Turkey is in Africa to Stay as an Equal Partner

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's diplomatic year came to a close with his visits to three countries in Africa; Sudan, Chad and Tunisia. Together with these, the number of his continental country visits sums up to twenty-three ever since he became prime minister, then as the president. Yet visits in 2017, produced more significant symbolic outcomes when compared to the previous ones. One significant of these emanates from renovation rights given to Turkey upon Erdogan's request of Sudan's Suakin island. Hence, reconstructing Red Sea island's ruined Islamic monuments is noteworthy, substantiating the claim that Turkey is in Africa to stay. Consider this alongside the largest military base Turkey opened abroad, in Somalia, in 2017.

Suakin island was once used by the pilgrims from Africa and Turkey as a stopover on their way to Mecca. It has also served as the administrative centre for the Ottoman governors of Hejaz province at the time. As a result, it has become an important realm, home to many important Islamic structures, mosques and shrines that are now in ruins. Island's international status was settled with the formation of Turkish Republic in 1923. Once these proposed restorations are completed, the island is expected to be revived as an important venue for religious teaching and as a holiday destination.

More importantly, restoration of the historical buildings on the island galvanizes Turkey's clogged up memory chip vis a vis the continent, particularly after the loss of its territories there nearly one hundred years ago. One other memory chip is in the musings of Afro-Turks, but that is for another article.

Recent visit by President Erdogan has noticeably bolstered his earlier three countries visit to Eastern Africa in the beginning of 2017, covering Tanzania, Mozambique and Madagascar. Conveniently, there and then, a number of business deals were signed on the basis of sectoral complementarities. Those deals were guided by a more economically minded framework that also indicated intentions for future perpetual covenants. Thus, it is important to note that visits in 2017 were fundamentally ground breaking, solidly marking a "new phase" in Turkey's dealings with the continent.

In what way these visits are inventive for Turkey's future involvement with Africa? This is a convoluted question calling for multifarious answers… Let's attempt hereby to respond by highlighting some of the central issues.

In fact, high level visits in 2017 are logical sequential outcome of a strategy that had been accepted at the Second Turkey – Africa Summit in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea in 2014. There, a "new model for partnership for strengthening sustainable development and integration" strategy was accepted to guide the future course of bonding with Africa. This strategy based on the realities of international political economy aimed to promote Turkey's relations with the continent around bilateral agreements. In this sense, Turkey is set to develop mutual relations with individual countries in the continent. Hence, an important departure from romantic "Opening Up to Africa" strategy to a more realistic "win – win" approach is now put in place.

Malabo meeting then, had already specified key areas of co-operation. It has proposed business interactions particularly in agriculture, agribusiness, rural development, civil defence, water resource management, development of micro- and small-scale enterprises, security, health and transportation. These areas are to be designed to find "African solutions for African problems". Hence, considering impressive diplomatic and economic interaction with the partner countries in Africa, the last visit to the continent is grounded on a more realistic milieu.

Additional justification for such a rational can be found in Erdogan's opening address at the First Economic and Business Summit, in Istanbul, at the end of 2016 whereby he stressed "the need for a deeper economic, sectoral and business-to-business collaboration" between African nations and Turkey. There he declared in a spirit of solidarity that, "we will not accept to be the wretched of the earth". Such rhetoric has chimed in his acceptance speech of the honorary doctorate awarded by the Khartoum University. He, pointing out the damages done in the continent by the colonial powers, called for the unity of the Muslim world to stand strong against contemporary challenges.

Erdogan's Khartoum University talk also stressed the economic role Turkey destined to play in Africa. Sudan in this sense pointed out to be an important and an equal partner, not only in rhetoric but also in action. This first visit at the presidential level also underlines the view that for a win - win situation, Sudan, upon a shared historical past and cultural heritage, provides Turkey with a firm basis for collaboration. Sudan, one of the geographically largest countries on earth with a population of fifty million and five thousand US dollars per capita income is rich in oil, gold and natural resources, offers substantial sectoral complementarities to Turkey. Sudan's agricultural sector has large potential for food security in sub-Saharan Africa.

US embargo against Sudan aimed to cripple the country. The country ended up being divided when South Sudan seceded, taking away two thirds of its oil reserve. In addition, civil strife in Darfur claimed many lives. Turkey has shown solidarity and proven to the Sudanese that she was a reliable friend during those difficult times. The prospect of removing the American embargo recently, opened-up for the Sudanese a path to explore new opportunities, particularly in the extractive industries but also in production and trade. In hindsight, at the current global conjuncture, intensified international competition for Sudanese resources renders Erdogan's recent visit timely and beneficial for mutual positive economic returns with Turkey. Announcement of a strategic partnership between the two countries was long overdue and was a welcomed outcome of the visit.

Similarly, Erdogan's visit to Chad had sealed another significant development on a very sensitive issue. Government of Chad had agreed to close down or transfer the administrations of Fetullah Terror Organisation (FETO) related schools to the Maarif Education Foundation. Hence, Chad had become one of the first countries to ban and criminalise FETO related networks in Africa. From Turkey's point of view, elimination of such networks would foster relations with the continent even more since FETO had been following its own agenda and not that of Turkey's, as it had been widely accepted in the past. In this regard, removal of these networks is expected to help producing deeper and economically more grounded, informed and realistic interactions with Africa.

However, there are still some specific areas preventing to improve relations with the continent. For instance, financing of trade and investments needs to be adequately addressed. Bank credits are not yet sufficient enough and insurance services are mostly absent. Exim bank credit limits for the continent must be increased that would help undertaking desired projects and to foster public – private partnership. Double taxation and transportation related problems needs to be addressed, particularly fairly quickly. Turkey, needs to calculate the impact of free trade agreements amongst African countries upon its own. It would help to ease up trade relations by creating and promoting free trade zones like the one in Djibouti. These and many other relevant glitches need to be tackled for each individual target country, requiring arduous labour informed by profound knowledge of Africa and backed up by modern methods of inquiry.