International Imam Hatip High School Projects. The organization also hosted the third Summit of African Muslim Religious Leaders in Istanbul in October 2019. Furthermore, TDV opened the Abdulhamid Han II Mosque, the largest mosque in Djibouti, in November 2019.²⁵ In addition, the Yunus Emre Institute (YEI), established in 2007, plays a vital role in cultural diplomacy by promoting the Turkish language, history, and art abroad and fostering cultural relations with other countries. YEI has opened cultural centers in 58 countries, including eight in Africa, with plans to expand to Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique. Additionally, YEI has provided Turkish language courses at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Senegal since 2016 and established a Turkish Language Teaching Centre in the Senegalese Army in 2018.

It is also relevant to address how the purposes of the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) have evolved in the last years. Founded in 2010 to strengthen ties with the Turkish diaspora, in 2019, YTB conducted the African Media Representatives Training Program (AFMED) for 20 journalists from 20 African countries. YTB also regularly hosts graduation meetings for African students who studied in Türkiye, including in Ethiopia, Djibouti, Nigeria, Kenya, Chad, Mauritania, Mali, Somalia, and Ghana. The Türkiye Scholarship Program, established in 2012, attracts over 100,000 applications annually from international students. By 2019, 150,000 students from 203 countries were studying in Türkiye, including over 15,000 African students, with 4,500 supported by the Türkiye Scholarship Program. The majority of these students come from Ghana, Guinea, Morocco, Kenya, Somalia, Malawi, Nigeria, and Cameroon. Additionally, 135 African academics are employed at Turkish universities.

²³ https://tika.gov.tr/en/detail-tika_carried_out_1884_projects_in_the_last_5_years_in_africa/.

²⁴ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/turkey-s-maarif-foundation-educating-over-17-000-students-in-africa/2395480#:~:text=Turkey's%20Maarif%20Foundation%20is%20providing,to%20provide%20educational%20services%20abroad>

²⁵ Abdurrahim SiRadag, "Türkiye'nin Afrika'da Yumuşak Gücünün Yükselişi: Sebepler, Dinamikler ve Engeller," *International Journal of Political Studies*, August 31, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.25272/1icps.1117810>.

The Turkish government established the Türkiye Maarif Foundation (TMF) in 2016 to manage schools previously affiliated with the Hizmet Gülenist movement, open new schools abroad, and enhance the global reputation of Turkish education. TMF provides education in 52 countries, with 467 educational institutions serving over 52,000 students²⁶. After the 2016 failed coup, TMF has taken over Gülenist-affiliated organizations in managing 175 educational institutions in 25 African countries, providing education to over 17,000 African students.²⁷

2.2.3 Security and Defense Cooperation

Türkiye's involvement in Africa extends beyond economic and humanitarian endeavors, embracing substantial security and military cooperation, particularly in Libya and Somalia. In these nations, Türkiye's military has implemented training programs for local armed forces and participates in peacekeeping missions across the continent, including in the Central African Republic and Mali.

One of Türkiye's notable contributions to peace-building is the establishment of a 50 million US dollar military training center in Mogadishu, named TURKSOM²⁸, designed to train the Somali national army in collaboration with the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) to combat al-Shabab militants. Since its inception in 2017, TURKSOM has trained over 15,000 Somali military personnel. Additionally, Türkiye provides specialized commando training in Isparta for select units of the Somali army. In 2018, Türkiye pledged 5 million US dollars to support the G-5 Sahel force, a coalition of five nations combating terrorism and trafficking in the Sahel region and later formalized a defense agreement during the Turkish International Defence Industry Fair in Istanbul. Türkiye's security engagements in Africa also include defense industry cooperation, military training, and combating terrorism and organized crime. Following its Africa Action Plan launched in 1998, Türkiye has signed security and defense-related agreements with 30 African countries and maintains military attachés in 19 of these nations. Türkiye currently operates military bases in Somalia and Libya, providing comprehensive military training and equipment necessary for strengthening the security infrastructures of these countries. Furthermore, Türkiye contributes to various UN peacekeeping operations, underscoring its commitment to regional stability.

The defense sector represents a growing dimension of Türkiye's engagement in Africa. Turkish defense companies have successfully marketed affordable military hardware, such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and armored vehicles, to African nations. These products have gained popularity due to their proven effectiveness in conflict zones like Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkish firms have made significant inroads into the African defense market, with 15 African states now operating Turkish-made armored vehicles. Notably, countries like Kenya, Tunisia, Uganda, Chad, and Senegal have placed substantial orders for Turkish military equipment.

Turkish UAVs, particularly the Bayraktar TB2 drones produced by Baykar, are operational in Morocco, Somalia, Libya, and Ethiopia, while Tunisia has begun deploying Anka UAVs manufactured by Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI). The main markets for Turkish arms exports in Africa are primarily located in West, East, and North Africa, with Tunisia, Nigeria, Libya, Egypt, Rwanda, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Morocco, Uganda, and Senegal being the top recipients. From 2015 to 2021, Türkiye's arms sales to Africa reached record highs, with the

²⁶ <https://turkiyemaarif.org/uploads/editions/files/16650a07412814.pdf>

²⁷ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/turkey-s-maarif-foundation-educating-over-17-000-students-in-africa/2395480>

²⁸ <https://www.trtworld.com/turkiye/hundreds-of-somali-soldiers-begin-duties-after-training-by-turkiye-17273931>

defense and aerospace industry ascending from 18th to 13th place among Türkiye's export sectors. The primary defense products exported include UAVs, armored vehicles, electro-optical sensor systems, surveillance systems, mine clearance vehicles, and rifles, highlighting the diverse capabilities of Türkiye's burgeoning defense industry in the continent.²⁹

3. Italy in Africa

3.1 The Italian Historical Approach

Italy's historical approach to Africa has been characterized by periods of disengagement combined with attempts to re-enter the continent with varying degrees of commitment. Following World War II and the loss of its colonies in Libya and the Horn of Africa, Italy gradually reduced its attention to sub-Saharan Africa. Despite being a significant donor of development aid, Italy's engagement was still conditioned by a certain refrainment due to its colonial legacy as well as by the lack of political will and material capabilities. Therefore, its relations with Africa remained superficial, with limited diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties until the late 1980s. During the 1990s, Italy experienced a transitional period marked by political instability and economic challenges. Except for ENI's activism in Africa's oil and gas sector, commerce and investments also remained fairly limited, with the country running a historical trade deficit largely due to energy imports. A perception of Africa as a source of multifaceted and essentially intractable problems, with barely any opportunities, overshadowed most other concerns and prevented further structured engagement.

Responsibilities for direct involvement were somehow left to the goodwill and activities of Italy's numerous NGOs and Catholic missions – from Jesuits in Chad and Salesians in Angola to Combonians in Uganda or Kenya – which, in many places, still maintain a deeply rooted presence today, at times referred to as a traditional focus on “people-to-people” relations. While some efforts were made to engage with Africa, particularly through involvement in peace processes such as in Mozambique and Somalia, Italy could not elaborate a coherent foreign policy approach towards the continent. The country remained somewhat active in the region by adhering to multilateral initiatives, including peacekeeping operations. The direct participation in some 30 international missions that Italy contributed to was also typically quite limited. A key exception was the large number of troops committed to the UN mission to Somalia in the early 1990s. Yet, the failed operation seemed to prove further the wisdom of staying away from the region. Italy's overall neglect of Africa for the better part of three decades was best illustrated by the lack of a single prime ministerial bilateral visit south of the Sahara between 1985 and 2014. Well into the new millennium, the extent of the country's diplomatic and cultural network – with only 19 embassies and three cultural centers across sub-Saharan Africa's 49 states – compared poorly with Germany, the UK, or France.

The first markable change of direction came when the early 2000s saw Italy's engagement with Africa largely focused on issues such as migration, particularly from the north. Notably, during Romano Prodi's administration (2006-2008), there was a renewed emphasis on Africa, with the Prime Minister highlighting the continent as a priority for development cooperation

²⁹ https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2022C42_Turkey_Security_Africa.pdf

in his inaugural speech at the Italian Senate in May 2006.³⁰ However, it wasn't until the early 2010s that a more substantial transformation occurred in Italy's approach to Africa, driven by both external and domestic factors. Under the government led by Prime Minister Enrico Letta (2013–2014) and continued by Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (2014–2016), Italy launched the Italy-Africa Initiative in late 2013. The aim was to stimulate public awareness of the continent by emphasizing the “virtuous dynamics” taking place on the continent and the opportunities that “positive economic prospects” offered for Italy and its small and medium enterprises. Opening new markets to Italian businesses, many of which had for years faced persistently weak domestic demand, was deemed strategically crucial for the country’s economic recovery. Externally, events such as the Arab Uprising and the changing geopolitical landscape necessitated a reevaluation of Italy's foreign policy priorities, leading to a renewed focus on Africa to safeguard energy security, manage migration, and explore new markets. Domestically, changes in government leadership allowed for a shift towards a more proactive approach to African affairs. Remarkably, in March 2017, under the direction of Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni, the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs declared Africa a priority for development cooperation”.³¹ These governments also expanded Italy's diplomatic presence in Africa, inaugurating new embassies and engaging in high-level bilateral state visits. A substantial diplomatic drive quickly gained traction. The shift was unmistakable in the impressive string of seven bilateral state visits to a total of 12 sub-Saharan countries from 2014 to 2019 by three successive Prime Ministers. Diplomatic initiatives also took a more stable form with the inauguration of five new embassies between 2014 and 2020, bringing the total in the region to 24, up from 19, or a hefty +26% increase. A permanent representative to the African Union was also appointed in 2018. At home, on the other hand, Rome organized and hosted two Italy-Africa ministerial Conferences, in 2016 and 2018, to encourage closer ties with African countries and the AU.³²

By that time, Rome's focus gradually shifted towards the Sahel region, which assumed "extreme importance" for Italy, representing a significant departure from its traditional areas of interest. This shift was primarily driven by the perception of that area as the “southern border of Europe.”³³ While France's involvement in the Sahel stemmed from addressing the jihadist threat and protecting its sphere of influence, Italy's concern centered on controlling migration routes. Expanding its diplomatic presence with new embassies in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, along with launching a military training mission in Niamey, Italy also committed to multilateral cooperation through participation in EU, UN, and French-led operations in the region from 2020 onwards.

Apart from advancing national interests, engagement in the Sahel allowed Italy to enhance its standing within the EU and shape its Africa policy. Emanuela Del Re's appointment as EU Special Representative for the Sahel in 2021 underscored external recognition of Italy's growing role in the area. Additionally, Italy's focus extended to the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea, where longstanding relations warranted a significant role in addressing security and stability concerns. This involvement included participation in EU missions for state reconstruction in Somalia and anti-piracy efforts, alongside the establishment of an Italian military base in Djibouti in 2013 and security force training agreements with Somalia and Djibouti. Italy's heightened engagement with sub-Saharan Africa culminated in the issuance

³⁰ http://www.senato.it/leg/15/BGT/Schede/Governi/0068_M.htm.

³¹ http://www.esteri.it/mae/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/interviste/2017/03/la-sfida-della-cooperazione-alfano.html.

³² Giovanni Carbone, “Italy’s Return to Africa: Between External and Domestic Drivers,” *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana Di Scienza Politica* 53, no. 3 (November 2023): 293–311, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2023.2>.

³³ <https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Schema-di-Documento-triennale-2021-2023.pdf>.

of a comprehensive strategic document dedicated to the region in December 2020, marking a notable shift in its foreign policy approach.³⁴

Yet, this period also saw a shift in focus towards migration management, reflecting broader European concerns. Italy's engagement with Africa in recent years has often been criticized for being reactive and inconsistent.³⁵ While areas such as economic diplomacy and development cooperation have seen progress, challenges such as migration have continued to dominate the agenda and shape Italy's relations with the continent.

Nonetheless, despite strategies to cope with situations of “imminent emergency” representing the most pressing and visible ones, it is important to highlight that Italy's presence in Africa lies on a more complex basis that also takes into account the involvement of civil society, the promotion of multilevel diplomacy, and the sustain to international or bilateral agreements of cooperation. Moreover, recent geopolitical reconfigurations seem to have opened new opportunities for Italy to relaunch its African strategic outlook and to elaborate a more consistent strategy that ranges from the issues of migration and energy to diplomatic initiatives and long-term partnerships.

3.2 Italy's Mode of Engagement

As highlighted in the “Operating Lines of Italian Development Cooperation in East Africa”, initiated by the Italian MFA in 2014, the reevaluation of Italian policy in the continent revolves around two main objectives: solidifying Italy's role in promoting political and security stability across the continent; enhancing the internationalization of the national economy through a fresh approach to commercial diplomacy, thereby fostering new investment opportunities for Italian enterprises in Africa. Since then, Italy has prioritized the stabilization of Africa within its political agenda. Italian policymakers suggest that stability can be pursued through a range of measures, including traditional involvement in multilateral security initiatives and forging economic and commercial partnerships that span three distinct yet interconnected dimensions: security, development cooperation, and business.³⁶

Since its inception in 2022, Giorgia Meloni's government has been involved in a very active foreign policy. Its approach to the southern shore of the Mediterranean has been marked by the necessity to mitigate the migratory flows that pass through the central Mediterranean route, which makes Italy the front line of migrant arrivals. A second pillar is to increase partnerships in the energy sphere to cope with the drastic reduction of fossil fuel imports from Russia, transforming Italy into an energy export corridor from the Mediterranean to central European countries.³⁷ Around these two nodes has been articulated the aspiration to make Italy a leader at the European level in proposing an innovative approach toward the Global South, particularly the African continent. Italy's commitment to the Enlarged Mediterranean area – encompassing the coasts of the Mare Nostrum and its African and Middle Eastern hinterland – is an intuitive and pragmatic choice. Italy has a relatively free field in this area. For over a decade, the US has lightened its political and military engagement in this area, shifting resources to the Indo-Pacific, a new strategic pivot to counterbalance China. More recently, the war in Ukraine has prompted central and northern

³⁴ Giuseppe Dentice and Federico Donelli, “Reasserting (Middle) Power by Looking Southwards: Italy's Policy towards Africa,” *Contemporary Italian Politics* 13, no. 3 (July 3, 2021): 331–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2021.1957309>.

³⁵ Ludovica Marchi Balossi-Restelli, “Italian Foreign and Security Policy in a State of Reliability Crisis?,” *Modern Italy* 18, no. 3 (August 2013): 255–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2013.801667>.

³⁶ Dentice and Donelli.

³⁷ Leo Goretti and Filippo Simonelli, “Italy's Foreign Policy in 2023: Challenges and Perspectives,” 2024.

European countries to turn their attentions eastward to contain Russia, leaving France, Italy, and Spain more room to maneuver. Moreover, France's mistakes in Africa – culminating in the military withdrawal from Mali – opened up an opportunity for the Meloni government to claim the need for a more equal relationship between Europe and Africa, promising to invest in the development of the African continent.

In the first months of her term, Prime Minister Meloni strongly promoted energy diplomacy efforts towards Africa, the long-term results of which remain to be assessed. For instance, the announcement of the so-called “Mattei Plan” for Italian policy toward sub-Saharan Africa and Europe's southern neighbor expresses a potentially positive insight and ambition on the part of the government.³⁸ The basic idea that characterizes the Plan, reiterated several times by the Council president and other members of the executive branch, is to propose a model of “virtuous and non-predatory cooperation” with African countries that contributes to the continent's stability and security, counteracts the “root causes of migration”, and can also be a source of inspiration for other European countries.³⁹ This undoubtedly ambitious approach has aroused some interest among international observers and media, who have wondered whether the Mattei Plan might mark the beginning of a new course for Italian foreign policy toward the continent. Nevertheless, looking at the plan as the only key to reading Italian foreign policy toward Africa would be reductive. On the one hand, the plan comes on the heels of an existing historical partnership with the continent. On the other, the prematurity of the plan itself would not allow the deeper and more multifaceted dynamics of Italy's presence in Africa to be fully grasped.

3.2.1 Security and Migration

Furthermore, Italy's approach to Africa has been significantly influenced by the migration crisis, which was particularly prominent between 2015 and 2018. The emergence of migration flows, often considered urgent, not only raised public awareness but also heightened political tensions within successive governments. This led to measures such as the closure of ports and borders as well as the externalization of migration control, which became key elements of Italian diplomacy. Despite criticism from Brussels, Rome has sought to promote coordination measures at the EU level, advocating for comprehensive solutions that include investment in countries of origin and transit as well as “burden-sharing” among EU member states. Migration remains a central focus of Italian initiatives, with data from the Italian Ministries showing that 20 to 25% of migrants arriving in Europe are Africans, primarily traveling through Libya and Tunisia from neighboring African nations, particularly from the Sahel and Horn-of-Africa regions⁴⁰.

In 2023, Italy's Mediterranean activism took a significant step forward with the agreement reached with Tunisia, whose looming economic crisis led to a surge in departures from its shores to Italy. For many, this exemplifies the strategy pursued by the Meloni government, namely one that aims to leverage good bilateral relations with African partners to push for changes in the broader EU's approach.

Prompted by Rome, the European Commission concluded the pact with Tunisia, which was touted as a foreign policy triumph and a remedy for migration issues.

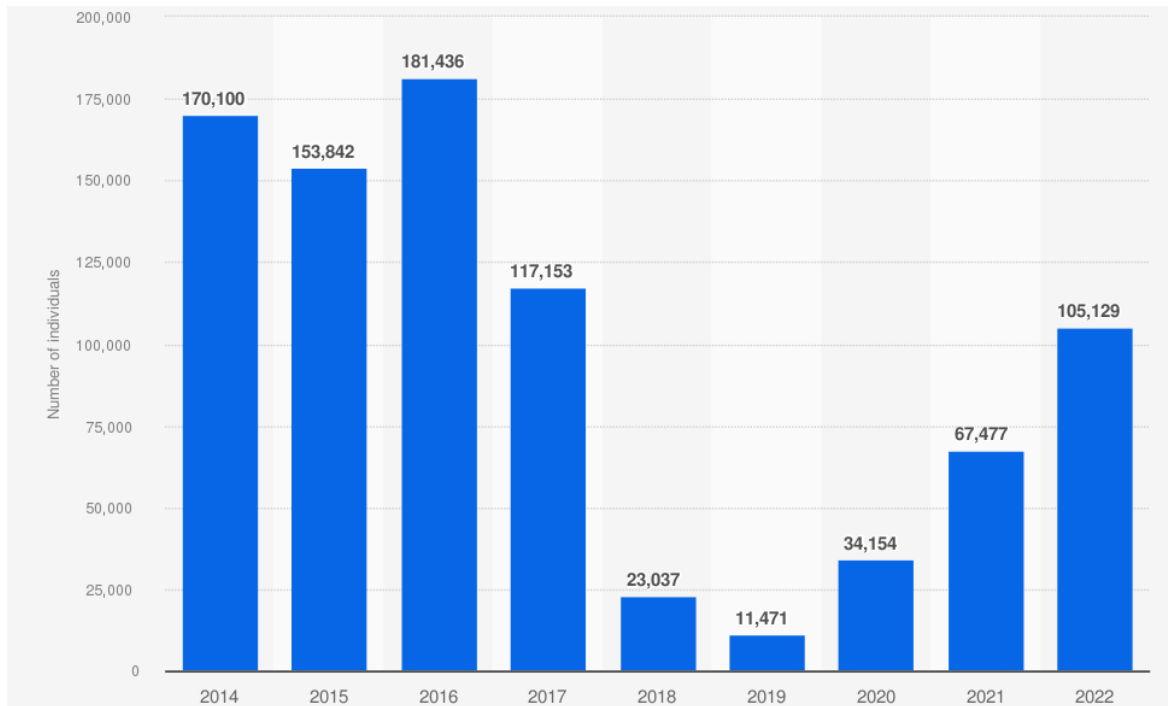
³⁸ The Mattei Plan is the idea through which, the Meloni government has proposed to articulate a strategy of collaboration with the African continent. Starting with the name chosen, an explicit reference to the founder of Eni and his vision of the world, the Plan has been presented as the forerunner of a new paradigm of collaboration between Rome and partners on the African continent.

³⁹ Matteo Fattibene and Stefano Manservigi, “The Mattei Plan for Africa: A Turning Point for Italy's Development Cooperation Policy?,” *IAI Commentaries*, no. 24 (2024).

⁴⁰ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/623514/migrant-arrivals-to-italy/>.

Signed in July 2023, the memorandum promised an equal partnership to address migration's root causes within the broader framework of supporting Tunisia's economic development. However, for some, rather than offering sustainable solutions, the memorandum has the risk of becoming a short-term fix. Despite its portrayal as a comprehensive partnership, the agreement primarily consisted of programs supporting youth employment, agriculture, and the Tunisian Coast Guard, aiming to persuade Tunisia to sign an agreement with the International Monetary Fund and enforce stricter control over irregular departures.⁴¹

Figure 2. Number of immigrants who arrived by sea in Italy (2014 to 2022), Ministry of Interiors.



Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/623514/migrant-arrivals-to-italy/>

A second feature of Italy's approach to migration in the Mediterranean region is its link with a more comprehensive strategy that blends diplomatic initiatives with military engagements. Since the collapse of the Libyan state, this increased military commitment is exemplified by the approval of several bilateral missions, indicating Italy's proactive stance in enhancing security and stability across the area. Furthermore, Italy has extended the operational scope of initiatives like “Mare Sicuro”, renaming it “Mediterraneo Sicuro”, to ensure continuous maritime surveillance in the Mediterranean, underscoring its determination to combat irregular migration and safeguard energy supply routes. This seems to complement and overlap with EU-led missions like EUNAVFOR MED IRINI, which is led by Rear Admiral Stefano Turchetto as EU Operation Commander and has its headquarters in Rome.⁴² In

⁴¹ Luca Barana and Asli Selin Okyay, “Shaking Hands with Saied’s Tunisia: The Paradoxes and Trade-Offs Facing the EU,” 40, IAI Commentaries, no. 23 (2023).

⁴² Launched on 31 March 2020 and extended to 31 March 2025 by the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). In particular the mission is mandated to carry out inspections of vessels on the high seas off the coast of Libya suspected to be carrying arms or related material to and from Libya in accordance with UNSC resolutions, in addition to monitoring violations perpetrated via aerial and land routes. As secondary tasks, it also: monitors and gathers information on illicit exports from Libya of petroleum, crude oil and refined petroleum products; contributes to the disruption of the business model of human smuggling and trafficking

parallel, Italy's proactive engagement extends to collaboration with countries of origin and transit to tackle the root causes of irregular migration. A pivotal step in this direction was the inaugural international conference on development and migration hosted by Rome in July 2023. This landmark initiative, known as the “Rome process”, was intended as a partisan and long-term partnership aimed at “implementing concrete measures for the growth and development of the wider Mediterranean and Africa, to address the root causes of irregular flows and to defeat the criminal activity of human traffickers”.⁴³ Therefore, Italy has increased its military presence in the Sahel region, particularly in Chad and Niger, where Italian troops contribute to a multinational force with the aim to prevent the “roots” of irregular migration. As part of its dedication to safeguarding maritime security, especially in vital trade routes, Italy has established a military base in Djibouti to support air and naval forces involved in anti-piracy efforts. The Loyada base, located near Djibouti, serves various purposes, including training local Djiboutian and Somali forces according to military cooperation agreements. Additionally, it stands prepared to deploy special forces for hostage rescue missions in response to pirate attacks or terrorism threats.⁴⁴

3.2.2 *Economy, Trade, and Energy.*

The economic aspect is another key component of Italy's new approach to Africa. Increased engagement on the continent has facilitated the strengthening of business ties through the establishment of new partnerships and the reinforcement of existing ones. This is demonstrated by the fact that while in 2013 there was only one office of ICE (Italy's national foreign trade agency) for all of sub-Saharan Africa (in Johannesburg, South Africa) now there are more than eleven across the continent.⁴⁵ Indeed, one can see that the Italian business world's approach to the continent has changed in recent years.

This transformation is evident in the increasing engagement of Italian companies, associations, and institutions beyond North Africa. Previously, only a limited number of Italian firms operated in Africa, primarily focusing on sectors such as energy, construction, and infrastructure. However, there has been a significant expansion, with small and medium-sized enterprises now venturing into various sectors, including agriculture, technology, pharmaceuticals, and manufacturing.

Economically, the trade between Italy and Africa has experienced remarkable growth as the economic interchange surpassed 68 billion euros in 2022. Statistical data reveals a relatively static trend in trade magnitude over the years. For instance, 2012, Italian exports to Africa amounted to almost 19 billion, compared to 21.3 billion in 2022. Similarly, Italian imports from Africa in 2012 totaled 35.2 billion, compared to 47 billion in 2022. This slight surge is predominantly fueled by a substantial increase in imports from Africa.

Thus, Italy's trade interchange recorded a negative balance of 31 billion euros, meaning the value exceeded that of exports for the first time since 2011. Weighing in is the staggering growth of imports, +36.5% in 2022. According to the MFA Economic Observatory, trade between Italy and Africa between 2016 and 2022 experienced an overall growth of 105%. An

networks through information gathering and patrolling by planes; is tasked to support capacity building and training of the Libyan Coast Guard and Navy. <https://www.operationirini.eu/about-us/>.

⁴³ Nicolò Fasola and Sonia Lucarelli, “The ‘Pragmatic’ Foreign Policy of the Meloni Government: Between ‘Euro-Nationalism’, Atlanticism and Mediterranean Activism,” *Contemporary Italian Politics*, April 4, 2024, 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2024.2335847>.

⁴⁴ Fabrizio Cotichia and Matteo Mazziotti Di Celso, “Still on the Same Path? Italian Foreign and Defence Policy in the Enlarged Mediterranean,” *Mediterranean Politics*, January 10, 2024, 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2023.2294252>.

⁴⁵ https://www.ice.it/repository/pdf/Uffici_Ice_Estero.pdf.

increase dictated mainly by imports, which now alone account for 70% of total interchange. The country with the highest interchange values is South Africa, with exports from Italy totaling 2.181 billion Euros and imports to Italy of 2.44 billion Euros. This is followed by Nigeria and Angola. In 2022, Tunisia absorbed 19.2% of Italian exports to Africa, followed by Egypt (16.9%) and Morocco (13.2%).

Overall, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt attracted 70.2 percent of exports to the continent. Italian exports to Africa consisted mostly of products from oil refining (21.9%) and industrial machinery. Italy imports goods for the greatest value from Algeria and Libya, which account for 36.7% and 21.2% of Italian imports from Africa, respectively. The main African product imported from Italy is natural gas (39.4%), followed by oil (27.5%) and nonferrous metals (6.6%). Despite this growth, the untapped potential for Italian exports to Africa remains significant, currently accounting for only 3.4% of total Italian exports⁴⁶.

While Italy's involvement in the Sahel region has largely been driven by the escalating migration crisis, Italy views the Horn of Africa as a strategic platform for both economic and political expansion, extending its influence towards the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian Ocean by providing support and training across various sectors, including agriculture, tourism, technology, infrastructure, and energy.

Turning to investments, Italy has shown mixed results. While setting positive records in the past decade, investments in Africa contracted by over 1 billion in 2021. This decline is attributed to various factors, including the global COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts, and financial challenges. Notably, the impact varied across countries, with significant declines observed in investments from Algeria, Egypt, and Ghana. Conversely, positive trends were noted in investments in Angola, South Africa, and Tunisia.

For example, in 2015, Italy emerged as the leading investor in Africa, contributing 7.4 billion US dollars (10.4% of total FDI to Africa), with a substantial portion directed towards the natural gas development project in the Zohr field in Egypt. However, fluctuations in investments can be heavily influenced by individual projects, particularly in capital-intensive sectors like energy. ENI's operations, as the leading Italian oil and gas operator in Africa, significantly influence investment trends⁴⁷.

In the energy sector, ENI stands as a key player alongside other major companies like ENEL, Edison, and Terna. However, ENI's footprint in Africa holds historical significance, with the company's activities dating back to 1958. Presently, it operates in about 14 African nations and has emerged as the foremost hydrocarbon producer on the continent among international entities, contributing to 7% of Africa's hydrocarbon production. In the last years, ENI has also tried to implement an approach that "extends beyond mere self-interest to actively contribute to the development of African nations and local communities⁴⁸".

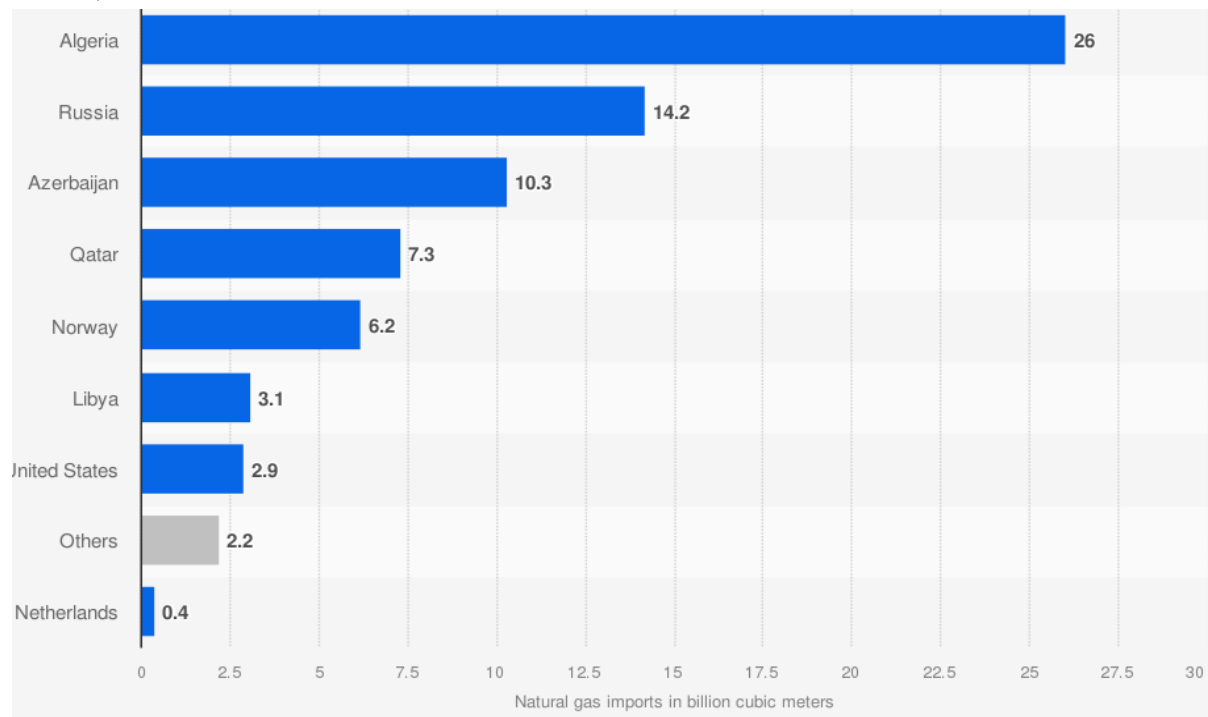
This strategy seems to fit well with the security objective of Meloni's government. First, it stresses the importance of a more equal and win-win cooperation with African countries. Second, and more importantly, it serves the purpose of facing the disruption caused by the reduction in Russian gas supplies due to the conflict in Ukraine. Unlike the previous Draghi administration, which viewed Mediterranean and African policies as complementary to Italy's broader European strategy, Meloni's government considers these regions as the primary arena for its political engagement.

⁴⁶ <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/trade-investment-and-economic-presence-italys-evolving-role-in-sub-saharan-africa-138286>

⁴⁷ https://www.esteri.it/mae/images/stories/commercio_internazionale/osservatorio_commercio_internazionale/sc_hede_paese/africa/Indicatori_Ast_years_fricala_26_11_2020.pdf

⁴⁸ <https://www.eni.com/en-IT/strategic-vision.html>.

Figure 3. Gross imports of natural gas in Italy in 2022, by country of origin (in billion cubic meters), ARERA, 2024



Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/787720/natural-gas-imports-by-country-of-origin-in-italy/>

Leveraging the autonomy to act independently and tapping into the capabilities of ENI and Confindustria to attract business opportunities, the government has actively fostered relations with key Mediterranean countries such as Algeria, Egypt, and Libya, resulting in a notable upsurge in gas supplies, notably from Algeria, which has now surpassed Russia as Italy's leading gas exporter. Additionally, ENI's agreements with the Libyan National Oil Production Corporation have strengthened Italy's position as an energy player in Libya.⁴⁹

Therefore, ENI's involvement could further bolster Italy's presence in the Horn of Africa. The company holds significant concessions in Kenya, where it operates offshore platforms in the Lamu basin and implements sustainability projects. Additionally, recent oil and gas discoveries off the coasts of Eritrea and Somalia may attract more Italian and European energy companies, potentially leading to geopolitical competition in the region.

Italian initiatives may seek to mitigate this competition by swiftly securing mutually beneficial contracts for energy resource exploitation with the relevant authorities in these countries. Moreover, Salini-Impregilo (now WeBuild) is involved in constructing major dams like the Gibe III on the Omo River and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile, the latter poised to be the largest hydroelectric plant in Africa. Enel Green Power has also made significant investments in solar and wind energy projects in Ethiopia.⁵⁰

3.2.3 Diplomacy, Humanitarian Aid, and Education

In the early 2010s, among the factors that drove Italy to increase its diplomatic activity in Africa was the search for political support within international organizations. The effects of

⁴⁹ <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/budapest/20542.pdf>.

⁵⁰ <https://www.iea.org/reports/italy-2023>.

the economic crisis and the first migration flows from the North African coast resulted in an initial cooling in relations with other European member countries. Therefore, it became extremely important for Italy to gain importance at the international level by slightly distancing itself from EU policies. At the institutional level, the votes of African countries in the UN General Assembly became a necessary electoral pool to realize the Italian ambition to secure a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for the two years 2017-19.

However, the new diplomatic activism towards Africa has developed along a double track combining multilateral and bilateral relations. Italy has developed the bilateral dimension of relations with different regional actors like Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan, Kenya, Djibouti, Mozambique, Nigeria, Angola, Ghana, and Senegal. In addition to the many missions undertaken by ministers of the Renzi government and taking up what was done by other European and non-European states, Italy chose to organize the first Italy-Africa Ministerial Conference in Rome.

A novelty for Italian diplomacy, it was attended by over 40 African countries with the aim to broaden political and economic ties with the African continent by “developing a new model of partnership”⁵¹. At the same time, strengthened by a long tradition, Italy tried to make the best use of multilateral mechanisms. In some cases, these multilateral efforts constitute part of the EU’s policy towards Africa that has sought to produce a coherent EU strategy that goes beyond the issues of human security (such as poverty reduction and humanitarian action, conflict resolution, and democratization) or combined security and emergency management.⁵²

Also, according to the Italian MFA, a multifaceted approach represents the best option to deal with the themes and complexities of the African continent through a so-called “value-oriented diplomacy”.⁵³ Intended as a sort of soft power 2.0, it is based on a positive narrative that aims at working together with African partners to achieve stability, security, and development to open new channels for improved politico-institutional and trade relations.

This type of diplomacy is grounded in two key premises: the pursuit of common, value-related encounters and the absence of hidden geopolitical agendas. As such, Italy is seen as a country with an advantage over many other international players.⁵⁴ A tendency to carve out its approach to foreign affairs concerning ethical values such as solidarity, inclusivity, resilience, respect for human dignity, creativity, a multidimensional approach, courtesy, and – last but not least – “beauty, and the absence of a predatory trait in relations with its partners, render Italy a trustworthy, impartial and moderate interlocutor on the continent.”⁵⁵

Accordingly, this vision represents an instrument to increase Italian credibility with its African partners, and in particular, new generations of African citizens. It is precisely through training and education that Italy can reinforce the tangible signs of shared values such as solidarity, adaptability, and creativity with Africa. In practical terms, Italy’s participation in international missions in Africa, such as the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) and Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP) in Somalia, among others, are but one component of Italian engagement to assisting host nations in the fight against terrorism, piracy and organized crime.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Carbone, “Italy’s Return to Africa.”

⁵² John Kotsopoulos and Frank Mattheis, “A Contextualisation of EU–Africa Relations: Trends and Drivers from a Reciprocal Perspective,” *South African Journal of International Affairs* 25, no. 4 (October 2, 2018): 445–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2018.1551154>.

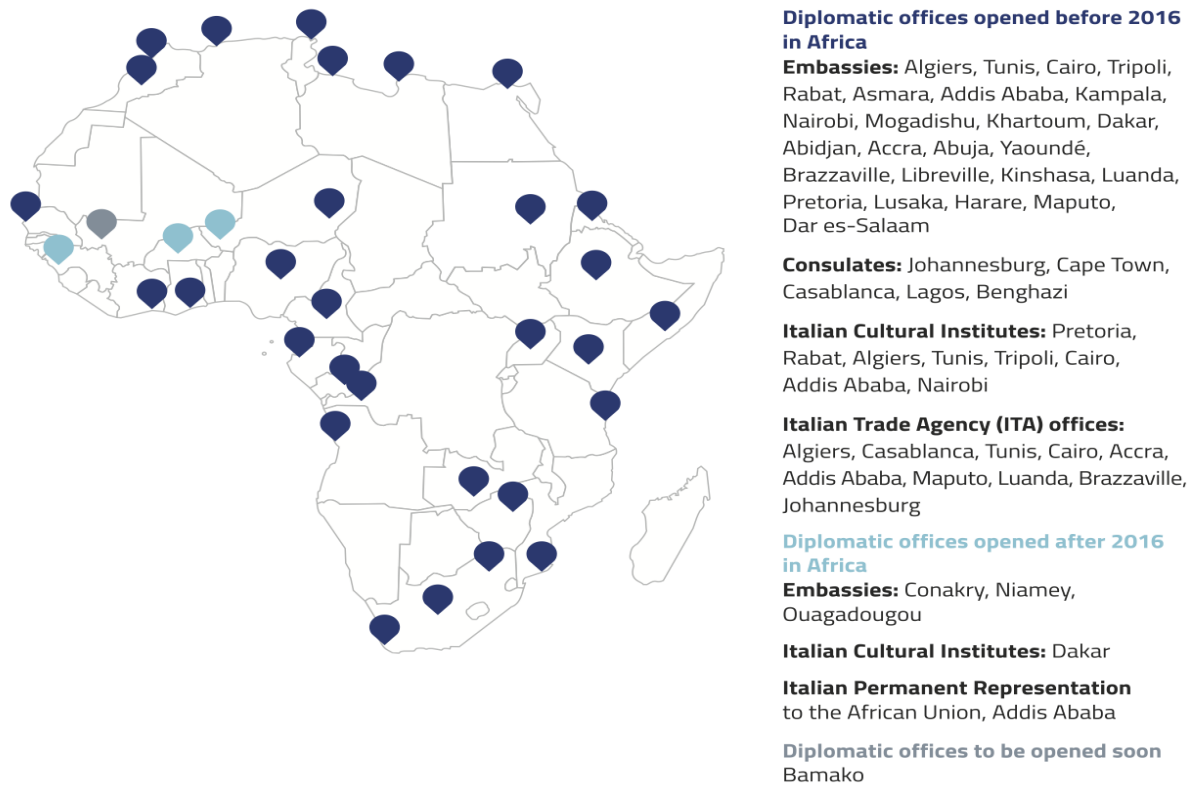
⁵³ Fabrizio Lobasso, “Italy and Africa: ‘Value Oriented Diplomacy’ in Action,” *IAI Commentaries*, IAI Commentaries, 2021.

⁵⁴ <https://ecfr.eu/article/beyond-the-mattei-plan-italys-search-for-an-africa-policy/>.

⁵⁵ Lobasso, “Italy and Africa: ‘Value Oriented Diplomacy’ in Action.”

⁵⁶ For more information see the European Centre for Electoral Support (ECES) website: Innov-Elections, <https://www.eces.eu/en/innovelections>.

Figure 4. The Italian diplomatic presence in Africa. Source: Italy MFA.



Another example is the promotion of educational modules by Italian universities in Africa in the fields of good governance, inter/intra-institutional relations, urban-rural dialogue, the rule of law, and the management of electoral processes. In that sense, contributions by Italy’s development cooperation in Sudan, which works to promote programs dedicated to raising awareness of gender issues and achieving gender equality in areas such as health, nutrition, community, and work, have been significant over the last years and has undoubtedly contributed to some improvements, still noticeable today, across Sudan.

Moreover, the “Italy, Cultures, Africa” initiative, promoted by the Italian Foreign Ministry (in collaboration with what was then known as MIUR: the Ministry of Education, Universities, and Research) in 2019, is another example of Italian engagement.⁵⁷

Moreover, a series of actors based in Italy that we can define as belonging to the “Catholic galaxy” maintain intense relations with African stakeholders. One of the most significant, but far from unique, examples of this negotiating and influencing action is the case of Mozambique, where Sant’ Egidio volunteers made a decisive contribution to the 1992 peace agreements. Its importance in the Italian context can be understood also by the fact that Andrea Riccardi, one of the community’s founders, was Minister for International Cooperation in the Monti government from 2011 to 2013. These few examples illustrate the breadth of support enjoyed by this lay movement linked to the Holy See, which, among its actions, has always had a special focus on peace on the African continent. Finally, Italian NGOs are very active in the cooperation sector. Numerous associations of both Catholic and non-religious origin create a territorial fabric that irrigates various projects and initiatives on the African continent.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ See MAECI website: Italia, Culture, Africa, <https://www.esteri.it/mae/tiny/28064>.

⁵⁸ https://www.esteri.it/en/politica-estera-e-cooperazione-allo-sviluppo/aree_geografiche/africa/il-partenariato-con-l-africa/.

Conclusion. The Potential of an Italian-Türkiye Synergy

After over a decade, in July 2022, Italy and Türkiye convened at the Third Türkiye-Italy Intergovernmental Summit. As the final Joint Declaration stated, “Türkiye and Italy have been united around common values, principles, and goals throughout history in Europe and the Mediterranean region. This remarkable solid foundation allows the two countries to enhance their cooperation in all areas”.⁵⁹ Moreover, as two NATO Allies and partners in the G20 that enjoy close cooperation and coordination with each other on regional and international matters, Türkiye and Italy can make significant contributions to stabilize international dynamics. Although issues like the war in Ukraine and the conflict in Gaza represent immediate pressing issues for most global actors, the fast-paced current developments and the future perspectives on Africa should not be overlooked.

As this report has underscored, African dynamics remain central to Ankara and Rome’s foreign policy agendas. Ankara’s growing influence in the region was underscored at Türkiye’s annual Antalya Diplomacy Forum, with seven African heads of state, seven prime ministers, and 25 foreign ministers in attendance. Together with its diplomatic activism, Türkiye confirms itself as a rising strategic player for the continent. Just mentioning another recent example, Somalia’s parliament ratified an agreement with Türkiye to provide naval protection and assistance in building a Somali navy.⁶⁰

One year later, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni hosted African leaders at a summit in Rome, where she unveiled plans to expand Italy’s influence on the continent, after which she declared that “our future inevitably depends on the future of the African continent. That’s why we have decided to launch an ambitious program of interventions that can help the continent grow and prosper, starting from its immense resources”.⁶¹ Indeed, as French influence in Africa wanes, Russia has been diverting its resources elsewhere, and China’s real strategies have lately been questioned by some countries. Ankara and Rome find themselves presented with unique opportunities to deepen their involvement across various domains, including energy, economy, migration, and security.

Despite their differences, the strategies of these two Mediterranean countries have clearer margins of complementarity than competition. Italy’s reliance on soft power and contributions to peacekeeping and humanitarian missions, combined with Türkiye’s mixed approach that includes more hard power elements (such as the expansion of its drone industry) and strong diplomatic and cultural ties, create a synergy that holds promise for both countries as well as for Africa.

The potential for collaboration between Türkiye and Italy is further evidenced by recent developments. For instance, in 2020, Türkiye’s intelligence played a decisive role in the successful release of Italian humanitarian worker Silvia Romano in Somalia. In January 2024, Italian Prime Minister Meloni visited Istanbul, with discussions focusing on Africa and, specifically, cooperation in Libya. Libya, with its 1,770 kilometers of Mediterranean coastline, numerous security challenges, and economic opportunities, provides a prime example of the evolving strategic interests and geographic considerations of both Türkiye and Italy. These interests have sometimes overlapped, such as in their political endorsement of

⁵⁹https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Joint_Declaration_3rd_Turkiye_Italy_Intergovernmental_Summit_5July2022_Ankara_0.pdf.

⁶⁰<https://theconversation.com/somalia-türkiye-maritime-deal-is-a-win-for-both-countries-and-not-a-power-play-for-the-horn-of-africa-225023>

⁶¹<https://www.rfi.fr/en/podcasts/international-report/20240309-türkiye-and-italy-consider-teaming-up-to-seek-new-influence-in-africa>.

the Government of National Accord (GNA), opposition to Haftar's advance on Tripoli, and support for the Government of National Unity (GNU) and elections. Their paths have diverged at other times, especially concerning maritime disputes and the Türkiye-Libyan energy agreement.

In the latter scenario, Rome adopted a more cautious stance toward Ankara. Italy initiated efforts to broker an agreement between GNA Prime Minister Fayeza al-Sarraj and Haftar, hoping to stabilize the situation. Meanwhile, Egypt, Greece, France, and the UAE focused on forming a larger pro-Haftar coalition that included Tunisia and Algeria. When these efforts failed, they intensified their collaboration within the eastern Mediterranean grouping and, in May, issued another joint statement condemning Türkiye's actions in the eastern Mediterranean and Libya.

On the contrary, in the subsequent periods, Italy made efforts to reconcile the disputes and proposed a path for a trilateral mechanism following the ongoing rapprochement between Türkiye and Egypt.⁶² Ultimately, Italy and Türkiye share common interests with regard to migration flows, energy supplies, trade, and competition from powerful neighbors (France, Russia, and Egypt). They also share a fundamental interest in a stable and functioning Libya.

Hence, despite the growing media and political rhetoric pointing to an inevitable clash or competition between Rome and Ankara over shared interests in the Wider Mediterranean, a more nuanced analysis highlights room for pragmatic cooperation.

Ankara has considerably increased its influence in Libya, including a military base, which can still help Italy pursue its goals in terms of controlling migration, enhancing energy infrastructures, and investing in the country's post-conflict reconstruction. At the same time, the recent visit of Giorgia Meloni to Tripoli has emphasized the increased role of Italy in stabilizing the Libyan and the Sahel area. First, many see a certain endorsement from the US Administration for a more active Italian presence to prevent a larger Russian expansion from where France has significantly withdrawn. Second, this trust given by the US and some European allies to the Meloni government empowers the Italian PM to exercise a wider role not only in the issues of direct interest for Rome, such as migration and criminality, but also to extend its efforts towards defining a plan and action for the stabilization of the whole area.⁶³ These instances highlight the practical benefits of a partnership extending beyond bilateral relations to influence broader foreign policy strategies encompassing the whole African continent. For instance, in the current context of global instability, notably marked by Russia's aggressive policies and its increasing presence in Africa, Türkiye's established foothold in the region becomes particularly valuable.

Ankara's role in countering Moscow's influence adds a layer of strategic importance to its cooperation with Italy and other Western countries. As Africa undergoes a transformation in international relations, Italy and Türkiye's collaborative approach offers new development prospects for the continent and innovative diplomatic strategies that can also serve European interests.

Although Rome and Ankara lack the financial muscle of other influential players on the continent – notably Beijing – both countries have powerful incentives to focus on potential partnerships in their bid to expand their influence in Africa. In this sense, one step forward could be the creation of a bilateral mechanism to facilitate the integration of their respective know-how, compartmentalize potential areas of friction, and favor the integration of their national strategies with broader multilateral initiatives. Therefore, this would not only be

⁶²https://www.cidob.org/es/publicaciones/serie_de_publicacion/notes_internacionales_cidob/276/as_north_africa_n_energy_links_are_redrawn_italy_becomes_europe_s_southern_gas_hub.

⁶³ <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/libyas-stable-instability-173834#g1>.

coherent with their alternative modes of engagement – compared to other external players – but also represent an instrument to promote an equal partnership with African countries and more sustainable growth for a “rising continent.”

Ultimately, the strategic moves by Italy and Türkiye have the potential not only to redefine the geopolitical balance in Africa but also to create tangible economic opportunities and positive outcomes for local populations. In this sense, the two countries share a similar understanding of how to engage with African partners based on more equal terms. Italy enjoys a historical presence in terms of humanitarian and development missions, which can also help energy sector companies like ENI elaborate a new approach towards sustainable goals and the development of projects in which local stakeholders and communities play a primary role.⁶⁴

At the same time, Türkiye’s recent activism has managed to entertain strong and cordial relations with African states and the entrepreneurial and civil society. While it is evident that both countries can benefit from a positive perception of their national policies in the continent, improving this alternative mode of engagement entails two aspects.

Firstly, Ankara and Rome should institutionalize their common ground, perspectives, and values through regular meetings, forums, and cooperation mechanisms with African partners. This approach would not only allow them to leverage their already strong diplomatic presence but also enhance their credibility as equal partners committed to amplifying the continent’s demands.

Secondly, to transcend the notion of soft power as merely a tool for pursuing one-sided strategic interests, Italy and Türkiye could establish forms of cooperation in culture, education, and local empowerment. This approach does not entail abandoning traditional engagement methods but rather advancing more structured and well-equipped human and material development programs in challenging scenarios. In this sense, Italy’s presidency of the G7 in 2024 is another crucial element.

On the one hand, this motivated the Italian government to set an ambitious agenda reflecting its domestic priorities and foreign policy interests. Alongside energy, migration, and ongoing conflicts as top issues, the presidency has made particular reference to the needs of Africa, ranging from food security to more sustainable development strategies based on equal partnerships.⁶⁵

On the other hand, the fact that Meloni has decided to invite Erdoğan to the forum was highlighted once again in terms of how Ankara represents a fundamental partner to address global stability and “the needs of the so-called “Global South”.⁶⁶ Yet, the question of how Italy and Türkiye can cooperate and learn from each other in this context remains. For instance, Italy could emulate Türkiye’s example by creating scholarships and facilitating exchange programs, while Ankara could learn from Rome’s experience in establishing a long-term presence through investments and achieving a more balanced trade relationship.

Such efforts could attract more international funds from various institutions and sectors. However, the success of their shared ambitions will depend on their ability to navigate the complex political landscape of African dynamics while respecting local sovereignty and promoting sustainable development. What makes this plausible is the way Italy and Türkiye’s foreign policy are structured. Although the former has traditionally refrained from adopting clear strategic objectives, and the latter has lately been criticized for its more assertive global

⁶⁴ <https://www.undp.org/africa/press-releases/eni-and-undp-join-forces-promote-sustainable-energy-and-sdgs-africa>.

⁶⁵ <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaicom2427.pdf>.

⁶⁶ <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/ruolo-g7-cooperazione-sviluppo/>

stance, both countries' historical trajectory demonstrates a high capacity for adaptability to changing scenarios and a unique ability to mediate with different actors.

Lastly, cooperation between Ankara and Rome can strategically advance Europe's broader interests in Africa. The EU foreign policy has historically struggled to adopt a unified approach to the continent due to divergent interests among its member states and their different views of strategic partnerships with third countries like Türkiye.

In this context, the shared perspectives of Italy and Türkiye on Africa can promote clearer collaboration channels. This partnership could also play a crucial role in strengthening Türkiye's ties with Europe, highlighting Türkiye's significance and its ability to engage effectively in regions where the European Union faces challenges.⁶⁷ This does not necessarily connect to Türkiye's frozen EU access process, but it surely implies a less transactional and more long-term vision for mutual areas of cooperation. As such, the EU has to substantiate its recognition of Türkiye's growing role as a stabilizing power in neighboring regions and its contributions to collective crisis management efforts, as reflected in European Commission progress reports.

It is a matter of fact that Türkiye's foreign policy towards Africa, particularly in its previous era, demonstrated a high degree of convergence with the EU's approach. Türkiye's policy largely focused on soft power and aligned with the EU's foreign policy strategy, further underscoring the potential for enhanced cooperation between Türkiye and European states in addressing challenges and opportunities in Africa.⁶⁸ In parallel, while Italy's geographic proximity has always prompted its particular eye of attention to Africa, the latest developments have shown Rome's enhanced willingness to play a major "bridging role" to mediate between different perspectives within the EU and other countries in the context of Mediterranean and African dynamics.

Therefore, by working together, Rome and Ankara can contribute to a more integrated and balanced stance of other external players, fostering stability and growth in Africa. Overall, this will represent a clear litmus test to assess new formulas for more equal and secure development in a rapidly evolving global context.

Authors

Samuele C.A. Abrami

PhD Candidate UCSC, Milan, and Visiting Fellow SUITS, Stockholm, Sabancı University, Istanbul

Riccardo Gasco

PhD Candidate University of Bologna, and Visiting Fellow Sabancı University, Istanbul

⁶⁷ <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/new-formula-collaboration-Türkiye-eu-north-africa>

⁶⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_23_5630