

Priorities Perpetuating Subjugation: the Sixth EU-African Union Summit

Following the conclusion of the sixth EU-AU Summit in Brussels, how the priorities for policymakers reflect an underlying deficiency in the inter-continental 'partnership' that will continue to undermine attempts for a relationship of equals for the foreseeable future.

RETHINKING **SECURITY** IN THE 2020s SERIES – COMMENTARY

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1. INTRODUCTION

European Union and African Union leaders met in Brussels for the sixth EU-AU Summit on 17 and 18 February 2022. Delays relating to the global COVID-19 pandemic had pushed this Summit back from 2020 as initially planned. This means that it is nearly five years since the fifth Summit that took place in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire during November 2017. The then-EU Council President Donald Tusk said¹:

"As you know, the European Union is Africa's biggest partner and closest neighbour. Its biggest investor, its biggest trading

¹ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2017/11/29-30/>

partner, its biggest provider of development aid and humanitarian assistance as well as its biggest contributor in peace and security. And this summit demonstrated our determination to reinforce our partnership even more.”

Similarly, during the press conference at the conclusion of the sixth Summit, European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen said² that Europe wanted to be Africa's 'partner of choice'. So, during the time since the fifth Summit, what has happened with European-African relations? What has happened to this 'partnership'?

2. DIFFERING PRIORITIES BETWEEN CONTINENTS

Frankly, while there may have been several impressive and important initiatives that were implemented and high-level dialogues initiated in private, a few key, high-profile decisions have unfortunately demonstrated the type of attitude that Europe still has towards African partners. The response to COVID-19 has been telling in this regard. European nations have systematically hoarded and outbid for vaccinations for their own citizens, often over-buying beyond their needs, and leaving the minimal remains for their African counterparts. Oxfam, for example, suggested that Europe has disposed of more COVID-19 vaccination doses than it has sent to Africa at the start of 2022.³

Under pressure from European pharmaceutical companies, the EU has resisted⁴ waiving intellectual rights (TRIPS) for vaccinations, which could help drive increased global manufacturing of both vaccines and therapeutics. Furthermore, while the world has been expected to be united in its research and reporting into the virus, when South Africa identified the now prevalent Omicron variant, Europe responded by immediately restricting travel to the country and its neighbouring States. South African President Cyril Ramaphosa spoke of the risks of a 'health apartheid' against Africans in December 2021. He said⁵:

² <https://video.consilium.europa.eu/event/en/25306>

³ <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/eu-set-bin-25-million-more-vaccine-doses-it-has-donated-africa-year>

⁴ <https://african.business/2022/02/trade-investment/will-eu-au-summit-reshape-europe-africa-relations/>

⁵ <https://english.alarabiya.net/coronavirus/2021/12/02/South-Africa-s-Ramaphosa-slams-COVID-19-health-apartheid->

“Given that it was our own African scientists who first detected the Omicron variant, it is also a slap in the face of African excellence and expertise.”

The dismissal of African expertise and experience in general is nothing new to international politics. While the EU has taken steps to set the record straight, including by funding the new African Medicines Agency, vaccine manufacturing in Africa, and the WHO Tech-Transfer hub, this continued negative attitude demonstrates the core hypocrisy at the EU’s purported claims⁶ to move from ‘a donor-recipient relationship’ to a true ‘partnership’.

From the outset, the difference in priorities between the EU and AU shows either a lack of understanding, willingness to understand, or wilful ignorance of the realities for both. For instance, the EU continues to prioritise action on climate, with its assistance with African initiatives such as the Great Green Wall⁷. But, as articulated by African Union Chair and Senegalese President Macky Sall⁸:

“African economies are among those that are polluting less but we are the part of the world that is affected the most by the aftermath and the consequences of climate change. So we should not add some injustice on the shoulders of Africa by no longer subsidising fossil fuels as was decided in Glasgow [COP26], because there’s a real difficulty for the African countries.”

The use of fossil fuels is but one discrepancy regarding economic priorities. The overall attitude of the framing of financial investment is also difficult. The EU has announced a new set of initiatives regarding financial investment into Africa. For instance, the 2021 Global Gateway⁹ initiative is meant to streamline European investment into foreign nations, including into Africa, for specific sectors such as digital technology, climate, transport, health, and education. The Global Gateway targets is a positive step towards breaking away from the donor-recipient model, as it re-aligns EU investment with what African partners have been calling for,

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/communication-eu-africa-strategy-join-2020-4-final_en.pdf

⁷ <https://www.greatgreenwall.org/about-great-green-wall>

⁸ <https://african.business/2022/02/trade-investment/will-eu-au-summit-reshape-europe-africa-relations/>

⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en

namely infrastructure and connectivity. While targeted investments can, and are often, successful at boosting key sectors, much more needs to be done, both in terms of mobilizing new finance on top-of the EU's existing long-term budget, and also revisiting EU trade and agriculture policies that undermine Africa's potential competitiveness. The fifth AU-EU Summit failed to meaningfully address both issues.¹⁰

This is not to criticise the EU solely for this decision. The AU for their part does continue to use these Summits as a tacit way to ask for money, and it is estimated that Africa has a \$285 billion financing gap in dealing with the pandemic. President Sall himself acknowledged this¹¹:

"We hope to leave Brussels with a renewed partnership, but I hope that when going to Brussels we will see a nice envelope on the table of the Europeans, because let's put it bluntly: We need money."

Granted, many sectors in African nations do require substantial investment for them to realise their potential. The question we need to pose is how to leverage this new finance so that it's creating self-sustaining economies and health systems, instead of dependency. It is more obvious that for the EU, the promise of economic investment is tied to the promise that African nations do more to securitise their borders, which is evident with the EU's continued focus on migration and security challenges, suggesting an underlying fear of the spill-over of 'African problems' into Europe.

3. FINDING INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

Instead, there could be ways to promote the European-African partnership without falling into these repetitive narrative traps. Rather than the often-infantilising language that talks of African potential and opportunity without specifying what that potential is, AU-EU leaders should set out specific mutually pragmatic priorities. For example, on education, in addition to promoting more economic investment, perhaps also identify that there is clear and proven African expertise in several areas, and so the partnership could look for more effective ways to cooperate between European and African universities. While the Erasmus+

¹⁰ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2017/11/29-30/>

¹¹ <https://african.business/2022/02/trade-investment/will-eu-au-summit-reshape-europe-africa-relations/>

initiative is a continues to be a good launchpad for student exchange programs, more could be done to streamline educational exchange beyond this, including the increased possibility for Europeans to access African universities. Policymakers could also look for easier and more effective degree recognition between the two continents as a standard, rather than having the continued risk of people's skills being undermined due to bureaucratic constraints.

On security, indeed there are ongoing armed conflicts across the African continent, including in Libya, Ethiopia, and Mali, while military coups, such as in Sudan, continue to plague the continent. The EU does have an incentive to help these nations find peaceful solutions, but how can Europe this be reconciled with the EU's current approach of sending arms to end conflict? EU High Representative, Josep Borrell has said¹²:

"We have to silence the guns, but in order to silence the guns, unhappily we need guns... We are not going to stop the terrorists from killing people just by preaching. We need arms. We need military capacities, and that's what we are going to provide, to help provide our African friends, because their security is ours."

Considering the sheer level of mobilized money available from the EU on this theme, it is unfortunate that the combined European expertise has concluded that increased arms sales is the most innovative and effective solution here when evidence¹³ shows that increasing weapons in a conflict is not usually effective at stopping that conflict.

On general economic development, the EU and AU could instead promote business cooperation such as easier mechanisms for European businesses to partner with African businesses with lower tax and duty requirements. A positive step was the fact that such mechanisms were partly included in the joint investment platforms, namely the Investment Package, announced at the Summit. In addition, policy decisions could promote African investment into European business and emerging technologies rather than merely framing this as a one-sided relationship. The creation of transparent, harmonised, and safe African legal and regulatory frameworks, to attract investments included by the private sector, should also be a

¹² <https://www.ft.com/content/dd29eb4d-1fc0-4123-ada1-290c4c63d966>

¹³ Ibid.

priority here. Finally, more efforts should be put into reforming the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) or on making substantial concessions to support African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCTFA).

On migration, rather than pumping money to African nations in an attempt to stop their people from leaving whilst securitising European borders, there could be an impetus to make fair, legal pathways for migration. Namely, having fair conditions based upon educational requirements for areas such as study and job opportunities, while importantly making sure that people are aware of these possibilities instead of them attempting perilous illegal migratory routes, such as the often-deadly sea route from war-torn Libya across the Mediterranean Sea.

The challenge for all these suggestions is that they are predicated upon the idea that the EU and AU both want to move towards an actual fair partnership of equals, with mutual expectations and opportunities. Unfortunately, the uneven power dynamic between Europe and Africa is deeply entrenched despite efforts to redress this balance, and the maintenance of this status quo is often comfortable for some European interests such as migration control. Having said this, AU leaders also need to do more to push for equal respect and dignity in negotiation, because a continued preoccupation with how much money Europe can promise to them will continue to keep them in this position of recipient. For now, it is unlikely there will be any significant changes to the partnership at this Summit, but unless radically new ways of framing the discussion emerge, these problems are likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

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