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Trouble in paradise: The EU–Africa partnership in a geopolitical context

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Summary

On November 20, 2023, the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) were meant to hold the third foreign affairs ministerial meeting in Brussels. However, it was postponed just a week before the event was due to take place. While the reasons for the cancellation are not clear, this is perhaps another indication of the troubles of the partnership – which is located within an unpredictable global context.

There is a growing sense of insecurity and change in the world owing to the growing number of high-intensity conflicts and changing power differential among traditional and emerging global powers. Geopolitical shifts of the past two decades have affected global trade and politics, and challenged existing multilateral institutions' legitimacy and efficacy. These changes have also affected the relationship between Europe and Africa.

This brief discusses how internal changes within Europe and Africa and external factors in global politics have affected the partnership between the two continents. It argues that Africa's assertiveness and increasing global importance, alongside Europe's declining centrality in the global economy and politics, as well

as the emergence of a multipolar world, have affected the EU-Africa partnership in three ways:

- 1) The emergence of multiple international actors has diversified the pool of partners African countries can choose from, making the EU an important but not necessarily the only or the most preferred partner.
- 2) The prominence of loans and investments in Africa's partnerships with non-traditional actors, especially China, has demonstrated that collaboration beyond aid is possible. The shift has increased the demand for trade and investment in the EU-Africa partnership. But African states also have some way to go in articulating their strategic interests vis-à-vis the EU.
- 3) As questions on the credibility of the current Western-led global governance system grow louder, African countries not only demand more representation but also push back against the unidirectional ways of norms enforcement that underlie the partnership.

Introduction

The EU-Africa partnership is situated amidst an unpredictable global geopolitical climate owing to tense competition between the US and China, recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's aggression in Ukraine and global divergences in response to the war and, more recently, the Israeli-Hamas war and the unprecedented human cost of Israel's military operation in Gaza.

Beyond these immediate realities, the relations between Europe and Africa have undergone significant shifts in the last decade owing to changes within both continents. African agency and assertiveness is growing, and there is more collective effort to push for a common agenda in global fora. At the same time, growing insecurity in the Sahel, Horn of Africa and North Africa has led to internal displacement and migration flows, including towards Europe. Accountable governance remains a concern across the continent as several countries struggle to prevent or overcome political crises, sometimes leading to conflict. While Africa was less severely affected by the COVID-19 health crisis, the pandemic had a major economic blow to most African countries, and its effects were felt at household levels.

In parallel, European countries have been weakened by long-term slow economic growth, weakening democracies and growing global geopolitical and economic competition. The Russian war on Ukraine has revived a sense of European identity and absorbed political attention and financing. The conflict in Ukraine and the Israel– Hamas war deepened a sense of instability in Europe and has put into question its capacity to speak with a consistent voice on pressing international issues. There is also an emerging divergence within Europe on the Israel– Hamas war but political positions pushing for a ceasefire seem to rise louder in other regions than in the West. On the economic front, the priority to build up European economic competitiveness has heightened EU leaders’ urgency to put European interests front and centre of their foreign and development policy.

This context directly and indirectly impacts the partnership between Africa and Europe. As a whole, while the depth and strength of the partnership vary by topic, the policy divergences and mistrust among policymakers on the two continents have increased in recent years. Areas of disagreement have been, for example, energy security and the green transition, partnership management and attitude towards global players such as China and Russia, international financial governance and debt management, human rights, gender and migration. Climate change remains an emergency the partnership has yet to deliver at scale, notwithstanding the progress made at COP27 with the decision to establish the Loss and Damage fund. The Russian war of aggression towards Ukraine and, before that, the response to the Covid 19 pandemic furthered tensions.

This briefing note discusses how the changing global context affects EU– Africa relations. It first discusses how Europe and Africa respond to and interact with global geopolitics. It then outlines how their respective responses affect the partnership. The briefing note then closes with some indicative suggestions to strengthen the cooperation.

Changing global context

The current international order – with the US as a (sole) great power and ‘the West’ as its centre – has evolved. There is an emerging multipolar world order whereby other powers, such as China, compete economically and in global influence with the US. Middle–power actors such as Turkey, Gulf States, India,

Russia, South Africa and Brazil are vying for political and economic influence in their proximate regions and beyond.

Africa and the world

Both Europe and Africa have undergone repositioning in this changing global context. This repositioning is positive for Africa because the continent has been able to diversify its partners, carve out a new role in this multipolar world, and exercise more agency. This [positive change](#) is, however, equally driven by changes that took place in the continent. Africa has a minor share in the global economy (around 3%) but a few of [the fastest-growing economies in the world](#) are in Africa and the continent is [projected](#) to be the fastest-growing region in 2027. Africa is the youngest continent, and by some projections, [one in four people in the world will be African by 2050](#).

Moreover, a young and ambitious African political leadership in the early 2000s, together with some drive towards ownership of continental matters and a need for autonomy following from the lessons of the Cold War period and international interventionism – led to the development of a [renewed AU and continental frameworks](#) for development and peace and security. It also led to a more vibrant inclusion of Africa and its leadership in global debates such as climate change and development. With greater interconnectivity, African citizens have also been able to travel more and share more of their lives and culture with the rest of the world – constantly challenging outdated single narratives about Africa.

The AU and its member states are pursuing strategic partnerships with the EU, China, Japan, Korea, the Arab League, the US, India, Turkey, Russia, the Gulf States and Brazil. While the AU does not have a direct mandate to represent its member states in global fora, and African countries have struggled to form unified positions on global matters, it has creatively invested in different formats to amplify Africa's influence and presence in global governance. One such method is the [Common African Positions \(CAPs\)](#), where African states under the leadership of the AU issue CAPs on various global issues such as climate change, humanitarian effectiveness, migration and the UNSC reform. The AU also coordinates with and relies on the three non-permanent African states members in the UNSC to influence the Council's decisions on Africa. Of late, the AU has also been [appointing representatives](#) and country leads that can carry out specific

political negotiations, such as the post-Cotonou partnership with the EU or debt moratorium and access to capital for COVID-19 recovery.

In September 2023, the AU also gained permanent membership to the G20 (now G21). This development shows Africa's increasing strategic significance and demonstrates that the continent is no longer willing to be marginalised from global fora and that it's ready to influence discourse and decision-making on the world economy. To make the best out of its membership, the [AU must set up mechanisms and processes](#) to shape and contribute to the G21's agenda. The AU's experience and role in the G21 will be a test to the AU's ability to represent its members in international fora – an issue on which it has a limited mandate.

These efforts from Africa, via the AU and other forms, are demonstrations of Africa's readiness to be a global player despite the continent's economic, political and security challenges. But Africa's vision of itself as a global player is incompatible with the aid paradigm in the EU-Africa relationship, the prevailing notions of giver-recipient, norms-setter versus norm-taker, and carrot and stick approaches of the relationship. The African side increasingly questions the values agenda, aid conditionality and underscores the need for more progress in trade and investment focus of the partnership. These stances often come across as pushback in the eyes of the EU.

In negotiations with the EU, common positions by African states on specific issues such as migration, access to energy, climate adaptation or access to vaccines enable them to be more assertive. However, African countries have yet to be able to [come up with strategic priorities](#) vis-à-vis the EU that go beyond thematic and reactive proposals. In the context of the EU-Africa partnership, where the power asymmetry favours the EU, the lack of an overarching strategy puts African countries at a disadvantage. Without setting their own strategic priorities towards the EU and other partners, African countries will continue to play a reactive rather than proactive role in their external partnerships.

Moreover, despite African countries' pushback against a unilateral application of the values agenda on governance, for example, the continent has faced severe challenges maintaining and upholding its own governance agenda. As recent coups in the Sahel, constitutional manipulations, election irregularities and some

of the violent conflicts in the continent demonstrate, [the African-owned and led governance agenda is also in crisis](#). Neither the AU nor its member states have been able to effectively use existing structures such as the African Peace and Security Architecture or the African Peer Review Mechanism – or other tools to effectively manage some of the most violent conflicts in the continent. This is due to several factors, such as the internationalisation of conflicts in the continent, the spread of insurgencies and violent extremism but also a lack of continental political leadership.

Europe and the world

For Europe, the changing global order presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, the rise of middle powers and alternative international actors has diminished Europe's (or rather the West's) centrality in global politics. While Europe still represents 14.5% of the world's GDP ([by 2022 figures](#)) and continues to be an essential actor in global multilateralism, its influence in the world, certainly in Africa, is not as strong as it was 20–30 years ago. Due to demographic pressures and the ongoing decline of Europe's share of the global economy, [Europe's influence in the world may suffer](#) further.

Moreover, as the geopolitical competition for natural resources, innovation, economic superiority and influence between the US and China intensifies, Europe is stuck in between. On the one hand, the US is an important strategic ally for Europe, and the continent is rather dependent on the US, particularly on security and defence. In some cases – particularly in maintaining global norms – this affinity with the US comes across as a liability for Europe as there is often the tendency to merge Europe and the US together as the 'West' when there are differing positions. This is, for example, the case on climate change and commitment to the Paris Agreement, military interventionism and the war in Iraq, the position on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and support to international law and judicial institutions such as the ICC.

On the other hand, two decades of globalisation have also meant commercial and even industrial reliance on China. The EU is setting a course to recalibrate its overreliance on China by 'de-risking' and incentivising the growth of certain sectors in Europe and investing in critical fields such as [batteries](#) and [chips](#) to boost European production. At the same time, discussion on [strategic autonomy](#)

and developing [European defence and security](#) sectors has become a [salient topic](#) in the past few years. While the EU, and Europe in general, maintain a positive relationship with the US and NATO continues to be a shared defence project, there is more recognition in Brussels of the Union's unsustainable security dependence on the US, and there is some momentum – albeit political and bureaucratic difficulties – to change that.

To safeguard its market interests, maintain global influence and secure other political interests such as regional and global security, the EU needs to deepen existing partnerships and seek new ones, including with Africa. European states and the EU in particular, have been reframing their international cooperation in the language of partnership, signalling an aspiration to move away from a donor-aid-recipient approach. Other cooperation models have triggered this shift, for example, India and China, along with an orientation to increasingly align European states' international cooperation to their foreign policy objectives. African states' difficulty in clearly articulating their priorities and policy objectives and engaging in policy negotiations with enough resources and capacities has been a bottleneck to making this shift happen. In addition, while African countries endorse a narrative that prioritises trade and investments, demands for grant aid and expectations of financial support to African institutions have yet to recede. The attempt to move away from aid also needs to be carefully managed to ensure that development gains are not lost and that other forms of mutually beneficial collaboration take place.

The European international civil society, as well as more development-oriented donors, also underlines that the partnership narrative risks forgetting that African populations are still among the most in need globally. While Africa has improved its social and economic indicators, it remains the continent with the highest poverty, instability and fragility. [Of 46 Least Developed Countries \(LDCs\) globally, 33 are in Africa](#). They also underline that investments and economic development need to have a strong development rationale. For example, most foreign investments in Africa are [concentrated](#) in a few middle-income countries and in capital-intensive industries where they risk bringing limited benefits to ordinary citizens.

The EU increasingly recognises Africa's global aspirations and is looking into expanding the partnership's trade and investment dividend. Africa's bid to be better represented in global fora is particularly a topic the EU has supported. The EU has, for example, expressed its support to the AU's bid to join the G20.

Impact of geopolitics on the partnership

The emergence of a multipolar world has affected the EU–Africa partnership in at least three ways.

First, the rise of middle powers has diversified the pool of partners that African countries can choose from, making the EU an important but not necessarily the only or the most preferred partner. This has meant a diversity of approaches to trade, different tolerance to economic and political risk and appetite for investments, different sensitivities on governance issues and different ways of conducting business or engaging in international cooperation. Above all, this diversification allows African states more space to mould agreements to their liking and has increased African agencies to pursue specialised partnerships with different actors to meet their interests.

Europe is not always at ease with Africa's diversification of partners and is particularly uncomfortable with Russia's influence in Africa. Russia has an [increasing presence](#) in military and security areas on the continent, including through 36 military cooperation agreements with African countries. Russia is the largest supplier of arms to Africa, and the growing foothold of the Wagner group, a Russian mercenary group with close ties to the political establishment in Moscow, has raised deep concerns in Europe and beyond.

The recent spate of coups in the Sahel region has brought this concern closer to the European border. The EU is concerned that European security partnership and influence in the region will be replaced with Russia's. In Mali, the political and diplomatic fallout with France has led to the expulsion of French forces from Mali, and later the withdrawal of Danish and German forces, the EU CSDP mission, and the UN peacekeeping mission. At the same time, the junta in Mali has signed a security partnership with Russia, and there are serious accusations of the use of the [mercenary group Wagner](#) as well, which in March 2022 was accused of committing atrocities in northern Mali. Niger has also expelled French forces and

France's ambassador, although it hasn't yet elaborated on its security partnership with Russia. Burkina Faso hasn't ended its partnership with France yet; but it has underlined the need and the basis for partnership diversification.

Moreover, the coups in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, in particular, were accompanied by popular protests not just in favour of the coup but in protest of France's security and political role in the respective countries. The accusations against France are also cast at the EU or the West by association. While the EU is working to counter what it deems is a growing Russian misinformation in the region, others have pointed to the need to listen to the grievances of local populations vis-à-vis Western security presence and French interventionism in particular. The fact that jihadi expansion has not been satisfactorily curtailed and continues to affect civilians after a decade of French, European and UN missions in Mali, Niger, and Chad has been a particular source of frustration for the local population, even if these challenges [do not seem to have decreased](#) since military takeovers.

Secondly, the prominence of loans and investments in Africa's partnerships with non-traditional actors, especially with China, has made clear that the same is possible in the EU-Africa partnership. Over the past two decades, China has become a significant economic actor in Africa. Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) [flows to Africa](#) rose from \$75 million in 2003 to \$5 billion in 2021. China has been a major source of [loans and capital](#) for several African countries for the past two decades. By some estimates, [Chinese loans to Africa](#) (public and private) amounted to €170 billion between 2000-2022. In 2016, China became the leading job creator on the continent and the [third largest investor](#) as the number of Chinese-funded projects increased by 106%. The scale and rate of growth of Chinese trade and investment in Africa have been impressive. Still, European countries remain [the largest holders of FDI](#) stock on the continent, with France and the Netherlands leading the way with UE\$54 billion each as per 2022. The recent change of strategy under the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has raised questions on whether the pace and sectoral focus of Chinese investments in Africa will be sustained.

There are several issues around China's commercial and financial relations with Africa, ranging from the quality of data, debt sustainability, environmental impact,

geographical and sectoral distribution/concentration of Chinese FDI. However, there is no denying that China has emerged as an important economic partner for several African countries. The EU is cognisant of this fact and recognises that it needs to change its economic engagement with Africa in light of alternatives China and others bring to the continent.

The EU has also been reformulating various strategies to guide its partnership with Africa. In recent years, there has been continuous [talk of 'rebooting' and 'restarting'](#) the EU-Africa partnership to make it fit for purpose. This has led to the development of several Africa policies by EU member states and the EU has also had to review its strategic frameworks, introducing "[Towards a comprehensive strategy with Africa](#)" in 2020. In her latest State of the Union [speech](#), President of the EU Commission Ursula von der Leyen indicated that she and the High Representative Josep Borrell will propose a new approach to Africa during the upcoming EU-AU summit. A joint communication between the European Commission and External Action Services (EEAS) on this is [expected in the second half of 2024](#), but it remains to be seen if there will be consultation with African actors this time around – since this is an oversight the EU has been accused of – and how different it would be from previous frameworks.

More recently, the EU launched the Global Gateway Initiative (GGI) – a €300 billion package of investments for major infrastructure projects between 2021-2027. The GGI is proposed as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative, and around €150 billion is projected to go into infrastructure projects in Africa. Where the money will actually come from, the role of the private sector and how this initiative will concretely build on the [Team Europe approach](#) is yet to be clarified. It is also unclear if and how it meets the demands of partner countries. Moreover, whether the EU can indeed follow a values-driven and green approach remains to be seen given the geopolitical objectives of the initiative, EU's need to pursue interest-driven partnership and match competition from others such as China, and the pushback from partners on the values agenda.

EU member states are also revisiting their engagement with Africa. Around ten EU member states have formulated their own African policies to establish new or reset old partnerships with African countries.

This re-orientation in Europe, carried out by the EU and its member states, is driven by maintaining political and economic relevance in Africa, countering China's growing influence and supporting European states' other economic and political objectives. While at the level of narratives and policies, the desire to do things differently is clear in Brussels, translating this narrative into action has not been easy.

Development cooperation continues to be a major pillar of the EU-Africa partnership. Neither Africa's insistence that the partnership should move beyond aid – nor the EU's continuous re-branding of the partnership – has changed this fact. African countries also lament the persistence of paternalism, bias and lack of understanding of [Africa's complex challenges and opportunities](#) and cite those as barriers to a renewed [EU-Africa partnership](#).

Thirdly, with the emergence of a multipolar global order, questions on the credibility of the current Western-led global system are growing louder. African countries not only call for more representation in global institutions but also increasingly push back against unidirectional and norm applications and double standards. Countries in Africa and beyond have increasingly questioned institutions such as the UNSC, financial institutions like the World Bank and other institutions disproportionately shaped by the US and European countries. The rise of multiple actors has amplified the call to reform these institutions and renegotiate the terms and norms of global governance.

The questions posed on the normative elements of the current global governance system have also challenged the EU-Africa partnership. While much of the global norms are internationally agreed upon, [African states](#) contest their inconsistent and unidirectional enforcement in ways that project moral superiority of the West over the rest and in a fashion that doesn't serve [Africa's interests](#). For example, the US' invasion of Iraq in 2003 was not condemned by other countries in the UN, to the point of political action, even if there were dissenting voices in Europe. Allegations of human rights violations and crimes against humanity committed by US military personnel during Iraq and Afghanistan have not been investigated by the International Criminal Court. The US has, in fact, [threatened](#) to take action if the International Criminal Court was to examine abuses in Afghanistan. Similarly, Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories and several documentations of

human rights violations and allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity by Israel remain unaddressed politically or legally.

African stakeholders have, therefore, grown less and less indulgent with the uneven and opportunistic call to respect internationally agreed principles and norms by European countries (and the US). As South Africa's minister of international cooperation, Naledi Pandor, [put it](#) "So you can't say because Ukraine has been invaded that suddenly sovereignty is important, but it was never important for Palestine. It's very peculiar. If you believe in international law, truly, then wherever sovereignty is infringed, it must apply and this is the point we've been making. We use the framework of international law unequally depending on who is affected, and we are arguing that that must change."

This was made even more apparent at the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Europe was 'shocked' at the results of the first United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) vote on the "Aggression on Ukraine" resolution in March 2023, where Africa represented the biggest regional block of countries that [abstained or didn't vote](#). African countries were dismayed by what some argued was a rejection of their agency and sovereign right to vote in any manner. Moreover, African states (and others in the global majority) also lamented 'Western hypocrisy' whereby peace and security matters close to Europe and the US are taken seriously while conflicts elsewhere were not managed with the same level of tenacity and consideration for international law.

Conclusion and ways forward

The political and economic evolutions that took place in Europe and Africa in the past three decades, and the interaction between their respective internal changes and the global context, have shaken the EU-Africa partnership. But they have also added a new and much-needed momentum to a partnership established on the ashes of colonialism and continues to suffer from the shadows of coloniality. It will take time to see tangible results from the renewed enthusiasm for a new EU-Africa partnership. But the fact that both sides have been able to gain more clarity on their respective needs and demands, some fundamental issues of the partnership and have been able to carry out more open and candid discussions should be appreciated. And in the long term, this honesty and ability

to identify joint areas of interest and accept differences will make the partnership deliver to the needs of citizens and the collective interests of states on both sides.

In this regard, the immediate geopolitical context offers opportunities for a better partnership. For example, both Europe and Africa share principles of multilateralism. While recent crises such as the pandemic and the war in Ukraine have illuminated that both continents have a different understanding of how the global system of multilateralism ought to work, it does not change the fact that both stand by the principle. Europe and Africa should, therefore, collectively envision what a reformed multilateral system that is fair, representative and reflective of the needs and responsibilities of all actors should look like. In this regard, Europe can support Africa's proposals to reform multilateral institutions such as the UNSC, WTO and the Bretton Wood Institutions, as it supported the AU's membership in the G21. Such a policy and politics-based partnership would not only help realise the goal of moving from a partnership beyond aid – it can also address some of the structural grievances Africa and the rest of the global majority express vis-à-vis the current global order.

The ongoing global discourse on reforming global financial systems to make them fit for green development and sustainable debt management are also helpful entry points for furthering the discussion on green transition and industrialisation in Africa. For example, the EU and its member states can do their part by experimenting with [debt-for-climate or debt-for-SDG](#) swapping mechanisms which will have win-win outcomes even if a holistic change on the global financial architecture will require buy-in from multiple stakeholders, including commercial lenders. Further, projections on Africa's population growth and urbanisation indicate that Africa's industrialisation is key for its economic transformation. How this industrialisation is achieved – and what it means for the global carbon reduction ambitions remains a sensitive issue. However, providing finance and non-monetary support to [Africa's climate adaptation](#) and industrialisation is in the [interest of both Europe and Africa](#).

Moreover, the increasing global demand for critical raw materials, natural gas and liquid hydrogen has also created an opportunity for resource-rich and coastal African countries, some of which have already signed agreements with EU member states. These opportunities should be accompanied by deliberate

policies by African states that ensure they go from raw critical material exports to processing. Similarly, explorations for natural gas and liquid hydrogen exports to Europe should be balanced with meeting the energy demands of the exporting countries.

Geopolitics or otherwise, opportunities for a better EU–Africa partnership are plenty. The challenge remains whether and how the two partners can seize them. Internal continental and external global dynamics have affected the demands of both actors on the partnership. It remains to be seen if and how the partnership can accommodate those. While, at the moment, the EU is more visibly working towards improving its relationship with Africa, Africa's next steps will probably have a more defining impact on the nature of the relationship. Africa – more so than Europe – has more incentives to rectify the power asymmetry in the relationship. This is easier said than done, but one way of going about it is to have a clearer and more proactive overarching policy – at bilateral or continental levels – vis-à-vis the EU. By engaging more proactively, assertively – and, more importantly – politically with the EU, Africa – like the EU – can leverage the partnership for its global positioning.

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