



**Turkey's “anti-colonial” pivot to Mali:**  
French-Turkish competition and  
the role of the European Union in the Sahel

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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January 2022  
Policy Paper #91/2022

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**Acknowledgement:** *The authors would like to thank Mr. Georgios C. Kostaras for his constructive comments on an earlier version of this paper.*

## **Summary**

- Since its rise to power in 2002, the AKP government has improved Turkey's relations with Africa. In particular, Turkey has sought a stronger role in the Sahel through its participation in regional security initiatives and by means of stronger economic and cultural relations.
- One of the tropes the AKP administration has used to advance its goals in Africa is an anti-colonial discourse against the EU and its member states. While this coincides with the AKP's internal revisionism, the most prominent example of the practice have been efforts to undermine French influence in Mali since the 2020 coup d'état.
- President Erdoğan has made skilful use of this anti-colonial discourse to exploit postcolonial sentiments against France and to portray France as an "agent provocateur" inciting domestic violence, while simultaneously presenting Turkey as an "equal and fair partner."
- Turkey has also utilized non-profit organizations and religion to support its goals and anti-colonial discourse, and to exploit its influence in Mali.
- The EU should revitalize its engagement with Mali and the Sahel, taking advantage of the current favourable political circumstances, and mobilising member states without a colonial past—such as Greece.
- The EU should promote EU-Africa cooperation on the basis of equality, use its soft power to aid Africa's political and economic development, and include more African institutions in its decision-making.

## Introduction

Turkey's rising foreign policy ambitions have been best reflected in its pivot to Africa. Its policy has hinged upon challenging the primacy of European states and intervening in their sphere of influence, primarily with the economic and diplomatic support of local pro-Ankara elements (Kardaş, 2021). This *modus operandi* has resulted in new areas of competition with European powers. The ongoing strategic competition between France and Turkey in the Sahel represents an excellent example of this.

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Since its rise to power in 2002, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP) government has improved Turkey's relations with countries including Niger, Libya, Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso and Mauritania by paying increased attention to regional problems like terrorism, poverty, famine, and ethnic and tribal conflicts (Jones, 2021). One of the tropes the AKP administration has used to advance its cause has been through acute references to the colonial heritage of the EU and its member states. Anti-colonial discourse has played an increasingly significant role in Turkey's foreign policy, as Turkey has projected itself as an emancipating actor (Capan and Zarakol, 2017; Alaranta, 2020).

This paper focuses on the AKP administration's use of anti-colonial discourse to challenge the French influence in Mali since the 2020 coup d'état. This discourse has aimed to exploit postcolonial sentiments to challenge the political and economic power of Western actors, to portray Turkey as a legitimate and "anti-colonial" ally and partner and, eventually, to establish a robust Turkish presence in the Sahel and beyond.

## The Roots of Turkey's Anti-Colonial Discourse

Having never been officially colonized, Turkey has had a complex relationship with the West (see Bilgin, 2009; Rumelili, 2003; Yanik and Subotić, 2019; Zarakol, 2011; 2013). Following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, Mustafa Kemal [Atatürk] reversed Turkey's declining military fortunes, leading Turkish nationalist forces to establish the Republic of Turkey. Despite initially employing anti-colonial and anti-imperialist arguments to fan winds of solidarity (Zarakol, 2011, 125–135, 148), Mustafa Kemal subsequently championed the Westernization of Turkey with a view to transforming it into a modern, European, Western -rather than a "postcolonial"- country, a policy in which he diverged from other regional actors (Capan and Zarakol, 2017, 196-197). His reforms sought to abolish the old Ottoman order and provide Turkey with an essentially Western identity.

While post-colonial critiques of Kemalism emerged with the rise of Turkish political Islam and the far right in the 1960s, they were not officially endorsed until the third term of the AKP administration. In 2014, the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (*Siyaset, Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmalar Vakfı*-SETA), a government-controlled think-tank, began publishing a series of policy papers promoting both a postcolonial critique of the West and Turkey's role as a global actor. Calls for a post-Kemalist, post-Western and post-Westphalian Turkey intent on transforming international politics were accompanied by critiques of the pre-existing Turkish reproduction of, and dependency on, Western thinking and norms (Mis and Aslan, 2014, 26; Yesiltas, 2014, 43). The focus on the creation of a new subject called "Turkey" lay at the heart of the work of other scholars including Aslan (2014) and Yeşiltaş (2014), who argued for the creation of a new Turkey independent and critical of Western notions and

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institutions (Çapan and Zarakol, 2017, 198). This movement's main line of thinking called for a distinct break from "obsolete Kemalism" (which became associated with colonialism) and the disruption of the "outdated Westphalian and Western foundations." The Arab Spring was presented as an attempt to break away from Western-imposed sovereignty, while the "Islamic State" was viewed as a challenge to the primary founding institutions of modern politics (Yesiltas and Kardaş, 2015, 78).

This association of a "New Turkey" with a critique of Eurocentrism also became apparent in speeches made by AKP officials after 2014. Foreign -and later Prime- Minister Ahmet Davutoglu repeatedly criticized the Eurocentrism driving international institutions like the United Nations, stressing the need for "recapturing the unifying spirit of Anatolia" (Davutoglu, 2013; Davutoglu, 2016). For his part, Prime Minister, and incumbent President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan questioned the status of borders and the postcolonial imaginary following World War I and argued for an Ottoman and Muslim solution to Western colonialism (Erdoğan, 2014; Deutsche Welle, 2016). The AKP administration highlighted the diametrically asymmetrical nature of its relationship with Western institutions and the overall inequality underlying the international order. The focus on postcolonial discourse intensified following the 2016 coup attempt, which was presented as an attempt by "Western colonialist forces" to topple Turkey's legitimate government (Reuters, 2021).

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Recently, the AKP's postcolonial discourse has served domestic revisionist policies. As Çapan and Zarakol (2017) show, President Erdoğan has employed it both to justify Turkey's democratic backsliding and to deflect Western criticism of Turkish foreign policies. For instance, in a 2016 speech, Erdoğan attacked the EU's treatment of Syrian refugees, which diverts "their [the West's] sensitivity to the so-called freedoms, rights, and law shown in the debate over gay marriage" and sustains "the slavery-and-colonial-era mindsets" (AA, 2016). He has also used strong Islamic and Ottoman-inspired symbolism to fuel domestic support and portray the West/Europe as a rival. Indicatively, in a 2017 speech in Adapazarı, he invoked the medieval religious wars between Christian Europe and the Islamic Middle East in a reference to present-day escalating tensions between the European Union and Turkey (Deutsche Welle, 2017).

The AKP has also used postcolonial discourse to support its "anti-colonial" agenda and exert its influence in the global South. The most prominent example of this practice have been efforts to curb French influence in the Sahel, the Middle East and North Africa. In August 2020, Erdoğan portrayed the visit of French President Emmanuel Macron to Lebanon in the wake of the August 2020 Beirut explosion as an attempt to "restore colonial order" and as "chasing after photos or doing spectacles in front of cameras" (*The Brussels Times*, 2020). A similar discourse has been employed to criticize French-led security operations in the Sahel region. In this context, Mali has emerged as a focal point of French-Turkish rivalry.

## Turkey's Involvement in Mali

Already in the 1970s, Turkey was providing technical and management assistance to Malian companies in collaboration with the World Bank (Keita, 1973). However, the recent boost in bilateral relations has resulted directly from Turkey's latest foray into the Sahel (see: Grigoriadis and Kostaras, 2021, 3-9), which has seen the AKP administration pursue a more proactive foreign policy in the region through multilateral initiatives (e.g., Turkey-Africa Partnership Summits), diplomatic visits, and closer political and economic relations (Kaya, 2021). Turkey's embassy in Mali was inaugurated in 2010, while interest

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in investment opportunities and in tapping Mali's natural resources has risen sharply. (Ozkan, 2020; Ramani, 2020). Its growing interest in Mali has brought Turkey into loggerheads with France, the leading European actor in the region. The two states have conflicting interests in regions extending from Transcaucasia, Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean to Western Africa. However, the growing French-Turkish competition in the Sahel has recently acquired increased resonance as the latter has sought to play a more significant role in a region traditionally within the French sphere of influence. In the case of Mali, Turkey has made efforts to capitalize on the deteriorating political and economic situation resulting from the jihadist and ethnic insurgency in the north of the country and a series of military coups (Ergin, 2020). Furthermore, the AKP administration has sought to take advantage of France's colonial history to portray Turkey as an "anti-colonial" and "like-minded" alternative, and French interventionism as a manifestation of the ongoing "Françafrique" (Mallet, Munshi, and Pilling, 2020). For instance, Turkey has repeatedly targeted French military operations (e.g., the French-led counterterrorism interventions under the G5 Sahel bloc) in the region (Ramani, 2020).

The AKP has also used anti-colonial discourse to exploit the postcolonial sentiments that exist in Mali, given that the state used to be a French colony and has been subject to strong French political and economic influence since its independence (Jayes, 2019). This discourse was especially present in the Turkish approach to the 2020 coup d'état that ousted the incumbent President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita from power. The strong anti-French sentiments that surrounded the coup provided the Turkish side with the opportunity to employ its anti-colonial discourse, which rests on the portrayal of Turkey as an "anti-colonial" alternative for African states (Africa News, 2020). Opposing France's colonialist instincts, Turkey promotes the image of a "like-minded", "anti-colonial" partner that wants to formulate "win-win" agreements based on mutual trust and inclusion, drawing on its South-South rhetoric. Turkey has also focused on economic and humanitarian development in the Sahel and beyond and emphasized its shared religious ties with countries in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, which is another feature that marks Turkey out from France and other Western powers. As this policy paper argues, the AKP's response to the coup perfectly showcases these leitmotifs and Turkish anti-colonial discourse and policies in the Sahel.

### Turkey's response to Mali's August 2020 coup d'état

On 18 August 2020, elements of the Malian armed forces stormed the Soundiata military base, exchanged gunfire with pro-government forces, and eventually detained several government officials including President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, who resigned and dissolved the government. Interestingly, the military junta seized power just a day before the Malian opposition groups, led by Mahmoud Dicko, an influential imam and political figure, orchestrated a massive rally to overthrow the government (United States Institute of Peace, 2020). The coup took place after weeks of domestic protests against the increasingly autocratic practices of the Keita regime, which had included kidnapping the opposition leader, Soumaila Cisse. Immediately confronted with the scenario of the removal of the French military presence from the region, French President Emmanuel Macron condemned the coup, which spurred the protestors to stage anti-French protests targeting the French troops in Mali on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mali's independence from France (Lyammouri, 2020). Many Malians, including Dicko, who had initially supported France's military ventures against the Islamists who held the North of the country, turned against France. Dicko and the protesters accused Paris of exploiting the country's war against jihadism to protect Keita's inefficient and corrupt government (*L' Express*, 2020). The coup and anti-French protests presented an opportunity for

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In a turn of events, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavuşoğlu was the first foreign official to meet with the National Council for the Salvation of the People set up by the putschists. While the visit occurred in the context of a series of visits in Africa, it nonetheless contradicted the 19 August 2020 press release calling for the release of President Keita and other high-ranking officials (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020a); as the visit showed, despite the long-standing good relations between Keita and Erdoğan, Turkish officials did not miss the opportunity to meet with the coup leaders. Speaking after the meeting, Çavuşoğlu stated he had "discussed the transition process" with the Council, along with Turkey's desire "for Mali to complete the transition process smoothly" (Ergin 2020). As the Minister indicated, the discussion of "the steps towards democratic elections, through the establishment of constitutional order as soon as possible" occurred in a brotherly manner.

As the visit suggests, Turkey also sought to play a more significant role in regional affairs through participation in regional security initiatives. During his visit to Mali, Çavuşoğlu met with Khatir Mahamat Saleh Annadif, former Foreign Minister of Chad, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Mali, and Head of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and discussed the transition process in the country (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020b). He also stressed that Turkey would continue to contribute both to the fight against regional terrorism and to the effectiveness of the MINUSMA mission. Indeed, Ankara had given five million USD in 2018 to the G5 Sahel force, a regional coalition that had begun in that year to deploy troops from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger to fight Islamist militants in the tri-border area conjoining Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. It had also been hosting Malian officers for training in Turkey and supplying Mali's army with light weapons and ammunition (Armstrong, 2020).

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A striking leitmotif is Turkey's undimmed interest in establishing stronger economic relations with Mali. The AKP administration's focus on the economic dimension coincides with Turkey's efforts to portray itself as a regional economic powerhouse and a force for regional development, spotlighting the work of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı-TİKA*) (Idriss, 2020). For instance, in 2018, Erdoğan and his delegation, which included 200 Turkish businesspeople, discussed cooperative and investment opportunities with the Malian government, while the following year, officials from Turkey's Foreign Economic Relations Board (*Dış Ekonomik İlişkiler Kurulu-DEİK*) paid a visit to Mali with a view to bolstering the bilateral trade and investment relations (Daily Sabah, 2018; Ergöçün, 2019). This approach has coincided with a pivot towards Africa in Turkish foreign policy over the last two decades, an important component of which is the embracing of the South-South Cooperation principle (SCC) (Bayram, 2020 39-51). For Turkey, the SCC is a way to not only reframe its relations with African nations, mostly through donations and aid provision, but also to strengthen cooperation between rising powers, developing states, and Islamic political-economic institutions in Western Africa (Hausmann and Lundsgaarde, 2015).

Similar patterns were also prevalent a year later when Mali experienced yet another coup d'état. On this occasion, the Malian Army, led by Vice President Assimi Goïta, captured the President Bah N'daw, Prime Minister Moctar Ouane, and Minister of Defence Souleymane Doucouré and stripped them of their powers. Then the head of the putschists, Assimi Goïta, announced that new elections would be held in 2022 (Durmas,

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2021). Partly confuting its treatment of the previous junta, Turkey initially expressed its concerns about these domestic developments, but subsequently opted for a relatively moderate stance, opposing the threats of sanctions and stricter measures by the African Union and the European Union. In addition, it expressed its support for the efforts made by the United Nations, the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States, as well as the transitional institutions, and extended the mandate for Turkish troops in the MINUSMA operation by one year (Avundukluoglu, 2021). Furthermore, Turkey placed special emphasis on its participation in the transitional process, as well as on the need for additional bilateral cooperation in various areas. Indicatively, Erdoğan stressed in his recent conversations with the now interim President Goita his “brotherly” support for the Malian people, while simultaneously underlining the importance of strengthening bilateral ties in trade and of combating terrorism (*Daily Sabah*, 2021). This narrative coincided with Turkey’s efforts to present the state as an alternative and like-minded partner in its discourse during his 2021 tour of Africa and speeches on regional initiatives (Coffey, 2021).

### Turkey's use of anti-colonial discourse in Mali

A closer look at the discourse surrounding the Turkish administration’s visits and responses to contemporary affairs in Mali also reveals another important leitmotif: the use of anti-colonial discourse. Turkey has employed the latter to portray itself as a potential alternative “equitable regional partner” for African states, with a view to fostering economic, political and security relations. Ankara has sought to make use of the growing polarisation within the international system, African fears of dependency on China and Russia, and the troubled essence of relations between the West and Africa (Kizilaslan, 2021). Furthermore, this approach is in line with what Frederico Donelli and Ariel Gonzales Levaggi (2018, 93-115) describe as the “Global South” discourse, which aspires to bridge the developed and developing worlds, projecting Turkish soft power and engaging with sub-Saharan Africa culturally, economically, and politically. Turkey’s postcolonial discourse has played a significant role not only in supporting the “Global South” discourse, but also as a tool for projecting soft power.

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In the case of Mali, Erdoğan has skilfully exploited postcolonial sentiments against France (e.g., the protests in Mali in 2020), highlighting French failures in Libya and the Sahel (e.g., Operation Barkhane), and portraying France as an “agent provocateur inciting domestic violence” through the support of “terrorist” elements like the Syrian Kurds (Jones, 2021). In parallel, Turkey has emphasized its shared historical, cultural and economic ties with African states. Already, in a speech delivered in 2015, Erdoğan placed the origins of the economic ties back in the sixteenth century, while also stating that “The goal of Turkey, which does not have the stain of colonialism in its history, is to improve its relations with Mali and all other African countries based on equal partnership” (TCCB, 2015).

The notions of “equal partnership” and a “fairer world” have played a vital part in Turkey’s approach to Western African states. In contrast to France’s hard power and colonialism, Turkey has projected the image of a “like-minded” and “non-imperial” partner that wants to create an inclusive vision for the future and plan “win-win agreements” based on mutual trust and respect (Middle East Monitor, 2021). Indeed, Erdoğan has emphasized in past meetings with African leaders or with reference to African multilateral initiatives that “Africa belongs to Africans; [Turkey is] not here for your gold” (Araweelo, 2014; Idriss, 2020). In support of these claims, Turkey has focused on developing its humanitarian diplomacy. An excellent example is the efforts of the

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Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı-TİKA*) in Africa. While TİKA has initiated at least seven thousand projects in Africa, it has recently helped Mali with improving its health services and pandemic response (Reliefweb, 2021).

Many Turkish non-profit organizations also operate in African countries, building schools, wells, roads and other types of public infrastructure (Gonel, 2021; Sevinc, 2021). The AKP administration has also emphasized the economic development of Mali through Turkish companies and financial aid. As Birahim Soumare, Mali's ambassador to Turkey, stated in 2018, Mali viewed Turkey as a significant ally in its efforts to unleash its economic potential on the international system (AA, 2018). Businesspeople in Mali and other regional states, favour this view of Turkey as an ally, which has translated into further economic cooperation (Tastekin, 2020).

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The fact that Mali has shared religious ties with Turkey, but not with France and other Western powers, is another key aspect of Turkey's approach. The AKP administration has sought to employ religion as a diplomatic tool to sway the Malian government towards Turkey. The Turkish government had a mosque erected in an upscale neighbourhood of the capital for the High Islamic Council of Mali, the country's most powerful religious association, and another restored in former President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta's hometown (Hernández, 2020). Turkey has capitalized on its increasing popularity with Africa's Muslim populations, particularly in the Horn of Africa, where communities have been more sympathetic to Erdoğan's overtures. Indeed, Erdoğan has long been trying to position Turkey as a protecting power for Muslims across the entire world (Yavuz and Öztürk, 2019, 1-9).

Another effective tool of religious diplomacy is the "Knowledge Foundation" (*Maarif Vakfı*), a public institution which took charge of a network of eighteen former Gülenist schools in Bamako (Armstrong, 2021). While it is difficult to assess the impact of Turkey's use of religion as a tool of soft power, the statement of the then Malian leader, Keita, after his 2018 visit to Ankara indicates that it has had some impact on African leaders: "We know the great importance of Mr Erdoğan to the development of Islamic nations. There was truly a need for a leader who could make his voice heard in the Islamic world and reveal his leadership. That voice is now being heard, and we are with him" (Ahval, 2018).

### How should the EU and its Member States respond?

This policy paper has sought to present the use of AKP's anti-colonial pivot in the Sahel, and specifically in Mali, and the relevance of the point that "Turkey is thriving in Africa (...) because it has a clean history. Turkey did not colonize Africa" (Middle East Monitor, 2021). Although its interest in Africa goes back less than two decades, Turkey has embarked on establishing a support base nurtured through top government-sponsored networking events such the Third Turkey-Africa Partnership Summit hosted in Istanbul on 17-18 December 2021. Factors that have facilitated Turkey's growing role include the diminishing engagement of the European Union and its member states' actions in the region. While the EU's interventions in Mali reinforce the idea of the European Union as a security actor, the limited character of these activities on the ground also strengthens the idea of it as both an interventionist and an ineffective actor (Cold-Ravnikilde and Nissen, 2020, 935-953). In addition, the relations between the European Union, its members and the Sahel states have suffered from weak political will (Schmauder, Soto-Mayor, and Goxho, 2020), with only a few EU governments other than those with long-

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established relations with Africa, maintaining a deep interest in the continent. While the European Union remains Africa's primary trading partner and source of foreign investment and development aid, it should take notice of the shifting geostrategic landscape and its declining credibility and influence in Western Africa. There is a need for the European Union to revitalize its interest in the Sahel, in Western Africa and in regional disputes in order to fill the current political and economic vacuum, and the European Union has indeed begun to perceive Western Africa as a region of increased interest in recent years (Zeiss, 2020).

A good place for the EU and its member states to start could be a stronger engagement with Mali. Despite the recent partial withdrawal of its member states from the region (e.g., France's "adieu" to its military mission in Western Africa in July 2021), the return of the European Union could help counterbalance the growing regional influence of China, Russia, and Turkey. Besides adopting the 2020 Comprehensive Strategy for Africa (European Commission, 2020), it has had numerous significant bilateral and multilateral meetings with African institutions and states (Green, 2021). Specifically, the current coronavirus crisis and political/economic situation have provided a unique opportunity to enhance some of the key priorities outlined in the comprehensive EU Strategy with Africa (e.g., digitalization, green transition), as well as underlining the need for a bold new direction in EU-Africa relations. Equally important have been the recent diplomatic initiatives by EU member states, such as Germany's 2017 Marshall Plan with Africa (BMZ, 2021). Interestingly, the bilateral initiatives could have an anti-colonial dimension, as the EU could promote and support the involvement of EU member states in the region free from the burden of a colonial legacy and history. Greece could play a leading role in that respect. (Diakopoulos, 2021).

The EU should also review its strategy on Western Africa to ensure a successful re-engagement with regional actors. Despite official expressions of desire to move beyond the legacy of colonialism, there are still frequent instances of Europeans speaking and acting in ways that Africans view as both paternalistic and unjustified (Islam, 2021). As this policy brief has shown, this leitmotif facilitates the prolonging of both postcolonial sentiments and polarization, thereby enabling the instrumentalization of post-colonial narratives against the European Union. A shift in its *modus operandi* to a partnership of equals (a term used by Ursula von der Leyen during her first visit to the African Union's headquarters) could thus diminish the stereotypical criticism of EU "neo-colonialism" and alter the image of the EU and its member states as "interventionist forces" in Africa (European Commission, 2019). The European Union needs to promote and emphasize the positive aspects of EU-Africa cooperation. After all, it is the leading aid, trade and investment actor across the continent as well as the main importer of a wide range of African goods, from chemicals, petroleum products, minerals and metals to fishery and agricultural goods (European Commission, 2021). On the other hand, it also needs to avoid attitudes that could be framed as "paternalistic." In other words, as the African Union's Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat has stressed, one society should not impose a model on another (African Union, 2021a). The EU should thus include more African regional institutions such as the African Union, the African Development Agency and the African Peer Review Mechanism and take into consideration the African Union's "Agenda 2063" (African Union, 2021b). At the same time, through its soft power, the EU could facilitate Africa's political and economic development, thus gaining crucial political, security, and economic advantages at the regional and international levels.

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