



Turkey's Sub-imperialist moment in the Middle East and Africa

“STRATEGIC AUTONOMY”?

The term: sub-imperialism



- The concept of sub-imperialism was introduced by the Brazilian Marxist scholar and activist Ruy Mauro Marini
- The term demonstrates how a regional power can be both a subject of imperialism and an agent of imperialist practices within its spheres of influence, while even challenging traditional imperialist actors.
- Marini was trying to understand the dynamics of capitalist development in a country like Brazil. The country was then in the process of industrialising and expanding but was still operating within the economic, political, and military limits set by the leading global powers.

Ruy Mauro Marini

- was inspired by Marxist dependency theories of the 1960s, as well as by the classical theories of imperialism formulated by thinkers such as Hobson, Lenin, Bukharin, and Rosa Luxemburg.

Ruy Mauro Marini explains the term with the characteristics of...

- **1) Hierarchical structure:** Sub-imperialist nations occupy a position in the global hierarchy below major imperialist powers but above less developed economies.
- **2) Dual role:** They are both exploited by major imperialist centres and exploit others in their own regions.
- **3) Regional power dynamics:** Sub-imperialist states act as regional hegemons, exerting expansionist influence in their "backyards" to protect their own economic and political interests, often collaborating with the larger powers.

characteristics ...

- **4)Regional power dynamics:** Sub-imperialist states function as regional hegemons, exerting expansionist influence within their "backyards" to safeguard their economic and political interests, often working with larger powers.
- **5)Internal development:** The development of sub-imperialism results from particular historical and systematic conditions within the global capitalist system, where internal capital becomes more concentrated, but dependence on the broader system persists intact.
- **6)Examples:** Countries like Brazil, India, and Iran are often cited as examples of sub-imperialism, as they are seen to wield considerable regional influence while still remaining dependent on the global imperialist system.

Sub-imperialist countries

- **Although a sub-imperialist country is not yet as economically powerful as those in the top tier and not as influential in shaping the world agenda, it engages in direct expansionist policies within its own region alongside major imperialist powers.**
- **That is why countries that reach this level by progressing through medium-developed nations are classified as sub-imperialist.**

Sub-imperialist countries

- **Some capitalist countries that have achieved regional power status can sometimes challenge major powers to act more independently in their own interests.**
- **Over time, the form and nature of their relations with major imperialist powers evolve into their advantage.**
- **For instance, while they were once simply a humble regional police force with big powers in their own regions, they now seek to align with big powers to advance their expansionist ambitions.**

- Although sub-imperialist countries are not yet powerful enough to command on a global scale, they can still constitute a centre of power in their own regions.
- **There is no doubt that this situation provides the fundamental basis for rivalry between countries in similar circumstances in the same region.**
- For instance, the situations of Argentina and Brazil in South America, or of Turkey and Iran in the Middle East, reflect this kind of objective ground for rivalry.
- **These kinds of regions always have the potential for conflict and friction due to ambitions for expansion.**
- Reminiscent of the rivalry between the Ottoman and Persian empires in history, Turkey and Iran, the successors of these empires respectively, continue to have their expansionist claims over the region.

Basis of inequality produces sub-imperialists

- The global interstate system produces interdependence based on inequality.
- **Therefore, problems arising from unequal positions and the possibility that powerful ones can intervene in less powerful ones economically and politically do not go away.**
- Yet nation-states, in general and sub-imperialist ones in particular, also have their own spheres of economic and political operation in their own right.



Sub-imperialism

- Sub-imperialism, in this context, refers to a phenomenon in which a country, while not a major global imperial power, acts in ways that align with or support the interests of imperial powers and behaves in an imperialist manner within its own region.
- **It is characterised by actions that expand a nation's political, economic, and military influence over other countries or regions, often on behalf of, or in collaboration with, dominant global powers.**

Turkey as a sub-imperialist power

- The concept of sub-imperialism today applies perfectly to Turkey.
- **Over the past 30 years, Turkey has developed into a significant industrial economy, integrated into productive networks centred on the European Union (EU).**
- Turkey has become a sub-imperial power, investing in ports, airports, and infrastructure projects to extract resources in the Middle East and Africa and to increase its global political and military influence.

How it started?

- **Turkey stands at the crossroads of inter-imperialist rivalry between the U.S., Russia, and, in the Horn of Africa, the rising power of China.**
- Turkey has one foot in NATO and the other foot free to pursue its own interests as it sees fit.
- **The Turkish state saw the 2011 Arab Spring events as an opportunity to assert Turkish leadership.**
- It is now bumping up against the limits of Turkish sub-imperialism.
- **The Turkish government put plentiful resources into trying to engineer the overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria.**
- Turkey even sent troops to Libya to prop up the nominal government that controls little more than the capital, Tripoli.

Before that...

- In 1998, Turkey launched an “Opening up to Africa Policy”, which quickly evaporated because of Turkish unpreparedness.
- Nevertheless, Ankara understood the important role access to African resources would play in the new century.
- **Erdogan aims to revive Turkey’s policy towards Africa with little opposition. Erdogan declared 2005 as “the year of Africa”, hosting the first Turkey–Africa Cooperation Summit in 2008.**
- Under AKP leadership, Ankara-Mogadishu relations were revitalised.
- **Relations with Somalia improved when Erdoğan was in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, for the 2007 African Union meeting.**

- **Turkish foreign policy was based on establishing relations with select African states through a multi-strategy combining economic, political, diplomatic, and cultural ties to further Turkish interests.**
- Somalia was the most receptive of all African states that Erdoğan explored.
- **Turkey's humanitarian strategy included sending hundreds of tons of food and other essential items and coordinating 'peacekeeping' and 'capacity building' activities to help police the Somali crisis.**
- Turkey's strategy involved government bodies such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), Turkish Airlines, and Kızılay (Turkish Red Crescent), as well as non-governmental organisations like the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), which supported Turkey's foreign policy goals Somalia.
- **The political and economic crisis positioned Turkey in a post-crisis nation-building role, once typically reserved for American and major European imperial powers.**

Turkey's presence in the Middle East and Africa

- **is a multi-layered foreign policy instrument rather than merely a matter of security; defence cooperation, military bases, security sector reforms, defence industry exports, and diplomatic initiatives are closely intertwined.**
- This presence, while enhancing local security capacities, also offers security assurances for the Turkish capital's infrastructure and energy projects.
- **Therefore, Turkey's military presence in Africa is not only a geopolitical security strategy but also an instrument of economic expansion that secures the material conditions for capital accumulation.**
- This form of expansion takes place on a strategic level, where coercive apparatuses and development aid work together coordination.
- **Somalia is one of the most striking examples of this integration.**

Why Somalia?

- Strategically, Somalia sits on the Gulf of Aden, at the entrance to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, a pivotal global shipping lane connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean.
- Turkey has identified Somalia as both geostrategically important and profitable.
- **Every Western country has ignored Somalia, given its 'failed state' status.**
- Amid inter-imperialist rivalries, this is a strategic move by Ankara.
- **Turkey has attempted to exert influence in Cameroon, South Africa and Congo. Still, these countries have already been courted by other states, most significantly the United States, France, China and the United Kingdom.**



Turkish pivot in Somalia

- **The Turkish pivot in Somalia not only serves to expand Turkish influence when considering its actions in Syria, Iraq and Qatar, but also competes with other imperialist rivals.**
- **The Ethiopian economic zone, designated by China, partly explains China's first overseas military base in Djibouti, intended to protect its interests.**
- **The Turkish domination of Somalia gives Ankara the option to either serve the American Western alliance or to use Somalia as a buffer state to block U.S. and Western imperialism.**
- **Whatever Ankara chooses, all roads for Erdoğan currently lead to Moscow and Beijing's ever-expanding Silk Road, making Somalia a gateway for renewed Turkish imperialism in the context of growing, global, inter-imperialist rivalries in the Horn of Africa.**

Later, in 2016...

- The announcement in early 2016 of a Turkish military base in Qatar reportedly included army, navy, air force, and Special Forces units, as well as advisors and trainers for the Qatari military.
- **This move has given Turkey direct access to the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian Sea, as well as a base to project its influence in the vicinity of the oil-rich microstates of Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates.**

Turkey in Somalia

- **In 2010, Ankara signed a military cooperation pact with Somalia after the Somali Chief of Staff and other retired generals, along with their Turkish counterparts, discussed the restructuring of the Somali army.**
- According to these agreements between Ankara and Mogadishu, Turkey has established a military training base in Somalia for the Somali National Army.
- **In 2011, Ankara and Mogadishu signed a 49-year agreement to enhance Somali education system.**
- Thousands of Somali students were awarded Turkish government and NGO scholarships to study in Turkey.
- **What this demonstrates is a geostrategic and patient Ankara that will exert its influence through both soft and hard power.**

in Mogadishu ...

- While establishing a military base in Mogadishu, Turkey also built hospitals, schools, roads, and water wells; conducted technical assistance projects in agriculture and livestock; and provided training support to the Somali security forces.
- **These simultaneous interventions not only provide humanitarian aid or strengthen diplomacy but also facilitate the restructuring of local infrastructure through Turkish contracting companies and bureaucratic processes.**
- In this way, Turkey's military presence becomes a multi-layered form of intervention that simultaneously carries both capital-export and development discourses.

Camp TURKSOM

- Opened in 2017 in Mogadishu, Camp TURKSOM covers 400 hectares and has become Turkey's largest overseas military facility (MFA 2025).
- **The military component of Turkey's foreign policy in Africa functions as a central instrument of domination alongside ideological apparatuses.**
- In this context, Camp TURKSOM is not merely a training camp but the military projection of Turkey's ruling class strategy.
- **In a short period, it became Turkey's largest overseas military facility; by 2025, more than 10,000 Somali soldiers had been trained there, and special forces such as the Gorgor Commando Units had been established (MFA 2025).**
- Although these units operate within the Somali state's structure, they are highly dependent on Turkey for training, weaponry, and logistics.

- **With the Defence and Economic Cooperation Agreement signed in February 2024, Turkey committed to protecting Somalia's maritime jurisdictional areas, modernising the Somali Navy, and establishing a long-term partnership in maritime security.**
- This agreement grants Turkey access to strategic ports and allows for permanent military presence in the region.
- **The delivery in June 2025 of three T129 ATAK attack helicopters and two utility helicopters to the Somali Air Force demonstrates the level of defence industry exports reached (SIPRI 2025).**
- In May of the same year, 500 Turkish soldiers stationed at Camp TURKSOM assumed operational duties in the field against Al-Shabaab at the request of the Somali government.

On top of these...

- **Turkey is establishing a spaceport in Somalia that will function both as an orbital launch site for satellites and as a testing ground for long-range ballistic missiles, such as the Tayfun missile system.**
- The project, managed by the Turkish Space Agency (TUA) under a defence and economic cooperation agreement with Somalia, will be located on the Indian Ocean coast and is intended to support Turkey's national space program and defence ambitions.
- **The project, part of a larger framework agreement between the two countries, will occupy a 900 km² area and is expected to cost over \$350 million.**
- Construction of the spaceport in Somalia has begun, with work starting in December 2024.

Behind the Horn of Africa...

- This military deepening is not limited to the Horn of Africa.
- **In February 2025, with France's withdrawal, the Abéché Military Base in Chad came under Turkey's control (International Crisis Group 2025).**
- This base in the Sahel region expanded Turkey's access to West Africa and increased its room for manoeuvre in the growing Russia–France rivalry in the region.
- **The deployment in Chad has elevated Turkey as a new regional security actor, following security vacuums in Mali and Niger.**

Turkish companies...

- Defence industry companies gain direct financial advantages from this military network.
- **Baykar's unmanned aerial vehicles, Roketsan's missile systems, ASFAT's warship modernisation, and STM's naval platforms have all been involved in Africa's security modernisation projects over the past five years. (Defence Turkey 2024).**
- These products build long-term relationships not only through hardware sales but also via maintenance, training, and technical support dependency.

Media and cultural communication tools

- also reinforce Turkey's influence in Africa.
- **The launch of TRT Africa in 2023 reflects Turkey's effort to promote its perspective across the continent. Regional offices of Anadolu Agency (2024), cultural activities of the Yunus Emre Institute, Turkish TV series broadcast on local channels, and social media content stand out as elements that bolster Turkey's image and enhance local cultural interactions codes.**
- These contents are not just promotional; they also transform local cultures in a way that can be called “cultural extractivism”, adapting them to global capitalist aesthetics and consumption patterns.

“energy cooperation”

- Turkey has pursued not only hydrocarbon resources but also rare minerals such as diamonds, gold, uranium, lithium, and cobalt.
- **Most notably, a “Turkey–Somalia Hydrocarbon Exploration and Production Agreement” was signed between the Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) and the Somali Petroleum Authority.**
- Under this agreement, Turkey will conduct three-dimensional seismic surveys across three offshore blocks covering a total of 15,000 km² and will have the authority to produce oil if reserves are discovered.(BBC Türkçe 2024).

Turkish construction companies...

- All such infrastructure and mining activities are usually conducted through the utilisation of national resources by private companies, with many Turkish-based multinationals playing strategic roles by supplying the physical and financial infrastructure for these operations processes.
- **Rönesans Holding and ENKA have undertaken major infrastructure projects in Senegal, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Tanzania, including highways, ports, railways, and power plants.(Financial Times 2024).**
- These investments facilitate not only transportation but also access to mining extraction zones, thereby providing the logistical foundation for mining extractivism.

In Angola...

- **Tosyalı Holding has partnered with the state-owned company Sonangol to establish an integrated iron and steel facility to reopen iron ore reserves in the Kassinga region (Reuters 2024).**
- This project aims at extracting local mineral reserves and integrating them into the global system markets.
- **Such examples show that the connection between infrastructure and mining activities is not only technical but also ideological and rooted in class interests (Anadolu Agency 2024).**

Finally,

- Turkey's military, cultural, and economic presence in Africa emerges in areas where global powers leave a void vacuum.
- **In cases such as the reduction of U.S. military engagement in Somalia and France's withdrawal from Chad, Turkey has stepped in, showing that it positions itself not as a directly competitive power but as a sub-hegemon filling gaps within the existing hegemonic order.**
- In doing so, it both establishes a regional sphere of influence and offers a security base for Turkish capital's investments on the continent.

Is this colonialism?

- Although presented in a discourse distinct from the West's colonial legacy, Turkey's presence in Africa is based on a logic that commodifies nature, disciplines labour, and transforms ecological regimes in favour of capital – both domestically and abroad.
- **The ecological aspect of pursuing regional hegemony involves a form of dominance that relies not only on resource extraction but also on the political reconfiguration of nature.**
- In this context, Turkey positions itself as a sub-hegemon that follows the strategic lines of global powers while seeking to establish hegemony within its own periphery.
- **In conclusion, Turkey's interventions in Africa should be analysed alongside the ecological and class contradictions of capitalist expansion. A more thorough examination of the connection between extractivist practices in domestic and foreign policy offers valuable opportunities for future research.**