

Introduction

The African continent is no longer Europe’s exclusive ‘backyard’. China, through the Belt and Road Initiative, is reshaping African infrastructure, whilst Russia, for its part, has entered the Sahel by capitalising on anti-French sentiment to offer security without the conditions of ‘good governance’.

If the European Union wishes to cooperate on security and the development of well-being in Africa, it must move beyond the mindset characterised by an asymmetry between donor and recipient. It is not merely a question of Europe helping Africa with its security challenges, such as the jihadist threat, human trafficking, armed criminal groups or conflicts over control of natural resources; it is primarily a matter of recognising that both actors share common interests, mutual responsibilities and a common political agenda that can define a partnership of equals¹.

In this context, last March the European Union and Ghana signed a historic security and defence cooperation agreement in Accra, the first of its kind between the EU and an African country. This agreement, designed to deepen cooperation across a broad spectrum of security challenges—from terrorist threats and maritime security to cyberattacks and hybrid threats—reflects the growing recognition by both parties of the interconnectedness of security between Europe and West Africa.

The new commitment positions Ghana as a key European partner in safeguarding stability in the Gulf of Guinea and presents an opportunity for the EU to recalibrate its security engagement in West Africa following setbacks in the Sahel, where European missions such as EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel Niger have been suspended.

Ghana and the soft power of stability

Ghana is one of Africa’s darlings. The country boasts abundant natural resources, stable and democratic political institutions, a relatively diversified economic structure, a middle

¹ FUENTE COBO, Ignacio. *From paternalism to geopolitics. The transformation of the in Africa*. IEEE Analysis Paper 21/2026. Available at: <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieeee/2026-transformacion-estrategia-seguridad-ue-africa-analisis>

Note: All hyperlinks are active as of 7 May 2026.

class and growth rates above the African average, as well as a better business climate than that of other countries in the region.

Ghana plays the card of being a middle-sized country, but with the added value of its stability. Its diplomacy is based on maintaining and capitalising on this recognised soft power, by committing to the pacification and development of the continent, the defence of Pan-Africanism and regional integration processes. The choice of Accra as the headquarters of the Secretariat of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement in 2021 is a clear recognition of this strategy.

Furthermore, the country plays a mediating role in the region, stemming from its prominent participation in peacekeeping forces, as well as the launch of the Accra Initiative—alongside Côte d’Ivoire, Togo, Benin, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger—which features a joint force aimed at preventing terrorism from the Sahel from spreading to the states along the Gulf of Guinea coast².

The country plays a central role in regional prevention and cooperation efforts to maintain stability in a region under increasing pressure. Like its neighbours, Ghana faces the threat of jihadist violence and must strive to secure the maritime areas of the Gulf of Guinea, which are essential for economic exchange.

The creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have institutionally fractured the West African region. Following the initial coups in Mali and Burkina Faso, Ghana maintained a firm stance in defence of a return to constitutional order, but chose not to align itself with the hardline faction within ECOWAS.

Unlike other members of the bloc, it avoided severing ties with the military juntas. This stance of engagement with the new governments of the Sahel states was further reinforced by the election of John Dramani Mahama as Ghana’s new president in 2024. The new leader has opted for pragmatism in his relations with the AES, given the need for cooperation on security matters and the interest in strengthening the competitiveness of Ghanaian ports vis-à-vis the port of Lomé (Togo) in provision the Sahelian states.

² DIPLOMATIC INFORMATION OFFICE. ‘Country Profile: Ghana’. Available at: https://www.exteriores.gob.es/Documents/FichasPais/GHANA_FICHA%20PAIS.pdf

For their part, the leaders of the AES have responded positively by intensifying bilateral exchanges of a commercial, economic or security nature with Ghana³.

In this context, it is hardly surprising that the EU has courted the African country to expand its already close trade relationship through an additional partnership in the field of security and defence cooperation. But it is equally true that Europeans should count themselves lucky that one of the most stable countries in the region has ‘hit it off’ with Brussels. Accra is not short of suitors.

In short, what was signed last March was a ‘win-win’ agreement for both parties.

The agreement allows the EU to present itself to the African continent as a reliable partner committed to stability in the region in the face of the dangers that, by sea and land, threaten the region’s progress and well-being. Thus, Accra can become the showcase through which Brussels demonstrates the full extent of the benefits of choosing the Europeans—rather than the Russians—in the field of security and defence.

Furthermore, Ghana has been designated to chair the African Union in 2027⁴, so the EU could not have found a better partner.

For its part, although Ghana remains the only country in the Gulf of Guinea bordering Burkina Faso that has not directly suffered from jihadist violence, it is seriously threatened by it. In this regard, it is hoped that the agreement will act as a deterrent against such threats and help to consolidate the country as a bulwark against terrorism.

The alliance is also rooted in long-standing economic ties. Thanks to the 2016 EU-Ghana Economic Partnership Agreement, the EU is one of Ghana’s main trading partners and a key market for the country’s cocoa and other agricultural exports.

Furthermore, as part of the Global Gateway Initiative⁵, the EU’s funding programmes in Ghana support urban development, governance reforms and clean energy. Brussels has

³ DRIESSEN CORMENZANA, Marta and FERNÁNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ, Lucía. ‘One year on: what has changed since the split of the Alliance of Sahel States from ECOWAS?’, *Elcano Royal Institute*. 2026. Available at: <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/un-ano-despues-que-ha-cambiado-con-la-escision-de-la-alianza-de-estados-del-sahel-de-la-cedeao/>

⁴ “Ghana to chair the African Union in 2027”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*. 2025. Available at: <https://mfa.gov.gh/index.php/ghana-to-chair-the-african-union-in-2027/>

⁵ European strategy to promote smart, clean and secure connections in the digital, energy and transport sectors, whilst strengthening health, education and research systems worldwide. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/international-partnerships/global-gateway_en

also allocated €339 million to Accra for the period 2021–2027 under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe⁶.

The jihadist threat in Ghana

As already noted, although the jihadist threat is not as noticeable in Ghana as it is in its coastal neighbours, there is concern about jihadist infiltration from Burkina Faso into the country's northern provinces. Conditions there are favourable for recruitment: a sizeable Muslim population and the economic hardships faced by northern communities.

Specifically, the African country is exposed to jihadist activity on its territory due to its proximity to the Cascades region in Burkina Faso and to northern Ivory Coast. Indeed, the growing presence of jihadist militant groups in the Cascades region, as well as the intensification of a strategy of attacks against neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire, make northern Ghana an ideal cross-border region for armed groups to retreat to and establish control, particularly as these areas offer access to highly lucrative illegal activities, such as clandestine gold mining or cattle theft⁷.

The fact that jihadist activity in Ghana is lower could be linked to several factors. It is the only English-speaking country in the region, which may be hindering—though not preventing—cross-border recruitment by the French-speaking jihadists of JNIM (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin)⁸.

Another factor is that the government has taken the threat seriously and made significant efforts to improve security. Consequently, the military presence in the north has been significantly reinforced, where the army is striving to engage the local population and encourage citizens to report suspicious incidents near their homes. This was particularly

⁶ MALHOTRA, Shairee. 'The EU–Ghana SDP: A New Pillar of Stability in West Africa', *Observer Research Foundation*. 2026. Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-eu-ghana-sdp-a-new-pillar-of-stability-in-west-africa>

⁷ MERZ, Rafael. 'The jihadist threat in northern Ghana and Togo', *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*. 7 April 2022. Available at: <https://www.kas.de/en/web/westafrika/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/the-jihadist-threat-in-northern-ghana-and-togo-2>

⁸ MOODY, Jessica. "Jihadist Attack on Togo Highlights Threats to Neighbouring Ghana", *The Jamestown Foundation*. 29 July 2022. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/jihadist-attack-on-togo-highlights-threats-to-neighboring-ghana/>

evident in the ‘See something, say something’ campaign. The campaign encouraged the local population to contact an anti-terrorism hotline if they saw anything suspicious⁹.

Despite counter-terrorism prevention measures, there is evidence that jihadist groups are established in the north of the country. Thus, following the Otapuanu military operation in south-eastern Burkina Faso in March 2019, in which Burkinabe military forces sought to dismantle cells of JNIM and ISGS (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara), the authorities of that country reported that extremist elements had been discovered in northern Ghana.

There is also evidence that there are a considerable number of Ghanaian jihadist fighters in the Sahel. It is estimated that up to two hundred young Ghanaians have left the country to join jihadist groups in Burkina Faso or Mali and that they may subsequently return to their home villages to carry out religious proselytising activities.

Furthermore, all the evidence suggests that JNIM uses Ghana as a logistics hub for gathering resources, particularly motorcycles, indicating that the jihadists are likely already familiar with the terrain of the country¹⁰. Experts therefore argue that the current lull in attacks on Ghanaian soil appears to be due to JNIM’s strategy of not disrupting supply lines and rest areas, as well as not provoking a relatively strong army¹¹.

The scope of the agreement

On 24 March 2026, the European Union took a strategic step forward in its relations with the African continent by signing, in Accra, a security and defence partnership with Ghana—the first of its kind between Brussels and an African country—marking a turning point in the EU’s approach to the continent’s security challenges. The agreement, signed by Kaja Kallas, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and Jane Naana Opoku-Agyemang, Vice-President of the Republic of

⁹ “In its fight against extremism, Ghana urges its citizens to speak up if they see anything”, *Africa Defence Forum*. 14 June 2022. Available at: <https://adf-magazine.com/fr/2022/06/dans-sa-lutte-contre-lextrémisme-le-ghana-exhorte-ses-citoyens-a-dire-quelque-chose-sils-voient-quelque-chose/>

¹⁰ MOODY, Jessica. “Jihadist Attack on Togo Highlights Threats to Neighbouring Ghana”, *The Jamestown Foundation*. 29 July 2022. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/jihadist-attack-on-togo-highlights-threats-to-neighboring-ghana/>

¹¹ ‘A beacon of democracy? How hyper-political competition increases the risk of violent extremism in Ghana’, *Netherlands Institute of International Relations ‘Clingendael’*. 2024. Available at: <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/a-beacon-of-democracy.pdf>

Ghana, has the overall aim of strengthening cooperation to tackle the rise in security threats in West Africa.

At the signing ceremony, Kaja Kallas highlighted the practical objectives of the partnership: “Thanks to this new agreement, we will be able to cooperate more closely in areas such as counter-terrorism, conflict prevention and cybersecurity. These are all important issues for our citizens, both in Europe and here in Ghana”¹² .

Furthermore, Kallas stated that “there are many other interested countries knocking on our door”, emphasising that, in addition to Ghana, there are other African states keen to diversify their alliances in response to an increasingly unstable international environment¹³ .



Photo: Kaja Kallas, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and Jane Naana Opoku-Agyemang, Vice-President of the Republic of Ghana. Source: Instagram.

¹² “Ghana: EU signs its first security and defence partnership in Africa”, *Africa News Agency*. 2026. Available at: <https://africa-news-agency.com/ghana-eu-signs-its-first-security-and-defence-partnership-in-africa/>

¹³ YOURANN, Carelle. “Ghana, EU Set to Sign Defence Partnership Within Days”. Available at: <https://www.ecofinagency.com/news/1003-53649-ghana-eu-set-to-sign-defence-partnership-within-days>

More broadly, this partnership forms part of a wider EU strategy to expand security cooperation on a global scale. Since 2024, Brussels has signed similar agreements with several countries, including the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, South Korea, Japan and India. With Ghana, European countries are now extending this approach to the African continent¹⁴.

The signing of the agreement is accompanied by concrete support for Ghana's armed forces. Equipment has been delivered to the authorities, including surveillance drones, anti-drone systems and transport vehicles. These deliveries form part of an ongoing support programme worth over €100 million.

Further funding is planned in the coming years to strengthen the country's operational capabilities. With this equipment, the Ghanaian authorities aim to improve surveillance of the northern border areas, which are exposed to incursions by armed groups, and to secure the maritime areas of the Gulf of Guinea, which are essential for economic exchange¹⁵.

Strengthening maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea, a key global trade route vulnerable to piracy, drug trafficking and other illicit activities, is another of the agreement's key objectives. For the EU, strengthening maritime governance in the region is of particular importance for the management of irregular migration.

Under the terms of the agreement, the signatories undertake to intensify exchanges and cooperation on maritime security, including by promoting the organisation of joint naval activities between the Ghanaian Navy and the navies of EU Member States, with the assistance of the EU Coordinated Maritime Presences.

Furthermore, the EU will support the development of the Gulf of Guinea maritime security strategy, known as the Yaoundé Architecture, which is crucial for addressing maritime threats in the region. This support will complement Ghana's active role within the

¹⁴ 'EU Security and Defence Partnerships', *European External Action Service*. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-security-and-defence-partnerships_en

¹⁵ "Ghana and the European Union seal an unprecedented security partnership in Accra", *LSI Africa*. 2026. Available at: <https://www.lsi-africa.com/fr/actualite-internationale/ghana-union-europeenne-partenariat-securite.html>

Yaoundé Architecture, in particular by hosting and contributing to the Zone F Multinational Maritime Coordination Centre in Accra¹⁶.

Like other EU strategic security plans with India, Australia and South Korea, the agreement with Ghana incorporates non-traditional security areas, such as climate and environmental pressures, as well as hybrid threats arising from disinformation and emerging technologies¹⁷.

Both partners recognise that security is not limited to traditional defence-related issues, but increasingly encompasses areas such as those mentioned above.

The financial support linked to the agreement is provided through the European Peace Facility, a financial instrument designed to strengthen the defence capabilities of partner countries. The fund was established in March 2021, with an initial ceiling of €5 billion for the period 2021–2027 (subsequently increased), to finance external actions with military or defence implications under the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

The fund was first used for operations in Ukraine (ammunition and vehicles) in 2022. Since then, the fund’s budget has grown rapidly, rising from €5 billion at the time of its launch to €18 billion for the period 2025–2026¹⁸.

Conclusions

For the EU, Ghana is a reliable partner in a volatile region; for Ghana, the agreement provides material resources and support to safeguard national and regional security. More broadly, the agreement brings together two continents whose stability and prosperity are increasingly intertwined.

The agreement can contribute to a more stable security architecture in West Africa and reinforce Ghana’s role as a regional pillar, especially now that the country is preparing to assume the presidency of the African Union in 2027.

¹⁶ “Security and Defence Partnership between the European Union and the Republic of Ghana”, *European External Action Service*. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2026/documents/ST-6958-2026-INIT_en.pdf

¹⁷ MALHOTRA, Shairee. ‘The EU–Ghana SDP: A New Pillar of Stability in West Africa’, *Observer Research Foundation*. 2026. Available at: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-eu-ghana-sdp-a-new-pillar-of-stability-in-west-africa>

¹⁸ FUENTE COBO, Ignacio. *From paternalism to geopolitics. The transformation of the in Africa*. IEEE Analysis Paper 21/2026. Available at: <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieeee/2026-transformacion-estrategia-seguridad-ue-africa-analisis>

Given the interconnected nature of security between Europe and West Africa, for Brussels this alliance represents an opportunity to re-establish a presence in the region and thus cooperate in stabilising an area of priority for the old continent, due to its geographical proximity and strategic importance for controlling migration flows and combating illicit trafficking.

*Óscar Garrido Guijarro**
PhD in International Peace and Security
Senior Analyst at the IEEE