AFRICA 20.03.2020 | Uzo Madu

What does Africa want from the EU?

While the EU's new approach towards Africa may be laudable, the continent itself first needs to develop a clear vision

A few days ago, on the heels of being 100 days in office, European Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen delivered its major strategic proposal in support of its ambition to improve its standing as a global actor – the EU's Strategy *with* Africa. Alongside taking the largest delegation of 20 EU Commissioners to meet with their African Union (AU) counterparts, the strategy showed the EU's commitment to the promise of making Africa, a top priority of a self-proclaimed 'geopolitical' Commission. The focus on the EU as a global actor is a response to the EU's prized multilateral order, which is under increasing threat, and a pressing need to find allies to address increasingly urgent policy challenges like climate change.

In the African context, the increased competition also comes into play, not only from China but also India, Brazil, Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey, Japan, South Korea, Russia and many others actively engaging African countries by combining economic, strategic and development objectives. Instead of being bound to former colonisers or tied to one cold-war camp, African countries can weigh up their priorities and offers. This is a thorn in the side for Europe, which has become concerningly accustomed to unfettered access to African markets, throughout the colonial period and thereafter.

Towards a comprehensive Strategy with Africa is a proposal for how the EU seeks to work with Africa in five key areas: green transition and energy access; digital transformation; sustainable growth and jobs; peace and governance; and migration and mobility. This proposal is just that – a proposal; it will be further discussed with African leaders and the AU as an institution in the months leading up to the AU-EU Summit slated to take place in October 2020.

Acknowledging diversity

In this context and by its title, *with* Africa, the strategy makes good on taking a modest approach to the relationship, recognising the value of involving both parties and including Africa's share of voice when setting about to revise the relationship and ensure it can produce tangible and realistic win-wins. This proposal is in stark distinction to the launch of the much criticised 'Africa-Europe Alliance for Sustainable Investment and Jobs' less than 18 months prior under the Juncker Commission, written and adopted with little consultation.

In comparison, therefore, this reference to the respective interests must at least be seen as setting future discussions on the right path to acknowledge and appreciate the differentiated interests and challenges of Europe and Africa. Both are at vastly different stages of economic development, with the EU's GDP ($18.8 trillion, in 2018) being 11 times the size of Sub-Saharan Africa's ($1.7 trillion in 2018).

What has been missing, however, are Africa's own ambitions for its relationship with the EU.

There are also major differences between the two when it comes to international criminal justice, sexual orientation and identity, death penalty and the centrality of the African Union in some crises. This was highlighted by the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, at the AU-EU Commissioners Meeting in February, where he claimed these differences 'are normal, given our cultural, sociological and even spiritual diversity. Only the recognition and acceptance of these differences, the language of frankness will allow us to remove the obstacles that may hinder our cooperation.' Moreover, this should feature more prominently in the ambitions of the relationship – the frankness to recognise and accept differences.

In search of an African foreign policy

What has been missing, however, are Africa's own ambitions for its relationship with the EU. This is much less clear than and cannot be provided by any strategy document of the EU. It is also a missing piece of the puzzle when it comes to attempting to discuss the Africa-EU relationship in any concrete terms.

Lacking a comprehensive AU foreign affairs strategy, there is still

sufficient information to highlight the central features of its approach. In 2016, the AU began embarking on a transformative process of institutional reform, under the AU Chairpersonship of Rwandan President, Paul Kagame, to make the AU leaner and more efficient, increase its financial self-sufficiency and secure Africa's interests in the international arena. Therefore, the AU is undergoing a major internal reform to ensure it can create the right environment to position itself and act as a global player rather than at its margins.

Current South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, has carried through this way of thinking at the AU Summit earlier this year where he was sworn in as the AU Chairperson, when he remarked that 'the era of colonialism and imperialism under which Africa is a pit-stop in the global assembly line has passed.' Individual leaders have also noted the importance of tackling African problems with African solutions in their exchanges with European leadership 'That relationship has enriched Europe but has not enriched Africa. We need to change that dynamic and we can only do it by ourselves, taking the correct measures for our future [...] so we are saying the time has come for us to take our destiny in our own hands,' said Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo in an address to 400 representatives of the African diaspora in France last year.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is a case in point. This agreement brings together all 55 member states of the African Union, covering a market of more than 1.2 billion people to create a single continental market for goods and services, with free movement of business persons and investments, as well as paving the way for accelerating the establishment of a customs union. In terms of numbers of participating countries, the AfCFTA will be the world's largest free trade area since the formation of the World Trade Organisation.

Africa's foreign policy can also be gleaned from the AU's request for observer status for the African Union at the World Trade Organisation.

Estimates from the Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) suggest the AfCFTA has the potential both to boost intra-African trade by 52.3 per cent by eliminating import duties. According the Carlos Lopes, the AU high representative for the post-2020 negotiations with the European Union: 'From now on Africans can make the free trade area their entry point for Europe negotiations.' The AfCFTA provides a basis for agreeing on key trade and investment issues as a continent, speaking with one voice with their partners, on issues of trade and investment, which is the preoccupation of the AU when it comes to its relationship with

the EU. For example, where Africa did ask Europe for help at their last high-level meeting in Addis, was in building roads and rail networks, a key component for the African Continental Free Trade Area to become a reality.

What's Africa's own strategy?

Africa's foreign policy can also be gleaned from the AU's request for observer status for the African Union at the World Trade Organisation. Late last year, AU Member States gave their mandate to 'coordinate and harmonize the position of African countries and regions, with a view to speak with one voice in international trade negotiations and for a [...] to facilitate the formulation of common African policies.' This moves reflects an area in which there is a strategic interest for both continents. The EU outlined this, albeit as a last action, in its strategy with Africa, saying it wants to strengthen 'the international rules-based order and the multilateral system, with the United Nations at its core [...].'

Furthermore, in peace and security, African leaders continue to call for expanding the UN Security Council to include permanent representation for the continent, despite not yet delivering on the opportunities it currently has within the UNSC. Currently, the three elected African members of the UNSC, otherwise known as the A3, are yet to prioritise a unified position and act as a coherent bloc in this configuration. This could help them shape wider 'UNSC debates, break geo-political deadlocks and guide the Council's collective action' and potentially support their wider ambition of a permanent seat.

In creating a new partnership between the EU and Africa that can deliver on the strategic and respective interests of both continents, being frank, open and honest about the differences that exist need to be at the heart of the approach to the partnership. On the other hand, Africa's lack of clear foreign policy not only towards the EU but globally means the potential for a dialogue of the deaf. Whilst key characteristic of its foreign policy emerge, especially in relation to the AfCFTA, we are still in search of a comprehensive foreign affairs strategy to understand exactly what Africa wants.



Uzo Madu

London

Uzo Madu is founder of the website and current affairs programme *What's in it for Africa*, where she monitors and analyses EU-Africa political issues. She has written for African Business Magazine and Borderlex.eu, featured on BBC World News and CNBC Africa, and in Forbes Afrique, Deutsche Welle and RFI Internationale. With over 6 years' experience in EU Public Affairs, she holds a Law degree and is studying an MA in EU External Relations.