

The Prospects for the Future of European Union–African Union Relations in Uncertain Times

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The importance of Africa for Europe was highlighted in the 1950 Schuman Declaration. Although the overarching framework for relations between the European Union and Africa is embedded in the 2000 Cotonou Agreement, cooperation between the European Union and Africa became increasingly institutionalized through the European Union–Africa Summits of 2000, 2007, 2010 and 2014, during which political leaders from both sides made strong rhetorical commitments to a strategic partnership. Yet, for the wider public, the relationship between the European Union and Africa appears to be both obscure and complex. The fifth European Union–Africa Summit is scheduled to take place in Ivory Coast in November 2017. This article will provide an overview of the development of European Union–Africa relations that coincided with the emergence of the African Union, the successor of the Organisation of African Unity. The so-called ‘strategic partnership’ between the European Union and the African Union represents the most comprehensive partnership the African Union has with any non-African actor. By highlighting current challenges affecting both, such as irregular migration, this article will, however, demonstrate that cooperation between the two is limited and somewhat lacking in strategic direction.

Introduction¹

Europe and Africa (the world’s second largest continent), are natural geographical neighbours. The link between both continents can be traced back to the cradle of humankind, according to which all Europeans have their origins in Africa. Later, European explorers reached African soil and most of Africa was colonized by European powers. During the middle of the twentieth century, African nations began to gain their independence from European powers.

Since the very beginnings of the European project, Africa played a role: In his capacity as Foreign Minister of France, Robert Schuman highlighted the importance of Africa for Europe in his famous Schuman Declaration (1950). In this speech,

Schuman proposed the birth of the European Coal and Steel Community, the first of a number of supranational European institutions that would eventually become today's European Union (EU).

The Schuman Declaration was also an attempt to reform and maintain the colonial empires of Belgium and France, as well as to consolidate Western Europe's influence in Africa.² In 1957, the importance of relations between both continents was first officially articulated in the Treaty of Rome. This Treaty also provided for the establishment of the European Development Fund. The Yaoundé Conventions (1963 and 1969), the Lomé Conventions (1975, 1979, 1984 and 1989) and the Cotonou Agreement (2000) continued the process of implementing official ties between the EU and Africa. The Cotonou Agreement is considered to be the most comprehensive partnership agreement between the EU and developing countries. It is the legal framework for the EU's cooperation with 79 countries from Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific. This Agreement is due to expire in 2020.

In the past few decades, Europe has provided considerable assistance for Africa's development and has encouraged the creation of the African Union (AU).³ The AU has been in existence since 2002. In January 2017, Morocco took up membership having been the only country in Africa yet to do so. This came some three decades after leaving its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity, in protest at its members' policy towards Morocco's claim to the disputed territory of Western Sahara. In terms of both aid and trade, the EU as a whole (EU and Member States together) maintains a position as principle partner to the AU.

All of the above encouraged the EU to institutionalize its relationship with the AU. Of the few EU Member States that had had colonies in Africa, France and Britain most strongly advocated for a close engagement in Africa and this first shaped official EU–Africa policies.⁴ The new political elites in Africa also had an interest in a formalized bond with the EU as a means by which to gain credibility and respect.

The EU and Africa: From Cairo (2000) to Abidjan (2017)

The EU–Africa Summits held in 2000, 2007, 2010 and 2014 were high-profile platforms at which many important decisions were agreed to. Other meetings between the EU and Africa include: the ministerial meetings that take place on an ad hoc basis, College-to-College meetings between the European Commission and the AU Commission, the Joint Annual Forums, the regular high level dialogues and expert level meetings, the EU–Africa Business Forums, the Africa–EU Civil Society Forums, the Africa–Europe Youth leaders' Summits, the meetings between the European Parliament and the Pan-African Parliament, as well as the meetings of the EU and Africa economic and social stakeholders network.

The first EU–Africa Summit, held in Cairo, Egypt (3–4 April 2000), concluded with the Cairo Declaration and the Cairo Plan of Action. Both sides proudly declared that this historic Summit would elevate the global partnership between Africa and Europe to a new strategic dimension, strengthening and synchronizing existing

cooperation through the promotion of dialogue on economic, political, social and development issues as priorities. This Summit can be considered as the beginning of an institutionalized EU–AU dialogue. Under this dialogue the EU would focus more on issues related to peace and security in Africa, while the African side would emphasize trade and economic issues.⁵

The emergence of the AU in 2002 improved EU–AU cooperation because it reinforced ‘trends towards greater pan-African cooperation and’ gave ‘a significant boost to EU–Africa partnership, not least because the EU finally had on the African side a comparable institutional partner committed to common priorities’.⁶

In December 2005, the European Council adopted an innovative ten-year EU Strategy for Africa, representing the first European political framework to address Africa as a single entity in an attempt to establish a foundation to synchronize the EU’s Africa policy with the Africa policies of the EU’s Member States.⁷ This Strategy defined, amongst others, the EU’s priorities in Africa as: fostering peace and security, supporting legitimate and effective governance, advancing economic growth and interconnecting Africa. All in all, the goal of the Strategy was to make the EU’s approach to Africa more effective.

The 2007 Lisbon EU–Africa Summit (8–9 December 2007) ended with the Lisbon Declaration and the adoption of the impressive 46-page First Action Plan (2008–2010) for the Implementation of the Africa–EU Strategic Partnership, under which a comprehensive catalogue of partnerships and priority actions was agreed.⁸ Both sides agreed to increase the number of high-level contacts and meetings between AU and EU officials, as well as to supplement the troika meetings of foreign ministers with sectoral ministerial meetings. Furthermore, both pledged to establish mechanisms for closer cooperation between the Pan-African Parliament and the European Parliament, as well as between the AU Economic, Social and Cultural Council and the European Economic and Social Committee. In addition to these significant steps, the Action Plan envisaged the involvement of AU and EU research institutes and think tanks for autonomous policy advice, as well as the involvement of the civil society.

Both actors recognized the benefits of regional integration in Europe and in Africa under the banner of the EU and the AU, as well as the importance of a strong bond between both regional actors due to their interdependence.⁹ It is claimed that, while having moved away from a traditional, bilateral relationship, a true EU–AU partnership has evolved. The Lisbon Summit united 80 African and European Heads of State and Government, namely the AU-52, the EU-27, the Kingdom of Morocco, the AU Commission and the European Commission. While Lisbon 2007 can be considered as the birth of a formalized and institutionalized relationship between the EU and the AU, it was also the beginning of the implementation of an EU foreign policy that is characterized by the conviction that interregional order and world order are not only interrelated, but rather play into one another.¹⁰ Furthermore, from an EU perspective, the recognition of a link between development and security also played a considerable role in the manifestation of EU–AU relations in 2007.¹¹

A common characteristic of these high-level meetings, whose conclusions are based on consensus, is that the rhetoric of the declarations and related statements are full of ‘diplomatic’ language and courtesies. The third EU–Africa Summit in Tripoli, Libya (29–30 November 2010) is a prominent example in this regard: the Tripoli Declaration ended with expressing gratitude for playing host for the Summit to the then leader of Libya, Muammar Gaddafi, who only a few months later would become the arch-enemy of certain EU Member States.¹²

Such an apparent ambivalence raises doubts concerning the credibility of EU–AU meetings, declarations and publications. Nonetheless, EU and African leaders adopted the ambitious 75-page Joint Africa–EU Strategy (JAES 2011–2013), 29 pages longer than the previous one, during the Tripoli Summit with the Tripoli Declaration. It aimed for increased effectiveness and impact of the EU–AU partnership. Following from the First Action Plan, the Second Action Plan defined eight thematic partnerships for the strategic partnership:¹³

1. Peace and security;
2. Democratic governance and human rights;
3. Trade, regional integration and infrastructure;
4. United Nations Millennium Development Goals;
5. Energy;
6. Climate change and environment;
7. Migration, mobility and employment;
8. Science, information society and space.

Brussels 2014 (2–3 April), the fourth and last EU–Africa Summit to date, was held under the premise ‘Two Unions, One Vision’ and ended with a ten-page Declaration as well as the adoption of a Roadmap 2014–2017. European and African leaders shared some of the highlighted criticism and refocused the implementation of the JAES on the following five priority areas for joint action:¹⁴

1. Peace and security;
2. Democracy, good governance and human rights;
3. Human development;
4. Sustainable and inclusive development and growth, continental integration;
5. Global and emerging issues.

There was broad agreement that the JAES should be further improved and that cooperation should be guided by a results-oriented approach. It was also agreed that the Joint Annual Forum would replace the Joint Expert Groups that facilitated the implementation of the eight priority areas of the JAES.

Brussels 2014 refocused the implementation of the JAES on the aforementioned five priority areas for joint action through the adoption of the Roadmap 2014–2017. The main focus of EU–AU cooperation however, remains in the area of peace and security. With regard to EU–AU policy dialogue, the African Union Support Programme (I–III), a key instrument in supporting the AU in the implementation

of the JAES since 2007, plays a crucial role. It aims at supporting the institutional and administrative capacity within the AU organs to deepen African integration and promote sustainable development. Enhanced efficiency in the performance of the AU Commission is the major objective the EU wishes to achieve through this Programme. In detail, since Brussels 2014 this entails the following priorities for the restructuring of the AU Commission:¹⁵

1. Promoting a culture of accountability and responsibility;
2. Improving administration and human resources;
3. Reducing operational costs;
4. Developing Standardized Operation Procedures.

There is a strong emphasis on the word ‘strategic’ in the relevant official EU publications. Clearly, the four EU–Africa Summits (Cairo 2000, Lisbon 2007, Tripoli 2010 and Brussels 2014) represent only the peak of what has transformed into a complex and innovative mechanism of cooperation between both regional actors. Lisbon in particular represented a milestone in EU–AU relations. Furthermore, the Second Action Plan underlined how important the eight thematic partnerships appear to be for the partnership between the EU and the AU.

The fifth EU–Africa Summit is scheduled to take place 28–29 November 2017 in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. In line with the AU’s theme for 2017, ‘Harnessing the Demographic Dividend through Investments in the Youth’, the central theme for the Summit will be ‘Youth’. ‘Youth’ issues have become a key priority for both the EU and AU. In the context of African demographic trends, there are major challenges for young people, especially unemployment and fragility that are both root causes of migration, as well as the threat of radicalisation. One of the key challenges in this regard remains the need to transform African economies from natural resources dependent to value-added production.

Apart from ‘Youth’, peace and security remain at the core of EU–AU cooperation, although the number of conflicts in Africa has declined thanks to the EU’s African Peace Facility established in 2003.¹⁶ Most of the African Peace Facility’s funding is allocated for African-led Peace Support Operations. The Facility also provides for capacity building, supporting in particular the operationalization of the different elements of the African Peace and Security Architecture, as well as an early response mechanism.

The heavy dependence of the AU on external funding, such as from the EU and the World Bank, continues to be a sensitive issue for EU and AU Member States. EU funding for Africa is channelled through various financial instruments, such as the European Development Fund, the African Peace Facility, the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, the Development Cooperation Instrument, the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, and the EU Food Facility.

The EU certainly promotes African ownership of its own policies regarding the continent’s future as well as the financial sustainability of the AU. At its 25th Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa (7–15 June 2015), the AU decided to implement

the previous decision on Alternative Sources of Finance to increase AU Member States funding to 100% of the operating budget, 75% of the programme budget and 25% of the peace and security budget, starting in 2016 to be phased in over the following five years. The new scale of assessment will be based on three payment tiers of countries, grouped according to the size of their respective Gross Domestic Product. Tier 1 will comprise five AU Member States (Algeria, Angola, Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa), which together should contribute 60% of the budget, shared equally amongst them. Tier 2 (25% of the budget) and Tier 3 (15% of the budget) countries will contribute according to their capacity to pay. During the 27th AU Summit in Kigali, Rwanda (10–18 July 2016), Donald Kaberuka, AU High Representative for the Peace Fund, proposed a 0.2% levy on all African eligible imports. His proposal expects to raise up to US\$1.2 billion per year. This is estimated to cover 100% of the AU's operating budget, 75% of the programme budget and 25% of the peace and support operations budget. While the EU welcomes such initiatives, it is sceptical of whether the AU will actually succeed with it as many AU Member States are already failing to pay their current (lower) level of contributions.

Migration as Priority

Owing to unprecedented levels of irregular migratory flows in recent years, migration has become the EU's current priority and is likely to feature prominently at the upcoming Abidjan Summit.¹⁷ Already at the Valletta Summit on Migration (11–12 November 2015), EU and African leaders agreed on an Action Plan and Political Declaration to step up and coordinate efforts addressing migration. The 17-page Action Plan outlined five priority areas:¹⁸

1. Development benefits of migration and addressing root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement;
2. Legal migration and mobility;
3. Protection and asylum;
4. Prevention of and fight against irregular migration, migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings;
5. Return, readmission and reintegration.

The Summit also saw the launch of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. As of 1 March 2017, the EU contribution amounted €2.4 billion. In addition, EU Member States, plus Norway and Switzerland have pledged more than €152 million. As of the time of publication approximately €62 million of the total pledged amount has been deposited. Its three regions of focus are the Sahel/Lake Chad, the Horn of Africa and the North of Africa.¹⁹ It aims to address some of the root causes of irregular migration and displacement in countries of origin, transit and destination, through the following priority sectors: economic programmes, resilience, migration management, stability and governance.

The 2016 EU–Turkey Agreement, ending irregular migration from Turkey to the EU and replacing it with legal channels of resettlement of refugees to the EU, inspired

a new Migration Partnership Framework, announced on 7 June 2016.²⁰ Under this Framework, tailored comprehensive partnerships (compacts) addressing migration will be negotiated with selected, mostly African, countries to better manage migration. These compacts will target irregular economic migration through a mix of short-term measures for managing ongoing flows and asylum requests, and long-term measures to reduce incentives. The mainstreaming of migration within the EU's Official Development Assistance for Africa in line with the Valletta Action Plan was reiterated at the Informal Meeting of EU heads of state or government in Malta (3 February 2017).

New Hope in 2017

2017 started well for the AU: more than three decades after leaving the AU's predecessor organization, the Organisation of African Unity, Morocco joined the AU at its 28th Summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (22–31 January 2017). At the same Summit, the new AU Commission was sworn in. Moussa Faki Mahamat of Chad succeeded Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma of South Africa who had been Chairperson since 2012. Dlamini-Zuma's term was supposed to end in 2016, but AU Member States were unable to agree on a successor and extended the mandate of the Commission under her leadership. Agenda 2063, her flagship policy, is a strategic framework for the socio-economic transformation of Africa over a span of 50 years. It contains an ambitious mix of proposals, such as inclusive growth, peace, the establishment of the Continental Free Trade Area by 2017, and the introduction of an African Passport, issued by Member States, along with the abolishment of visa requirements for all African citizens in all African countries by 2018.

Across the Mediterranean, the EU celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community, commonly known as the Treaty of Rome, on 25 March 2017. At the same time, EU Member States have so far failed to agree on a clear agenda on how to handle irregular migration, the EU's current top-priority. Furthermore, for the first time, an EU Member State, the United Kingdom, will leave the EU. It is not only unclear the ramifications Brexit will have on EU–AU relations, but also on the future of the EU itself: Britain has major geostrategic interests in Africa and is one of the few EU Member States that is a net contributor to the EU's budget, meaning it contributes more money than it receives. Furthermore, British intelligence and military capabilities have so far been crucial for EU support to peace and security in Africa. Prime Minister Theresa May triggered Article 50 on 29 March 2017, launching the two-year countdown to Brexit. EU institutions will be preoccupied with the negotiations. Recent or upcoming elections in some EU Member States moreover add to the uncertainties.

Encumbered with so many uncertainties and challenges, it may be problematic for the EU to exert the necessary transformative power and leverage at the Abidjan Summit 2017. Linking the central theme for the Summit, 'Youth', with migration appears to be the most appropriate avenue for making the fifth EU–Africa Summit a success. AU leaders would therefore be well advised to stay tuned on the many

ongoing debates in Europe, i.e. migration, Brexit and the results of the elections in France and Germany. Of importance are also the discussions on development policy, including on EU financing for development with the follow-up to the mid-term review of the EU budget, external assistance funding and the European Development Fund. Last but not least, there is the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, the new European Consensus on Development and the future of the Cotonou Agreement.²¹ These may well pave the way for agreement on policies and priorities for future EU–AU relations at the EU–Africa Summit 2017.

Conclusion

European and African leaders made notable rhetorical commitments to a strategic partnership during the EU–Africa Summits in 2000, 2007, 2010 and 2014. Yet, for the wider public the relationship between the EU and Africa appears both obscure and complex. It is not only doubtful what all this theoretical commitment amounts to in practice, but also how far the relationship has already developed. Despite significant elements of cooperation, the EU–AU relationship is also shaped by divergent perspectives on a range of regional and global issues, and additionally by the emergence of alternative partners for Africa, such as China and India, that have made traditional ties with the EU less attractive.

Although the AU is a fledgling institution, enough time has elapsed since its establishment for it to be possible to conduct a meaningful analysis of the status of the EU–AU relationship. It was not until the EU–Africa Summit in Lisbon in 2007 that the bilateral relationship was properly established between both institutions. As such, the European side still considers the AU of 2017 not yet fully developed, but is willing to devote available resources to assist the AU in establishing itself as a fully functioning organization. Caused by recent unprecedented levels of irregular migratory flows that are likely to increase due to the projected population growth in Africa, migration has become the EU’s current priority and is expected to feature prominently at the upcoming 2017 EU–Africa Summit. Aside from migration, the key challenges for the two actors in the near future include trade and security, in addition to defining the structure, nature and geographical scope of any new agreement to succeed Cotonou upon the latter agreement’s expiry in 2020.

EU–AU relations emerged in the 2000s during a time of huge enthusiasm for such a relationship in Europe and Africa. The EU sought to export the model of its own development and structure, and Africa was ready to import it. In Europe, this eagerness was linked to the replacement of national currencies with the euro and two major rounds of enlargement. In Africa, it was connected with the pride and associated aspirations related to the emergence of the AU itself. Later, during the same decade, when the global financial crisis started to kick in, a period of disillusionment set in. This was to eventually become the worst financial crisis since the 1930s. In the mid-2010s, unprecedented irregular migration put the EU under additional pressure. Opposition to the European project rose throughout the EU. The notion of the transformative power of Europe seemed to have peaked. The future of

the EU and, subsequently, EU–AU relations remain uncertain. The outcome will be dependent upon the direction in which the EU’s Member States wish the bloc to develop. This will, at least in 2017, be largely influenced by the results of the elections in France and Germany, as well as on how the Brexit negotiations proceed. In terms of EU–AU relations it would therefore be prudent to concentrate efforts on critical areas of interest such as migration, security and the post-Cotonou era.

References and Notes

1. The views and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author.
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16. Established with Decision 2003/3 of the African, Caribbean, and Pacific Group of States (ACP)-EC Council of Ministers).
17. According to the International Organisation for Migration, irregular migration refers to:

movement that takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit and receiving countries. There is no clear or universally accepted definition of irregular migration. From the perspective of destination countries it is entry, stay or work in a country without the necessary authorisation or documents required under immigration regulations. From the perspective of the sending country, the irregularity is for example seen in cases in which a person crosses an international boundary without a valid passport or travel document or does not fulfil the administrative requirements for leaving the country. There is, however, a tendency to restrict the use of the term ‘illegal migration’ to cases of smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons.
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