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EU-Africa relations need a new strategy

Africa can represent one of the most legitimate partners for the EU. But for that, the EU must show more respect for the agency of African states

The war in Ukraine has inevitably led the European Union to concentrate its diplomatic, military and humanitarian efforts on its eastern flank. Yet, Europeans should not make the mistake of forgetting the southern dimension, which knocks at their doors with pressing humanitarian needs, protracted instability and foreign interventions. Indeed, the Mediterranean and the African continent represent a unique opportunity for the EU's strategic ambitions, in a context of mounting geopolitical confrontation.

The progressive deterioration of the EU's relations with Africa, however, is not a by-product of the Russian aggression in Ukraine. After the promising launch of a continent-to-continent process of dialogue and co-operation through the Joint Africa-EU Strategy in 2007, the differentials derived from an unequal partnership and the legacy of the colonial past resurfaced in the last decade.

A crucial moment was the Libyan crisis in 2011, when the attempt by the African Union (AU) to find a negotiated settlement was dismissed in favour of a military strike by the United States, Britain and France, followed only later by a NATO intervention backed by the United Nations. The clash continued over management of the 'refugee crisis' in 2015-16 and reached a new peak during the pandemic — when many in Africa felt let down by Europe's vaccine rollout, due to the slow pace of donations from Europe and the controversy over a patent waiver first proposed by South Africa and India.

A new set of challenges

In the meantime, the void left by Europe has been rapidly filled by other actors with diverging or competing interests: Russia and its Wagner mercenary group in Mali and the Central African Republic, Gulf states

and Turkey in the Horn of Africa, and China with its sponsorship of big infrastructure projects from Egypt to Nigeria.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine exposed EU-Africa relations to a new set of challenges and questioned the ability of European leaders to bring the partnership back on track. Food insecurity in African countries was exacerbated by the price increases for food and fertilisers induced by the war and the blockade, imposed by Russia, of wheat exports from Ukraine, on which some African countries are highly dependent. The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, successfully misrepresented the food crisis to African leaders as a consequence of the sanctions imposed on Moscow by the West.

Moreover, to ensure military support to the Ukrainian government and armed forces, the EU has activated for the first time the European Peace Facility (EPF), created in 2021 by merging the African Peace Facility (APF) and other instruments. Of the € 5.62 billion EPF budget for 2021-27, € 3.1 billion has already been pledged to Ukraine, thus spreading fears among African partners that the European commitment to peace and security in Africa might significantly diminish.

The EU must urgently realise that Africa can represent one of the most legitimate partners to reach its goal of 'strategic autonomy'.

More than 7.8 million refugees from Ukraine entered the EU in 2022, with a record number receiving temporary protection. Meanwhile, fewer than 140,000 sea arrivals across the Mediterranean have sparked a new controversy among EU member states about rescue, reception and relocation duties. This has exposed the EU to accusations of double standards in the treatment of migrants and refugees from Ukraine, on the one side, and Africa and the Middle East on the other.

Indeed, African countries are divided over Ukraine, as shown by votes at the UN General Assembly: in March, on the condemnation of the Russian aggression; in April, on the suspension of the country from the Human Rights Council and, in October, on the illegal annexation of four Ukrainian regions.

In a context of growing geopolitical competition, the EU must urgently realise that Africa can represent one of the most legitimate partners to reach its goal of 'strategic autonomy'. Europeans have already understood that their southern neighbours can help them meet their new needs for energy and raw materials in the context of the US-China trade war and sanctions against Russia. But it is time to take a more proactive stance

towards African policy interests and concerns, to enhance the resilience of its societies and institutions.

Moreover, Africa is not only a possible alternative to strategic rivals and unreliable partners — it is also a gateway to the broader Global South. By reinforcing its relationship with the African continent, Europe might restore its credibility in other developing and emerging countries, from Latin America to Asia.

To realise an effective partnership on stability and democratic governance, the EU needs to show more respect for the agency of African states.

In an attempt to revitalise the relationship between the two continents, an AU-EU Summit was organised in Brussels in February, after several postponements since the last summit in Abidjan in 2017, which were only partly due to the Covid-19 restrictions. The EU and AU commissions met again in Brussels at the end of November to take stock. Despite well-received emergency measures undertaken or promised by the EU, a more systemic approach is needed to rebuild confidence and to collaborate in key sectors.

On food security, for instance, the EU agreed to mobilise an additional € 570 million for Africa — a total of € 4.5 billion of grant funding by 2024 — and to establish a joint task force on access to, and affordability of, fertilisers. The nature and extent of the challenge, however, require that climate change, barriers to intra-regional trade, poor infrastructure development and import dependency be addressed. Long-term co-ordination *vis-à-vis* international institutions, such as UN agencies and the G20, is also needed.

The EU also reiterated its € 600 million commitment to AU and African-led peace support operations for 2022-24. But to realise an effective partnership on stability and democratic governance — from Libya to the Sahel — the EU needs to show more respect for the agency of African states, invest more in civilian institutions and co-operate with the change-makers on the ground, such as local communities and women's groups. A joint effort to reform the UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding system, including funding schemes, could also forge a more effective peace and security partnership.

Frank dialogue

On climate change, a Team Europe Initiative on Climate Adaptation and Resilience in Africa was adopted at COP27 in Egypt. This will mobilise

over € 1 billion to improve the identification of risks, strengthen policy and governance and lever additional resources. It is part of the broader Global Gateway strategy, which should step up the EU's partnerships by realising major investments in infrastructure. This could be a game-changer, but, to make it credible, the EU will first have to build a frank dialogue with Africa on its priorities, addressing concerns about the perceived protectionism of the European Green Deal and the consequences of its 'dash for gas' for African communities.

On people movement, despite efforts to enhance co-operation with the AU and the UN on stranded migrants and refugees in Libya and the ambition to address the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement, the core of EU efforts remains reducing arrivals on European coasts, countering smuggling activities in the Mediterranean and increasing repatriations to countries of origin in Africa. A change of narrative is in order to treat people flows not as a public-order concern, but as a structural phenomenon with potential economic and social benefits for Europe and Africa.

The EU-Africa relationship, thus, urgently needs a new strategy. It should be based on the dramatically changed international context, a more equal balance of benefits and responsibilities and a long-term vision.

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