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Why the EU and Morocco Need Each Other More Than Ever

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Opinions expressed are my own



I. Reality Check: A De Facto Member of the European Economic Space

Few countries outside the European Union demonstrate a level of integration—both economic and normative—as advanced as Morocco’s. The EU is Morocco’s largest trade partner, and the majority of foreign direct investment comes from Europe, making Morocco deeply connected to the continent’s industrial supply chains and regulatory frameworks¹.

From food safety to environmental standards and data protection to competition law, Morocco has made clear strides in aligning with the European *acquis*. This alignment has turned the Kingdom into a regional model of voluntary convergence, making it a natural candidate for deeper structural cooperation with the Union. Yet, the political and legal architecture governing EU-Morocco relations remains outdated, still anchored in the 1996 Association Agreement, which no longer reflects today’s level of integration.

Much has changed since that agreement entered into force in 2000. Morocco is no longer just integrated with the EU—it is now a key contributor to the competitiveness of the European space itself. In a world of intensifying economic rivalry – Trump’s global trade wars and Asia-EU competition – Morocco strengthens the EU’s position by anchoring value chains in the EU’s direct neighborhood and offering a gateway to African and global markets. Thanks to Morocco’s alignment, Europe is better positioned to withstand global competition, diversify its partnerships, and project stability beyond its borders.

Furthermore, since 1999, Morocco’s economy has tripled in size, positioning itself as a dynamic emerging market. The middle class is growing, key sectors such as automotive and aerospace have taken off, and the country is now at the forefront of renewable energy in Africa. Morocco has also become a diplomatic heavyweight, bridging European, African, and Arab interests. The most visible symbol of this new status is the joint hosting of the 2030 FIFA World Cup with Spain and Portugal—two EU member states—signaling the cultural and infrastructural closeness between Morocco and the Union. Therefore, the time has come for the EU to treat Morocco not as a neighbor but as its closest ally and friend in the Euro-Mediterranean area.

II. The Strategic Value of a Stable and Aligned Neighbor

The global order is shifting—and fast. With Donald Trump back in the White House, the United States has reimposed sweeping tariffs, pulled back from multilateral coordination, and taken steps to appease Moscow—moves that Brussels views as undermining European interests. Across capitals, the old certainties of the post-Cold War order are unraveling. The EU is no longer just navigating competition; it is increasingly navigating *abandonment*.

In this increasingly adversarial world, Europe needs more than rhetoric—it needs partners who can deliver stability, trust, and alignment. Morocco is one of the few who can deliver on these promises. It remains the only North African country that has committed to a path of economic openness and gradual democratic consolidation. Its institutions are increasingly resilient, its diplomacy is active and multilateral, and its security posture is well-coordinated with Western allies².

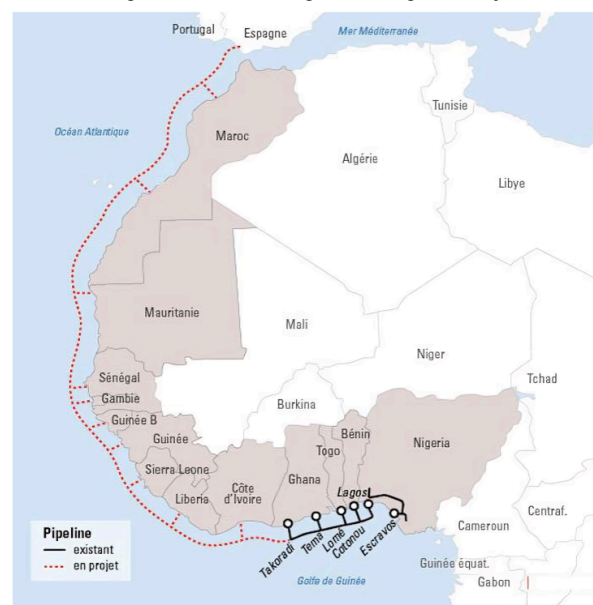
¹ EU Commission, *Trade & Economic Relations with Morocco*, [link](#).

² US Department of State, *Major Non-NATO Ally Status*, [link](#).

Morocco's contributions to regional stability are immense—and central among them is its global leadership in renewable energy and infrastructure connectivity. With landmark projects like Noor Ouarzazate or green hydrogen valleys, Morocco is not only advancing its own energy transition but also positioning itself as a key supplier of clean power to Europe's industrial base for the decades ahead. In a new era defined by climate urgency and strategic autonomy, this ability to deliver affordable, stable and low-carbon energy makes Morocco an indispensable partner in the EU's long-term push for energy sovereignty.

At the same time, through initiatives like the Sahel Atlantic Strategy and the Nigeria-Morocco gas pipeline³, Morocco is diversifying regional energy corridors and bolstering the EU's resilience on its southern flank. As instability and extremist threats continue to rise across the Sahel, Morocco offers both a stabilizing presence and a credible channel through which European interests can be defended and projected.

Picture 1 : Map of the Morocco-Nigeria Gas Pipeline Project



Despite this, EU policy toward Morocco has often lacked clarity. While Brussels expects ever-closer cooperation—on migration, counter-terrorism, trade and more—it simultaneously maintains trade restrictions and selectively applies scrutiny when non-European partners such as China become involved. These inconsistencies are eroding trust: if the EU wants Morocco to act as a cornerstone of its neighborhood strategy, it must treat it accordingly.

Moreover, without a clearer political vision for Morocco's place in the European project, cooperation risks becoming transactional. The Union cannot simply expect Morocco to align, liberalize, and secure its southern frontier without offering more structured integration in return. Strategic trust must be mutual—and earned.

³ Middle East Forum (2025, March 7th), Morocco-Nigeria Gas Pipeline: A Strategic Win for Africa and the United States, [link](#).

III. Two Proposals for a Renewed EU-Morocco Partnership

To unlock the full potential of EU-Morocco relations, a structured, forward-looking framework is essential—one that reflects not only economic realities but also the political, security, and societal depth of this strategic partnership. Two complementary avenues could be explored to reflect that ambition.

First, a more holistic and forward-looking path could involve the creation of a bespoke partnership inspired by the European Economic Area (EEA), but adapted to Morocco's geopolitical context. Such a framework could combine trade, regulatory convergence, and sectoral integration in key domains such as energy, digital transformation, security cooperation, and industrial policy. By including mechanisms for participation in EU programs and policy dialogue, this model could reflect the true scope of EU-Morocco interdependence. Crucially, this approach could also pave the way for Morocco to access cohesion-style funds—especially in infrastructure, digital development, and climate adaptation—contributing to shared prosperity and further embedding the relationship within the EU's long-term strategic outlook.

Second, although legally complex, accession to the EU Customs Union could be revisited ad hoc. Such a move would go beyond trade facilitation by embedding Morocco more tightly into the EU's external trade governance. It would also reinforce mutual trust and create incentives for shared economic resilience, particularly as the EU pursues open strategic autonomy.

IV. A Roadmap for a Lasting Partnership

In all of the cases above, if the EU-Morocco partnership is to move from aspiration to execution, it must be anchored in clear and coordinated sectoral cooperation. Five domains stand out as particularly urgent and strategic.

Security and defense cooperation is one such area. Morocco is already a trusted counter-terrorism partner, with a long track record of intelligence sharing and security collaboration with European agencies. Deepening this cooperation—potentially through Moroccan participation in selected Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) missions—could offer a more integrated approach to addressing cross-border threats. A structured relationship with Frontex, respectful of Moroccan sovereignty and grounded in joint objectives, would also help protect Europe's southern perimeter⁴.

Migration governance is another domain where the stakes are shared. Morocco's geographic position makes it not just a point of transit but a co-manager of Europe's southern frontier. A durable framework for cooperation could include transparent mobility arrangements, return protocols, and joint efforts to dismantle trafficking networks. Any forward-looking partnership should recognize Morocco's role not just in enforcement but also in shaping humane and effective migration policy.

On the economic front, Morocco's trajectory toward middle-income status demands a shift in how the EU mobilizes its financial tools. Opening access to the EU's cohesion fund—or creating a dedicated envelope to support infrastructure, energy transition, and digital inclusion—would both empower Moroccan development and generate new markets for European technologies and services. As the EU recalibrates its industrial policy and supply chains, investing in Morocco is not charity—it is strategic foresight.

⁴ Frontex (2023), *Frontex-Morocco outlining the next steps for closer cooperation*, [link](#).

High-level political dialogue must resume and be institutionalized. Morocco should be invited into structured conversations on EU priorities in areas like defence, digital regulation, climate adaptation, and industrial resilience. These summits would not only signal trust, they would provide a forum for preemptive coordination on policy decisions that increasingly affect both shores of the Mediterranean.

And finally, people-to-people ties must be brought to the forefront. The EU and Morocco could explore visa facilitation measures linked to Morocco's development indicators, easing access for tourists, students, researchers, and entrepreneurs. Full integration into Erasmus+ would amplify educational and cultural exchange. Scaling up academic and civil society partnerships would nurture the kind of long-term trust and understanding that no treaty alone can deliver.

V. The Question of Western Sahara: A Pedagogical Mission

As European Commissioner Dubravka Šuica recently emphasized, “the EU remains fully committed to strengthening its strategic partnership with Morocco”⁵. Yet, that ambition continues to be hampered by legal and political ambiguity—particularly following the CJEU rulings⁶ that struck down part of the EU-Morocco trade agreement involving products from Western Sahara. These rulings have cast a shadow over European investments in the region and complicated the legal infrastructure underpinning EU-Moroccan cooperation.

To move forward, the EU could consider adopting a dual-track approach: advancing a Common Foreign & Security Policy (CFSP) recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara to bring much-needed clarity to its trade and diplomatic relations in the region; and meanwhile, initiating a reassessment of its stance toward the Polisario Front, taking into account growing concerns over its links to extremist actors. These two discussions—recognition and classification—may not only help align the EU's legal and geopolitical positioning but also contribute to a more coherent and principled policy framework in its Southern Neighbourhood.

Importantly, such a step would be grounded in the current trajectory of international law. The United Nations itself has moved progressively toward this logic. Through resolutions such as UNSC Resolution 2765, the Security Council has explicitly acknowledged and called for similar efforts made since 2006—a direct allusion to Morocco's autonomy initiative presented in 2007⁷. Therefore, for EU policymakers concerned with legality and alignment with multilateral norms, supporting Morocco's approach would not be a divergence from international consensus, but rather a logical extension of it.

Furthermore, while often framed as a liberation movement, the Polisario Front has in fact long operated as a proxy force backed, funded, and politically supported by the Algerian regime. Its leadership is hosted in Algerian territory, and its military and logistical apparatus is deeply embedded within Algerian defense structures. The movement's autonomy is increasingly questioned by observers who point to its instrumentalization as part of a regional rivalry with Morocco⁸.

⁵ Hespess EN. (2025, April 3rd). *EU Committed to Strengthening Strategic Partnership with Morocco – European Commissioner*, [link](#).

⁶ *Judgment of the General Court in Joined Cases T-344/19 and T-356/19: Council of the European Union v Front Polisario*. Press Release No 170/24.

⁷ UN Security Council, *Resolution 2756(2024) Paragraph 4*, [link](#).

⁸ Atlantic Council (2024), *Algeria's Morocco obsession has killed reconciliation prospects*, [link](#).

Moreover, the group's entanglement in destabilizing activities is increasingly evident. Abu Walid and Abu al-Sahrawi—the founders of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)—were previously combatants within the Polisario ranks⁹. This is not an isolated anomaly: it reveals a structural vulnerability that transcends separatist aspirations and enters the domain of transnational criminal and terrorist networks.

The group's coordination with Hezbollah¹⁰ and suspected closeness with Wagner operatives—both sanctioned by the EU—further deepens concern. In this context, continued EU financial support to Polisario-run camps in Tindouf, estimated at €10 million, raises serious questions of political coherence, security prudence, and reputational risk¹¹.

Recognition of Morocco's sovereignty under CFSP would not only close the legal loophole created by the CJEU rulings but also reinforce regional stability, protect European investments, and support broader EU-African cooperation. France has already taken this step, while Spain and Germany have expressed strong support for Morocco's autonomy plan. The upcoming Council presidencies—Denmark, Ireland, Cyprus, and Lithuania—should seize this moment to transform disparate national stances into a unified European position.

A comprehensive approach—anchored in legal recognition and a clear stance against terrorist proxy actors—would send a strong signal: that the EU stands by its allies, defends its interests, and acts with strategic foresight in a region vital to its future.

VI. The Future of EU-Morocco Relations is Now

Moroccans and Europeans do not simply trade—they live together, work together, and dream together. They have raised families across borders, built institutions side by side, and shared a vision for prosperity that transcends geography.

It is time for the EU to act accordingly. Among all its neighbors, Morocco has gone further than any other in aligning with European values, institutions, and strategic goals. The EU must now recognize this exceptional convergence—not simply with symbolic words, but through a framework that reflects Morocco's unique place in its neighborhood.

This is more than diplomacy—it is a vision. A Euro-Moroccan future of shared peace, economic growth, and collective resilience.

⁹ Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2019), *Exploiting Borders in the Sahel: The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara*, [link](#).

¹⁰ Gulf International Forum, *Examining Iran's Geopolitical Goals in the Western Sahara Conflict*, [link](#).

¹¹ European Commission (2024), *EU Humanitarian Aid to Western Sahara Refugees in Algeria*, [link](#).