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Part II of II: Türkiye’s threefold approach to increased influence in West Africa: A double-edged sword for the EU?

Background

In the recently released “[White Paper for European Defence - Readiness 2030](#)”¹ by the European Union (EU), it is articulated that, besides building the EU’s defence capacities, strengthening partnerships with like-minded countries in strategically important regions is also one of the cornerstones of future European security. Specifically, the white paper states that the EU should enhance partnerships in a mutually-beneficial way, to address a wide range of security challenges, among others, the increasing [security dilemma](#) in the Sahel, in which Türkiye is mentioned specifically as a key partner.

With the United States retreating from its involvement in Africa, this circumstance implies that Europe and the EU are now devoid of American assistance in terms of humanitarian aid and stabilisation engagements due to the [closing](#) of USAID and [possibly](#) AFRICOM, thus finding themselves increasingly isolated in confronting challenges originating from the Sahel. Türkiye’s expanding influence in West Africa creates a

¹ European Commission. (2025). *White paper for European defence – Readiness 2030*.
https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6d5db69-e0ab-4bec-9dc0-3867b4373019_en

rather complex dynamic with the EU in which it's both seen as a competitor and a potential partner. The reality is, the EU and Ankara are highly interdependent – in both political and economic spheres. Türkiye serves as a vital trading partner for the EU and plays an essential role in European supply chains, making ongoing collaboration imperative. This dynamic could provide leverage for enhanced cooperation between the two, owing to their mutual interests. The EU seeks increased security assurances for its southern frontier, whereas Türkiye aims to see a return on its investments in various industries while strategically aligning itself for a future prospective membership to the EU. Together, this holds a great potential to forge a strong alternative to the presence of China and Russia in the region. But can Türkiye be a trusted ally amidst increasing hybrid security threats from West Africa or will it show itself as a double-edged sword?

Potential Avenues of Cooperation

The defense and security sector appear as a potential avenue of cooperation. Türkiye has established itself as a frontrunner in military technology sectors in which Europe is notably deficient, especially in the domain of drone warfare. The operational efficacy of the Turkish-manufactured Bayraktar in Ukraine highlighted its strategic importance, as these systems were crucial in impeding Russian advances towards Kyiv. This phenomenon is similarly observable in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Togo, and Nigeria, where the Bayraktar TB2 drone has emerged as an essential asset in combating violent extremism, with its extended operational range facilitating comprehensive surveillance and intelligence gathering. Through increased funding and donations, the EU may be able to bolster the number of drones these countries have at hand thus contributing significantly to the countries' ability to forge a more robust security sector in West Africa.

The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy ([CSDP](#)) missions stand out as another clear avenue of cooperation for the EU and Türkiye to strengthen local security sectors and combat threats such as terrorism, organized crime and irregular migration. Türkiye has emerged as an independent regional power, characterized by its self-determined strategic objectives and competencies, which align with the EU's overarching initiative for strategic autonomy and a diversified partnership base that concurrently aids the EU in its migration governance, violent extremism, and hybrid threats. However, European values such as democracy promotion and rule-of-law norms may conflict with Türkiye's more autonomous and assertive military actions, creating potential friction in rules of engagement and accountability. One example of this discrepancy in values is noticeable in Niger where the US has closed its base and the EU [ended](#) its capacity-building mission (EUCAP Sahel Niger) in June 2024. Contrarily, Türkiye has maintained its support for the military junta and has since shown [interest](#) in establishing a military base in the country. Erdoğan was also

vocal against the ECOWAS intervening in Niger². Typically, the EU has been very positive in its support for ECOWAS. This shows a clear divide in strategic priorities between the two: Türkiye supports bilaterally whereas the EU typically implements its support through regional organisations such as ECOWAS. However, the latest [defence dialogue](#) between the EU and Nigeria might show a change in strategy from Brussel. It is particularly pertinent if the military juntas opt to collaborate with Ankara rather than with the initiatives spearheaded by Abuja or Accra within an ECOWAS framework, which could result in regional divides, characterized by a Turkey-aligned Sahel coalition opposing the more EU-aligned coastal democracies. Consequently, Türkiye's bilateralism might fuel the political agenda of the AES countries leading to a further weakening of the cohesion within ECOWAS. Especially if Ankara's rapid bilateral offers (military investment and training for high tempo operations) reduce ECOWAS decision-making influence and the EU's leverage from sanctions or aid suspension, resulting in a bypassing of the EU conditionality of democracy and human-rights safeguards.

Then, there is the question of mass migration from West Africa to the southern borders of the EU. While Erdoğan hasn't publicly said anything about mass migration in the Sahel, it is nonetheless a fact that Türkiye in the future – along with Russia and China – will have quite significant influence and power in large portions of the Sahel and West Africa, thus enabling them to influence the level of migration inflow from the region to Europe - and potentially also weaponize it. Erdoğan for example utilized the large number of refugees from the Syrian civil war in 2015 to push the EU to concessions and increased influence. Most recently, significant migratory movements have been observed emanating from Mali, traversing through Mauritania, and ultimately directing towards Europe. Alternative pathways, such as those originating from the Sahel and Libya, where Russia and Türkiye are currently augmenting their geopolitical presence, may exert considerable pressure on southern countries such as Spain and Italy, among other nations. With Erdoğan starting to line up Türkiye as one of the EU's most vital security partners, it is unknown if Türkiye's influence in West Africa could be used as a focal point of pressure to stem migrant flows towards the EU.

Engaging with Erdoğan and Ankara

One salient aspect to consider when engaging with Erdoğan is the *Türkiye first* policy whereby Türkiye will prioritize the most advantageous course of action for the nation at any given juncture. Such priorities may shift rapidly, necessitating that the EU remain vigilant and ready for these potential strategic realignments.

² <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/turkey-influence-africa/>

A pertinent illustration of this phenomenon is the concurrent switches towards both the EU and the BRICS+ coalition. This dualistic behaviour may indicate that Erdoğan's reliability as a long-term ally is questionable. Nonetheless, Türkiye has recently been very vocal about the necessity of a security partnership between Türkiye and the EU. Turkish Deputy Defense Minister Suay Alpay claimed that without Türkiye, [the security of the European Union and Europe is under a great potential threat](#). Similarly, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan pointed out that [sustainable peace and security in Europe are only possible with the partnership of Türkiye](#). The comments were made in relation to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but they may also have significant importance when understanding the threats that will impact the EU's security architecture in the coming years.

The EU's special envoy to the Sahel recently [expressed interest](#) in working with Türkiye in the region, as the latter is seen as part of international solutions to stability in the Sahel. With the EU eyeing a potential partnership through its recently published [White Paper for European Defence - Readiness 2030](#), the pathway for closer ties may not prove too difficult. Türkiye's emphasis on south-south cooperation may prove as a vital bridging mechanism between the EU, Türkiye and the West African partners. With Türkiye being a Muslim country, non-EU, but yet technologically advanced, it appeals to many West African governments wary of Western paternalism. Türkiye's ability to support logistics, trade, and security could potentially aid the EU's long term strategic objectives and programmes of delivering development and stability support to the region – that is if strategic alignment between Brussels and Ankara is reached.

Conclusion: A double-edged sword of cooperation?

A partnership between the EU and Türkiye may present itself as a double-edged sword in the sense that while collaboration with Türkiye could enhance migration management, bolster security measures, and mitigate hybrid threats, it simultaneously poses risks. Owing to the Türkiye First policy performed by Erdoğan and informed by historical precedents, such a partnership may inadvertently exacerbate the very sources of insecurity it aims to address by increasing the risk of hybrid threats towards the EU's southern frontier. Nevertheless, in light of the US' retreat and in search of greater security guarantees, the EU may find it imperative to engage in this partnership due to the limited collaborative opportunities available in West Africa. An EU-Türkiye partnership is also contingent upon Türkiye's conceived position as semi-neutral among African leaders, the security situation, and lowering influence of actors like Russia, US and China. This can either pull Türkiye towards or away from the EU. The challenge for Brussels lies in transforming Ankara's assertive regional presence from a zero-sum dilemma into a pragmatic one,

leveraging Türkiye's operational agility to mitigate hybrid- and conventional threats towards its southern frontier. Conclusively, the EU might need to prepare for a closer Ad Hoc and issue-based relationship with Türkiye when it aligns on values, security and strategy but still maintain the adaptability to pursue its own interest when opportune. If not, Türkiye's threefold approach of security cooperation, cultural diplomacy, and economic diplomacy may prove to undermine the EU's influence in West Africa and so potentially exacerbate security risks in the years to come.

Recommended reading:

Issouf, Binaté (2025). Turkey is stepping up its influence in west Africa – what's behind its bid for soft power. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/turkey-is-stepping-up-its-influence-in-west-africa-whats-behind-its-bid-for-soft-power-256929>

Brown, Will (2025). The Bear and the Bot Farm: Countering Russian Hybrid Warfare in Africa. *The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)*. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-bear-and-the-bot-farm-countering-russian-hybrid-warfare-in-africa/#burkina-faso>

Hussam, S. (2026). Redefining power systems: Turkish electric-sector engagement in Africa. *Washington, DC: Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/redefining-power-systems-turkish-electric-sector-engagement-in-africa/>

About the author:

Mikkel is a special advisor and researcher at the Royal Danish Defence College. His work primarily focuses on maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea, Professional Military Education (PME) capacity-building in West Africa, and Turkey as an emerging actor. Aside from his research, he is also responsible for implementing the College's role in the Danish Peace & Stabilisation Fund's programmes in the Gulf of Guinea and West Africa. He was previously seconded to the KAIPTC in Accra, Ghana (2023-2025).

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