AFRICA 29.11.2017 | Florian Koch

China as a role model?

How pragmatism is replacing values in Africa-EU relations

The paucity of good governance and lack of participation by large sections of the population in many countries in Africa, coupled with a general lack of prospects, have triggered a swell of (religious) radicalisation. The result is not only unstable countries and regions, but also waves of refugees that Europe is resolved to hold back at any price. In view of the growing population, job-hungry youngsters in Africa urgently need better prospects to avoid turning the current demographic dividend into a risk factor. Another upsurge in migration to Europe would also widen the political rift within the European Union between proponents of an open-door and a closed-door policy.

Ten years Joint Africa-EU Strategy

The balance sheet on the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES), resolved 10 years ago, is a mixed one. It was supposed to put an end to the lopsided donor-recipient relationship between Europe and Africa, seeking instead to structure relations along more political lines, in order to pursue common interests and joint projects. The political traction for this in the JAES has been lacking so far, however. The primary reason for this is that many African and European member states view relations at the continental level as less important, preferring instead bilateral negotiations or to set different priorities for the partnership.

On top of this, there are a large number of political differences between the countries when it comes to European military intervention, sluggish democratic development in Africa or trade relations. Other actors like China and India see no need to raise such issues or engage in discussions on them because they are not interested in the democratic development of their partners—in contrast to the European value-oriented approach, which is coming under increasing pressure as a result. Whilst trade between Africa and China is leaping from one record to the next, and China is reaping praise for supplying Africa with an infrastructure and helping it to develop, Europeans bear the brunt of criticism for being too timid and paternalistic.

When heads of states and government met at the previous summit between the European and African Unions in 2014, they were already keen to avoid any controversial topics. In addition to the obligatory discussions over peace and security, that summit was devoted above all to improving trade and investment, while issues such as good governance and human rights were only discussed on the margins. Nevertheless, there was a much-praised exchange of opinion on migration and mobility, which the Africans perceived by to be an important step towards an equal partnership, as the declaration emerging from this dialogue also reflected the interests of African countries.

How void of substance the declaration really was, however, could be witnessed in the ensuing months, with virtually nothing that was agreed at the summit having been implemented a whole year afterwards, before the dynamics of 2015 triggered a different course.

The U-turn in EU policy

The arrival of approximately 1.3 million migrants in Europe in the summer of 2015 and Europe's incapacity made if necessary to find new solutions to address the causes of exodus and flight. Consequently, migration is no longer seen as a sub-category of development cooperation. Instead, it now makes up its core. As a result of its population growth, Africa was identified as a key challenge.

At the forefront of the new strategies are migration controls and the rapid implementation of projects that require a degree of pragmatism. All initiatives of the EU since the Valletta Action Plan of November 2015 bear the hallmarks of this change in paradigm. Reducing migration has become key. The strategy is to focus on economic development, even if it’s the political system of (in-)justice in partner countries that forces people to migrate.

Economic development is no doubt necessary and welcome in most countries of Africa, but without political change it will become arbitrary. Due to its obsession with migration, the EU is giving mere lip service to all other objectives and claims to good governance and human rights. This then translates into support for dubious regimes in North and East Africa within the framework of the Rabat and Khartoum Processes.

Most African partners welcome this U-turn in EU policy, whereby investment and economic cooperation is no longer so contingent on adherence to democratic standards. China and other external actors have led the way on this approach. They prefer to leave sensitive, difficult political topics to Europe, such as cooperation and funding of peace and

security-policy measures.

Political dialogue on-demand

As successful as the Chinese model may be, however, Africa has not become more stable or peaceful as a result. What is more, China's physical distance from Africa means it has less to fear should its policies lead to more instability in Africa.

Political dialogue with Africa, which has produced little fruit thus far, is becoming less important to Europeans and is being replaced by a 'quick-fix' strategy. The fact many African governments are not interested in such a dialogue makes such developments more inevitable.



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