

BRIEFING NOTE No. 113

Mission possible?

THE GEOPOLITICAL COMMISSION AND THE PARTNERSHIP WITH AFRICA

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October 2019

The new European Commission takes office against a backdrop of global challenges emanating from near and far, including climate change, trade wars and cyber threats. With this in mind, Commission President-elect Ursula von der Leyen, in her opening statement and mission letters, communicated a vision of a commission that is “more strategic, more assertive and more united” in its approach to foreign policy. Characterising her incoming team as a “Geopolitical Commission”, she emphasised the need for the EU to protect and update multilateralism, to develop greater strategic autonomy and to better link internal and external policy.

This brief explores the opportunity that this geopolitical framing offers for a more strategic EU-Africa relationship – and a real partnership of equals and mutual interest. At the same time, it points to the dangers of empty rhetoric for the EU’s credibility as a foreign policy actor. In renaming the European Commission’s development portfolio “international partnerships” and outlining plans for a new comprehensive strategy for Africa, von der Leyen seeks to signal a more political approach. Yet, the EU will need to show that this time it has the will and ability to move from words to meaningful action.

First and foremost, if partnership is the aim, the Commission needs to address the question of whether this is a strategy “for” Africa or rather “with” Africa. Further, unless the Commission and member states allow the European External Action Service (EEAS) to play a more significant role in coordinating Africa policy, the political and strategic elements of the EU-Africa relationship are unlikely to be sufficiently prioritised. Parallel and competing EU structures for working with Africa risk undermining a strategic continent to continent approach and creating breaks on African integration. Any comprehensive strategy will have to honestly acknowledge and address the fundamental contradictions inherent in these multiple EU structures.

1. Introduction

[W]e must once again take a stand and fight for our Europe. The whole world is being challenged by disruptive developments that have not passed Europe by.

-- Ursula von der Leyen, Opening Statement to the European Parliament Plenary Session, 16 July 2019

We often say partnerships and multilateralism are married in our collective DNA. Yes, but you cannot be multilateralist alone. So we need partners. But many of our partners are disengaging from the rules-based system, and others are applying the rules in a selective and self-serving way.

-- Josep Borrell, Opening Statement at hearing before the Committee of Foreign Affairs, the Committee of International Trade and the Committee for Development, European Parliament, 7 October 2019

This ECDPM briefing note examines potential strategic implications of the incoming European Commission for the EU-Africa relationship. It draws on the mission letters from Commission President-elect Ursula von der Leyen to the incoming College of Commissioners, in addition to her opening statement to the European Parliament. Where relevant, it also draws on the hearings of the new Commissioners-designate in the European Parliament.

Von der Leyen has called her incoming Commission a “Geopolitical Commission”. Indeed, **the geopolitical context was omnipresent in her speech to the European Parliament and throughout her letters to the new College of Commissioners** – in relation to potential trade disputes, the focus on building a European Defence Union and even the approach to development (von der Leyen 2019 a-m). Von der Leyen repeatedly stressed that the **EU must be more assertive in its commitment to multilateralism** and indeed lead the way in fortifying and reforming multilateral fora. At the same time, she is clear about the need for the EU **to reinforce its own economy and develop greater strategic autonomy by improving cooperation among the member states on security and defence** so as to be a credible global actor (von der Leyen 2019 c, h, j, m).

Against this backdrop, **the value of a more strategic relationship with Africa becomes evident – both as a partner in multilateralism and ultimately as a growing market for European investment and trade.** Von der Leyen is setting out a more strategic course with regard to development cooperation and Africa. For instance, she has renamed the Commission’s development portfolio “international partnerships”, restated Europe’s commitment to a “partnership of equals” with Africa, and charged International Partnerships Commissioner-designate, Jutta Urpilainen, to work with High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the Commission-designate (HRVP) Josep Borrell to draft a “new comprehensive strategy for Africa” (von der Leyen 2019d). Von der Leyen is also seeking to mainstream implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across both the internally and externally oriented Commission portfolios, thereby re-emphasising their universal nature (von der Leyen 2019 a-l).

This rhetoric of a partnership of equals has been evident since 2007, when it was used in the Joint Africa-EU Strategy adopted by the EU and African states at the Lisbon EU-Africa Summit. However, little flesh has been added to the concept since (AU and EU 2007). **Complicating any overarching strategic approach to Africa based on partnership are the various new and existing EU frameworks for dealing with Africa.** These frameworks include different aid delivery and partnership structures, as well as the proposed “comprehensive partnerships” with individual countries to deal specifically with migration. A new strategic approach to the African continent would need to redirect these competing frameworks, or at the very least, be more explicit on what ultimately drives European engagement with Africa.

2. A Geopolitical Commission

Juncker's commission was the first to have a clear political direction, as laid out in the mission letters to his incoming Commissioners. His Commission, formed in the aftermath of the financial and Eurozone crisis, was largely inward looking to begin with – heavily focused on getting Europe's economy going again (Juncker 2014a). In contrast, von der Leyen, in laying out the challenges ahead and the tasks for her **“Geopolitical Commission”**, **constantly returns to the geopolitical challenges she sees as threatening Europe; not just in terms of traditional hard security, but also in relation to economic risks, climate change, cyber threats and populism** (von der Leyen 2019m). Interestingly, despite the fact that the geopolitical context is shaped largely by the actions of Russia, the United States and China, von der Leyen rarely explicitly mentions these actors in her mission letters (von der Leyen 2019 a-l). But they do loom large and were discussed at length at the confirmation hearings of several Commissioners at the European Parliament (EP 2019 d, f).

In both von der Leyen's initial speech to the European Parliament and throughout her mission letters to the College of Commissioners-designate, she pairs the idea of EU leadership on multilateralism with the theme of a stronger and more autonomous EU, capable of showing strategic leadership. Von der Leyen reaffirms Europe's commitment not only to the rules-based international order, but also to updating that order where necessary, albeit with a much more explicit reform agenda for the World Trade Organization (WTO) than for other fora. **The desire for European leadership on multilateralism is apparent across a number of policy areas, such as trade, climate and humanitarian issues and the SDGs.**



Ursula von der Leyen. Photo by Mathieu Cugnot / European Union 2019 via European Parliament.

However, human rights, a traditional area of European leadership, is not mentioned anywhere in the letters to the externally focused Commissioners (von der Leyen 2019 m, h, a, k, b). Von der Leyen also frequently returns to the theme of European autonomy; both to enable Europe to lead on multilateralism, and in the understanding that if multilateral solutions are not possible in some areas, Europe has to be strong enough to protect its interests. Most notably, she lays out areas where the **EU must develop its capabilities in both the economic and defence realms to be a more effective global actor** (von der Leyen 2019 m, h, j, c, i). These ideas are encompassed in her letter to incoming HRVP-designate Borrell, to whom she writes that the EU needs to be “more strategic, more assertive and more united” (von der Leyen 2019c). There is little surprising in these ideas. They echo Juncker's 2018 State of the Union address and reflect the growing consensus in European policy circles that the EU has no choice but to seek to uphold multilateralism, and to do so it will need to develop greater autonomy in key areas (Tocci 2019, Biscop 2018, Pisani-Ferry 2019, Dworkin and Gowan 2019).

To engineer this, von der Leyen has set out a solid operational foundation for her “Geopolitical Commission”. Highlighting **the linkages between internal and external policy across all portfolios**, she has outlined plans to build on coherence between internal and external policy, which has been a growing concern in the past years, as particularly evident in the EU Global Strategy (EEAS 2016). To raise the profile of foreign policy across the Commission, she has included it as a weekly agenda item for the College, asking all Commissioners to prepare weekly updates on the external dimensions of their portfolios. Alongside this, she has explicitly mentioned foreign policy dimensions of portfolios to many of her new Commissioners (EC 2019, von der Leyen 2019 a-m). This implies a much greater internalisation of foreign policy objectives and initiatives across the incoming College of Commissioners, as well as the externalisation of certain internal

EU policy priorities. This should strengthen the EU's foreign policy outreach across a wide range of issue areas. However, it is interesting to note that despite the focus on building the EU's role as a foreign policy actor, there is no real mention of the role of the European External Action Service (EEAS) or of truly building and empowering a well performing European diplomatic service.

The EU's ability to lead on multilateralism and to build its strategic autonomy will depend on **the willingness of member states to pool sovereignty in the field of foreign and security policy**, and ultimately on **whether some issues of common foreign and security policy can be decided using qualified majority voting (QMV)**. The current requirement of unanimity often results in outcomes that represent the lowest common denominator for Europe's positioning in the world. Von der Leyen targeted this issue head on in her opening speech to the European Parliament, and in her letter to HRVP-designate Borrell, in



Josep Borrell. Photo by Philippe Buissin / European Union 2019 via European Parliament.

which she wrote, "We must overcome unanimity constraints that hamper our foreign policy." She instructed him to use QMV in line with the clauses of the treaties (von der Leyen 2019 c, m). At his hearing, Borrell showed a keen awareness of the problems, but focused mainly on building unity, treading carefully regarding how he might attempt to introduce QMV, starting with rolling over Russian sanctions, and then perhaps introducing it in other areas. In his closing statement, he made the interesting suggestion that to increase member states' sense of ownership of EU foreign policy, reduce duplication, and take advantage of the knowledge and initiative of member states, individual foreign ministers could be tasked to work as "chefs de file" for the EU on specific issues on which their countries have strong knowledge (EP 2019d).

Today's international context gives von der Leyen's ambitions a new sense of urgency. But considering the member states' diverse political trajectories and priorities, the context cannot ensure that they will be more united on foreign policy than in the past, or guarantee success in activating QMV on foreign policy issues. Since the Lisbon Treaty, the EU has built an impressive architecture for foreign policy, including an increasingly assertive narrative on Europe's aspirations in the world, most clearly stated in the Global Strategy (EEAS 2016).

Yet, **even in Africa and the Neighbourhood, the EU often struggles to transcend its status as a donor and be seen as a real geopolitical actor**. Member states often perceive the EU as merely a framework for channelling development aid, for directing EU aid to preferred priorities and initiatives, or as a conduit for delivering tricky messages on human rights. The individual members have held tight to most strategic tools of foreign and security policy as well as their own economic diplomacy. This means that the EU has consistently punched below its collective weight, lacking the power, agency and legitimacy to develop a more strategic role. This has been evident in major crises in Europe's immediate neighbourhood, such as in Libya, where member states including Italy and France have consistently protected their own narrow interests rather than supporting the EU in seeking a comprehensive solution (Megerisi 2019).

It is against this backdrop of geopolitical turbulence, and amid the growing focus on policy coherence and efficiency in foreign policy that von der Leyen has renamed the development portfolio "international

partnerships” (von der Leyen 2019d). The relabelling of this portfolio, as well as the tasks von der Leyen assigned to International Partnerships Commissioner-designate Urpilainen, and the explicit references to Africa in her mission letter to Trade Commissioner-designate Phil Hogan, reflect a desire to develop a more political and strategic relationship with regions in which the EU has traditionally focused on development cooperation. **At the same time, there is a sense that Africa (and even more so the European Neighbourhood, though covered by another Commissioner) is a part of the world where the EU actually has the potential to be a geopolitical actor with real strategic influence.** This sense was also reflected in the geographic priorities that Borrell laid out at his hearing, which included Libya, the Sahel and the Balkans (EP 2019e). To date, however, the EU’s member states have tended to usurp this more strategic role, sometimes quite ineffectively. The mission letters, as well as statements by von der Leyen, Borrell, Urpilainen and others, **point to a growing awareness that the relationship with Africa needs to evolve towards a more strategic one.** The question going forward is whether the member states will give the EU space to do this, particularly in an era when many of them are revising or developing their own bilateral Africa priorities.

3. A partnership of equals?

The title “International Partnerships Commissioner” is itself indicative of a move away from relationships centred on aid. The framing of a more strategic relationship with Africa is also apparent in von der Leyen’s statement that the **EU must “make the most of the political, economic and investment opportunities that Africa... presents”**. She instructed International Partnerships Commissioner-designate Urpilainen to work with the HRVP on a “new comprehensive strategy for Africa” (von der Leyen 2019d). In both her hearing and written answers, Urpilainen appeared to embrace the international partnerships concept, repeatedly stressing the **need to move beyond the donor-recipient relationship, to adopt a positive vision for Africa** and to build a relationship based on mutual interests. HRVP-designate Borrell mentioned the strategy in his introductory statement at his hearing, but unfortunately there was no follow up from parliamentarians (EP 2019 a, c, d).

The **language of equal partnership is not new.** The EU will thus have to mainstream this vision more effectively across the European Commission directorates-general, the EEAS and the member states if it is to convince African partners that it is serious about partnership. The Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) was adopted more than a decade ago. The language of partnership was then already embraced, including explicit references to a strengthened political partnership, joint responsibility and a common commitment to multilateralism and to address global challenges (AU and EU 2007). However, there was not sufficient political and institutional follow through (Bossuyt & Sherriff 2010). If a new strategy is to be taken seriously, it must build in realistic processes to follow through on its vision and recommendations, so that the partnership moves from words to actions.

More recently, Juncker, having initially focused very little on Africa, began to adopt the rhetoric of partnership in the aftermath of the refugee and migration crises and as China’s growing influence on the continent became ever more apparent. In his 2018 State of the Union address, he used the “partnership of equals” language when laying out his vision for a new Africa-Europe alliance for sustainable investment and jobs, which would focus on European investment in Africa (Juncker 2018). The alliance proposals contained few new bold developments, representing instead a repackaging of existing initiatives. Also, very few African actors or indeed EU member states seem to have been consulted ahead of that initiative. Thus, the “partnership” element was lacking. **To be credible, African leaders in politics, business, academia, civil society and others must be widely consulted ahead of the drafting of any new strategy.** The run up to the next EU-Africa Summit, now expected to take place in late 2020, offers a good opportunity to get such a process right.

There are indications that the idea of partnership is taking root, pushing understandings of international development beyond the traditional aid-driven model. In outlining her approach to Africa, Urpilainen focused on the positive while also emphasising universal goals. She stressed the EU's commitment to the SDGs and to gender equality in a universal sense, pointing to the mainstreaming of these principles across the Commission. That mainstreaming is evident in von der Leyen instructing each Commissioner to ensure delivery of the SDGs within his or her policy area, as well as in the appointment of the first female Commission President and the intention to have gender parity in the College of Commissioners. Urpilainen emphasised that she would seek to ensure promotion of the SDGs with the newly proposed €89.2 billion Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) and wider European programming. She further committed to devote 20% of the NDICI to human development. Finally, von der Leyen clearly directed Borrell to use the external financial instruments strategically to contribute to the EU's wider political aims and enhance Europe's leadership and influence (von der Leyen 2019c).

While the above is somewhat expected, more telling is the **fact that several other Commissioners mentioned Africa at their hearings. This provides a good indication of the depth of the commitment to move beyond a traditional aid-centred relationship.** There is a growing understanding that Africa should no longer be the domain of just one commissioner. It should be approached with a variety of tools. Trade Commissioner Hogan mentioned building new partnerships as his second priority, naming Africa first among the new partners. "Africa must become an even greater priority for us", Hogan said. "The recently agreed Africa-Europe alliance, based on a policy and investment partnership of equals, points the way forward." Mariya Gabriel, Commissioner-designate for Innovation and Youth, indicated that partnering with the Balkans and Africa would be one of her key challenges (EP 2019e). Collaboration on research and innovation offers an interesting path for equal partnership between the EU and Africa. This is an area that many African countries are enthusiastic about, and initiatives could directly contribute to sustainable development (Di Ciommo and Thijssen 2019).



Phil Hogan. Photo by Jean-Christophe Verhaegen / European Union 2019 via European Parliament.

Events will overtake the mission letters and confirmation process, but **some of the overarching themes outlined will inevitably bleed through to external action. Indeed, this**

is the intention of the "Geopolitical Commission". This was true of the Juncker Commission as well. In that case, the perceived success of Juncker's Investment Plan for Europe led to establishment of the European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFSD), which sought to invest €4.5 billion in the Neighbourhood and Africa, with the aim of leveraging €44 billion in private investment (EC n.d., EC 2019, Bilal and Große-Puppenthal 2018 a, b). The focus on leveraging public money to attract private investment has since become a clear tenet of European thinking on Africa. Now it is evident more globally, feeding into the Commission's proposals for the EFSD+ within the new NDICI, as part of the EU budget for 2021-2027 (EC 2018: 22-23, Bilal 2019). It will continue to be a feature under the new Commission, as it is referenced in von der Leyen's mission letter to Urpilainen. Urpilainen herself has repeatedly mentioned the importance of private sector investment in Africa, and Trade Commissioner Phil Hogan referred to it as well.

The confirmation process has already seen elements of von der Leyen's overarching agenda for Europe trickling into the foreign policy realm and beginning to set a new direction. This is most notable in the "Green New Deal" which von der Leyen initially presented in her opening speech. In her mission letter to Executive Vice President-designate Frans Timmermans, she characterises the Green New Deal as a major initiative within Europe. Yet there is an element of diplomacy as well, as Urpilainen and Crisis Management Commissioner-designate Janez Lenarčič mentioned its external dimension several times, specifically regarding development cooperation and building resilience. The Green New Deal was not mentioned in either of their mission letters, nor did Timmermans' mission letter delve into the external dimension in any detail. But the impetus to externalise the initiative beyond Europe's borders emerged during both Urpilainen's and Lenarčič's hearings. At one stage, Urpilainen even asked the parliament to support implementation of the external dimension (EP 2019 b, c).

Von der Leyen's Commission thus explicitly recognises the strategic importance of Africa from the outset. The emphasis on Africa that emerged in the final years of the Juncker Commission and evident now from the start of the von der Leyen Commission may allow for the evolution of a more political approach to Africa. This is confirmed by several developments, particularly **the shedding of the development label, the wider understanding of Africa policy demonstrated across the new European Commission, the universal adherence to the SDGs and gender equality, and the growing clarity on how the internal political direction of the Commission affects its external policies.** In Europe, it is increasingly clear that EU-Africa relations will be influenced by the overall political direction set by the new European Commission leadership and its ability to mainstream that direction across the Commission. The intention is that the EU's approach to Africa and development should no longer be one of technical decisions taken by one or two strategically isolated directorates-general. Yet, this will require the Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO) to become less dominant in steering the direction of EU-Africa relations within the EU institutions. It will also necessitate that EEAS (and other relevant DGs) play a larger role in setting the strategic direction.

4. Competing frameworks

A lack of clarity continues to surround the framework for development of the EU's relationship with Africa. Von der Leyen sometimes embraces a continent-to-continent approach. For instance, she charged Urpilainen to draft an Africa strategy, and instructed Hogan to consider implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) as the basis for a continent-to-continent free trade agreement (von der Leyen 2019 d, h). Yet, she also instructed Urpilainen to complete "an ambitious post-Cotonou agreement" with the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Group of States, and thus does not commit fully to a strategic continent-to-continent approach. Nor is there any indication as yet of how North Africa, which is also covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), will fit into future EU-Africa relations (von der Leyen 2019g). Moreover, von der Leyen has directed Urpilainen to support other Commissioners in reaching "comprehensive partnerships" with countries of migration origin and transit, thereby introducing yet another framework for "partnership" with Africa (von der Leyen 2019d). **The challenge of reconciling competing EU frameworks for Africa is not new, but there seems to be no bold thinking or initiative to overcome this as yet.**

The ACP and moving beyond aid

The von der Leyen Commission seems poised to continue Europe's relationship with Africa through several overlapping, but not always complementary frameworks. One of these is the ACP, though it lacks any real identity as a joint political project, existing largely as an institution for the distribution of EU development aid. Upholding the ACP framework, as suggested by von der Leyen's instruction to Urpilainen to conclude a post-Cotonou agreement swiftly, **conflicts with a more strategic and comprehensive approach to Africa in**

which trade, aid, investment, and political and security cooperation are considered within one integrated approach. Such an integrated approach would require the EU to not work in parallel with regional and continental integration structures in Africa. Framing the EU's relationship with Africa in a regional protocol to a post-Cotonou agreement with the ACP raises precisely these issues. It would undermine African unity as well, as North African states are not part of the ACP Group, and they are unlikely to agree to what would amount to a downgrading of their relationship with Europe. The African Union has already declared its unhappiness at being housed within the ACP framework (AU 2018). While it may be many years before an intercontinental free trade agreement can be negotiated, the EU's legitimization of competing frameworks may further complicate this process and ultimately create disincentives to integration (Medinilla and Bossuyt 2019).

Further, in her mission letter to Urpilainen, von der Leyen frames the question of development as a competition in which the European development model is vying against others (here China looms large without being explicitly mentioned): "In an increasingly unsettled world, where different development models increasingly compete, the partnerships of equals we build are essential for our future" (von der Leyen 2019d). This is certainly consistent with the idea of a "Geopolitical Commission", but the **depiction of Africa as a battleground between the EU and China is not the most effective framing if a truly equal partnership is the goal.**



Jutta Urpilainen. Photo by Jan Vandevael / European Union 2019 via European Parliament.

This tension between a more strategic, political way of thinking about the EU-Africa relationship and a traditional donor-recipient relationship will likely continue. This was evident from Urpilainen's hearing before the European Parliament's Development Committee. While she embraced the more strategic conception, parliamentarians' questions rarely strayed from traditional notions of development aid. The fact that the Foreign Affairs Committee was not involved in her hearing was a missed opportunity to delve into what a more strategic vision of the Commissioner's role and of the EU-Africa relationship might achieve (EP 2019 a, c). Similarly, Urpilainen will head DG

DEVCO, a service that has traditionally focused on development aid delivery and may have difficulty transitioning to a more strategic EU-Africa relationship in which aid is less central. Such strategic direction should come from the EEAS, but requires buy-in across the Commission.

North Africa and the European Neighbourhood Policy

The instructions to the Neighbourhood and Enlargement Commissioner regarding the Neighbourhood South, which includes North Africa, are extremely vague. In contrast to the much more detailed and ambitious vision for the Balkans and the Eastern Partnership, no specific policy ideas are mentioned for the Mediterranean neighbours. Nor are specific countries referenced. Von der Leyen briefly mentions governance, environmental protection, migration partnership and support for economic growth and employment as priority areas, but hints at no further ambitions or strategy for the region (von der Leyen 2019g). Furthermore, as already mentioned, **no reference is made in either the Neighbourhood Commissioner's letter, or in any other, as to how North Africa fits within a potential Africa strategy or renewed partnership.**

The lack of clarity regarding the overlapping frameworks of the ENP and a potential continent-to-continent approach is not new. The ambiguity serves European purposes even as it complicates the African integration

agenda. The close relationships that the EU has nurtured with some of its North African neighbours have allowed it to develop key markets, important security relationships and close cooperation in countering irregular migration. Yet, at the same time the EU continues to support African integration and particularly the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) (De Groof et al. 2019).

However, the strong normative agenda that once distinguished the rhetoric of the ENP is now absent for the Neighbourhood South. Indeed, in North Africa the ENP increasingly appears to overlap with the “comprehensive partnerships” on migration to which the EU aspires. **Neither democracy nor human rights are mentioned at all in von der Leyen’s letter to the Neighbourhood Commissioner, and mention of “rule of law” is reserved for the Balkans and the Eastern Partnership.** This contrasts with Juncker’s 2014 letter to then Commissioner Johannes Hahn, which made no such distinctions when instructing him to help neighbouring countries “develop and support stable democratic institutions and to become more prosperous” (Juncker 2014b).

This change of direction began following the 2015 review of the ENP, which opened the door to a more differentiated approach to the Neighbourhood. Different countries would thus have leeway to engage more or less on different strands of the ENP: “Differentiation and greater mutual ownership will be the hallmark of the new ENP, recognising that not all partners aspire to EU rules and standards, and reflecting the wishes of each country concerning the nature and focus of its partnership with the EU” (EC and HRVP 2015). The overlap between the Neighbourhood policy and “comprehensive partnerships” on migration will likely reinforce the trend towards catering to the needs of individual North African countries.

“Comprehensive partnerships” on migration

There are tensions between von der Leyen’s idea of an overarching strategy for Africa based on a partnership of equals, and her instructions to Urpilainen regarding “comprehensive partnerships with countries of migration origin and transit”. Von der Leyen has instructed Urpilainen to use all leverage possible to achieve migration aims, including adjusting bilateral aid (von der Leyen 2019d). From this it is clear that despite the language of partnership, von der Leyen still foresees the use a certain amount of coercion on the topic of migration management, while it also suggests that migration will be tackled bilaterally. What remains ambiguous is how this fits into a wider vision for Africa, and how the African Union or regional economic communities (RECs) might be integrated into such schemes. Further, in this area Home Affairs Commissioner-designate Ylva Johansson and the controversially titled Vice President-designate for Protecting our European Way of Life, Margaritis Schinas, will each have considerable influence alongside Borrell, Urpilainen and the Neighbourhood Commissioner. It is somewhat unclear who will set the strategic direction or make the final decisions.

The external aspects of migration management are clearly present in the letters to both Johansson and Schinas. They are instructed to coordinate with the HRVP and other relevant Commissioners “to develop stronger cooperation with countries of origin and transit” for Johansson and “to ensure the coherence of the external and internal dimensions of migration” for Schinas (von der Leyen 2019 f, I). This is closely aligned with the focus on the external dimensions of migration that gained prominence in the Juncker Commission. The founding of the European Union Trust Fund for Africa in 2015 provided a basis for intensification of such cooperation with third countries. But even beyond the trust fund, migration has become an increasingly central element of European foreign policy and a battleground of differing views within development policy.

There is still little clarity about what “comprehensive partnerships” might mean in practice, although there are some indications of how the EU might approach them. It increasingly appears that the EU hopes to work closely with third countries to secure borders, tackle human trafficking and smuggling, and ensure effective returns of failed asylum seekers, while at the same time using development initiatives to tackle “root

causes” of migration. What the Commission plans to offer in exchange is still not entirely clear. Traditionally the Commission has sought to use development funding as an incentive. Von der Leyen hinted at this approach to Urpilainen, and Urpilainen stated this view at her hearing. But it is doubtful whether this would actually reduce migration or indeed change the thinking in many African countries (Fine, Dennison and Gowan 2019). Another potential incentive is to offer legal pathways to countries that accept returnees and work with the EU on migration management. Von der Leyen has asked Schinas and Johansson to look into this (von der Leyen 2019 f, l). However, while the Commission has repeatedly advocated for such legal channels, few schemes have actually been put in place enabling Africans to move to Europe to work legally.

The EU’s recent joint declaration with Morocco following the Association Council of 27 June 2019, though issued within the ENP framework, is perhaps indicative of what a comprehensive partnership on migration might mean in the North African context. In that statement, migration and climate change are set as two cross-cutting themes for partnership across four structural areas: an area of convergence of values, an area of economic convergence and social cohesion, an area of shared knowledge, and an area of political consultation and security cooperation (Council of the EU 2019a). This very much mirrors Spain’s approach to migration cooperation with Morocco and several countries in West Africa, which has been **based on building a comprehensive relationship replete with state visits, security cooperation, enhanced trade and investment, and growing cultural cooperation**. As Spain’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Borrell visited Morocco four times over the course of one year. During his confirmation hearing, he referenced the Spanish experience in building migration partnerships (EP 2019d, Fine and Torreblanca 2019). The EU partnership with Morocco overlaps with ENP structures, and the EU will likely seek to replicate this approach elsewhere in North Africa. However, this manner of integrating migration into a wider bilateral partnership catering to the needs of individual countries may provide a basis for deeper cooperation with other countries on the African continent.

5. Conclusion

The mission letters and hearings outline the aspirations of the new Commission to be a real player in the foreign and security policy arena. However, this roadmap will inevitably be interrupted by real world events, the personal preferences of individual Commissioners and, particularly, the willingness or otherwise of member states to empower the EU. While the characterisation as a “Geopolitical Commission” suggests recognition of the challenges Europe faces in the world, the EU remains slow to take concrete action, due to both internal divisions and Europe’s sensitive positioning vis-a-vis neighbours. In the aftermath of most of the hearings, this again became blatant in the EU’s weak response to Turkey’s offensive in North-Eastern Syria, and in France’s ability to single-handedly block ascension talks with North Macedonia (Council of the EU 2019b, Barigazzi 2019).

More than a field for EU-China rivalries, Africa challenges the EU to demonstrate its ability to develop a workable foreign policy. If the EU cannot do this with Africa, real questions can certainly be raised about the likelihood of the EU ever being a relevant and effective foreign policy actor. Von der Leyen’s “Geopolitical Commission” has mapped out several steps towards recognising this. But there is no evidence as yet of any really bold thinking or clear direction about how to approach Africa differently. Nonetheless, **the stakes are now considerably higher, both for Europe and for Africa. It is thus**



Ursula von der Leyen. Photo by Mathieu Cugnot / European Union 2019 via European Parliament.

important that the new “partnership of equals” move beyond empty rhetoric.

To begin with, **the EU needs to reconsider the implications of the language it uses, and think about whether it really does want a comprehensive strategy for Africa or would instead prefer a comprehensive strategy with Africa.** In a partnership of equals, African partners would be treated as equals. That means the processes leading to such a new strategy must be truly shared and inclusive of different views from both sides. Thus, not only European but also African priorities must be put on the table. Further, in order to ensure the strategy has concrete steps for the way forward, it must include real issues of substance and potential avenues for action, and not just broad lines of interest. Such a process could be linked to the preparations for the next EU-Africa Summit, now to be held in Brussels in late 2020, which could be an important occasion for European and African leaders to validate a concrete direction for their partnership.

Further, **it is crucial that the new EU leadership introduce more strategic direction within the EU institutions, and convince EU member states of the value of a truly common strategic approach to Africa.** The EEAS should play a key role in steering the strategic direction of the relationship. At the same time, directorates-general from across the European Commission and member state representatives should be involved in preparations for the strategy and summit. This should ensure policy coherence and true complementarity in the EU's approach to development, trade, agriculture, research and innovation, and a host of other areas that are tangible and meaningful.

It will also be necessary to make some hard choices about how different frameworks for approaching Africa and African states fit together, and what the EU's aims really are with regard to Africa. If the EU truly wishes to strengthen African institutions, then it is important that European frameworks for approaching Africa do not undermine the African Union and regional economic communities (RECs) by creating alternative processes that weaken African integration. The contradictions and strategic costs of pursuing the relationship with Africa through a regional protocol to an ACP post-Cotonou agreement would become more apparent with time. Any new comprehensive strategy needs to directly address how other frameworks, such as the Neighbourhood policy in North Africa and potential “comprehensive partnerships” on migration, fit into a wider continent-to-continent approach. As Urpilainen, Borrell and others begin to develop an Africa strategy in the coming months, ECDPM will continue to put forward ideas for how to ensure better policy coherence and how to reconcile competing frameworks for working with Africa with the aim of moving the EU-Africa relationship in a bold and concrete direction.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank ECDPM colleagues Anna Knoll, Alfonso Medillina, Lidet Tadesse, Luckystar Miyandazi, Sean Woolfrey, San Bilal, Geert Laporte and Virginia Mucchi for their useful input on an early draft of this paper as well as Annette Powell for the layout. Feedback is welcome and can be sent to cte@ecdpm.org or as@ecdpm.org.

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This publication benefits from the structural support by ECDPM's institutional partners: The Netherlands, Belgium, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Sweden, Switzerland, Denmark and Austria.

ISSN1571-7577

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