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How the EU-AU Summit failed Africa again

Despite all the talk about partnership, the EU still fails to treat Africa on an equal footing. But Russia and China offer Africa alternative options

Before the highly anticipated 6th Summit between the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU) concluded on 18 February, the two sides had one common goal: to press the reset button on the European Union's relations with Africa after a few years dominated by mistrust, a mismatch of expectations, and lots of anxiety. The EU is interested in rekindling the relationship to respond to new actors like Russia and China on the continent. In Africa, decisionmakers had grown frustrated with the EU and were ready to change the status quo.

Since the early days of the EU, Africa has been important to the development of the EU as a global actor in international development and later peace and security issues. Yet, this relationship had always been asymmetrical, as the EU, more or less, defined the terms of engagement – even when it rhetorically insisted on the idea of partnership.

At least, however, the EU had a fairly coherent strategy towards Africa beyond its sheer material power – making use of its a large market, wealth, and status within the international system. In contrast, efforts at regional integration through the AU still relied on external actors' largesse – including the EU's. Moreover, the AU's integration is often betrayed by incoherent positions, which makes it easy for the EU to sway some AU member states through bilateral deals and led them to abandon more unified positions.

Africa's new-found agency

However, in the lead up to the summit, this strategy was being challenged as African countries increasingly have more options beyond Brussels and other European capitals. In recent years, African partnerships with China, Russia, Turkey, Japan, among others, have grown. In fact, both a Turkey-Africa Summit and a China-Africa Summit preceded the

meeting with the Europeans. These new actors in Africa provide viable alternatives to the EU's historical influence on the continent. Importantly, they allow African decision makers to exercise more agency – by asserting African interests, norms, and values – in African affairs, something which the EU consistently promised in negotiations, but failed to deliver on.

Since this exercise of agency through engagement with other actors relegates the EU to the second division, there are understandable anxieties in Europe. In particular, the EU's perception that Africa is a site of geopolitical rivalries has influenced its recent approach to Africa. For example, the bloc announced its Global Gateway soon after the China-Africa Summit in December last year to rival the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.

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The Global Gateway is an investment package worth €300bn to support infrastructure around the world by 2027. Half of this has been earmarked for Africa. The scheme is an important departure from the EU's modus operandi in Africa until now, where development and trade dominated – despite the extensive engagement within Africa's peace and security landscape.

While the focus on geopolitical rivalry is problematic – inasmuch as the focus of engagement is on other actors in Africa, rather than Africa itself – the continent can still use it to its own advantage.

By presenting itself as a partner on the same footing as new actors, the EU attempted to retain the position of priority partner. This has been clear since the 2020 EU strategy towards Africa, and it was the message the EU brought to the summit. For the African side, the EU remains important, but with new actors on the continent and disappointments around Covid-19 vaccine inequity, the AU was clear in articulating a set of demands.

Mixed results from the summit

So was the summit a real reset in the end? Both sides issued a joint declaration with an optimistic tone. The document looks ahead to 2030 and gives flesh to the Global Gateway through a commitment to African priorities in the context of the sustainable development goals and the AU's own blueprint for inclusive and sustainable socio-economic development, the so-called Agenda 2063.

For obvious reasons, health and economic recovery were high on the agenda. But while there is a ramped-up commitment to vaccine donations directly to the AU and the COVAX facility, it falls short of the AU's calls for the EU to support the production of vaccines in Africa by waiving intellectual property rights. African demands for the EU to shelf the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) in favour of trade partnerships that map on to Africa's ambitions, or a more just approach to migration have equally gone unaddressed. Overall, the declaration repeated a pattern: it gave a little bit more, but once again failed to meet Africa's expectations – even in a new competitive context.

In other words, the EU still fails to see and treat Africans as real partners. This view is rooted in colonial attitudes, which manifest themselves in global governance more broadly and Africa-EU relations in particular. The refusal to confront this present reality can only push African countries further away into the arms of partners that engage with clear intentions. So, while the context of the summit forced the EU to pay attention, the reset in Africa-EU relations has not yet happened. What the summit underlines instead is that neither the AU nor its member states will be satisfied with the status quo – after all, they have alternatives now.



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