Institut für Europäische Politik

GEPS Briefing: Ten years of EU – Africa Partnership. Perspectives after the Abidjan Summit

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German European Policy Series

Abstract

With the Abidjan Summit between EU and African states in November 2017 the Joint Africa EU Strategy has celebrated its first 10 years. The paper will give an overview of the main fields of cooperation as defined by the strategy (security, trade and development, migration), and then proceed with a reflection on the changing parameters that will shape future cooperation. The paper will thus put emphasis on the Brexit, the ongoing transformation of African regionalism and the role of China.

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On 30 November 2017 leaders from fifty-five African states and from the EU and its member states gathered in Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire) for their fifth summit. In the wake of this event and given changing political contexts on both sides of the Mediterranean, the relevance of this partnership was questioned, and calls were made to radically rethink the rationale and objectives of this partnership.[1]

This short paper will start with giving an overview of the main fields of cooperation as defined by the Joint Africa EU Strategy, and then proceed with a reflection on the changing parameters within Europe, Africa and beyond that will shape future cooperation.

1. Africa - EU Relationships. A Balance Sheet

When the European Union and AU embarked on their 2007 Joint Africa EU Strategy (JAES) some core thematic fields were identified to serve as guideposts for the further dialogue. Ever since the EU-ACP conventions had been established in 1975, Development and Trade had characterized this relationship. These traditional concerns had been later, with the Cotonou Agreements, complemented by Human Rights and Good Governance; and eventually, with the creation of the African Peace and Security Architecture, also with Peace and Security. Some of these fields have particularly gained in importance throughout the last ten years, while migration has also moved to the forefront. The more general and quite sobering assessment, however, is that "the innovative content of the JAES was gradually replaced by short-term crisis management and growing indifference."[2]

1.1 Security

Europe has been the top donor for African Union military missions (it contributed € 1.3 billion to the African Union Mission in Somalia). The African Peace Facility, financed through the European Development Fund, became an innovative and generous mechanism of EU support for the AU's peace and security activities which was complemented by EU-AU dialogue formats. The EU is also a direct provider of security through EU military and civilian missions in Africa (Somalia, Mali, Niger, Somalia, Central African Republic, mission Atalanta to fight piracy in the Horn of Africa) and national military interventions (France in Mali or Côte d'Ivoire). The EU certainly had many reasons to support the construction of a legitimate Pan-African peace and security architecture and to strengthen the AU, and cooperation in this area seemed strong even if lately more debate emerged about burden-sharing and requests for a more substantial financial participation from the African Union.[3] Still, in facing a variety of domestic security threats and humanitarian crises, it is still Europe (and the USA) that many African governments ask for material and financial support (and not China).

The situation is more complicated with regard to fighting terrorism and other transnational security threats. The EU and its member states have found it more con-

1 Arnould, Valerie, and Francesco Strazzari. 2017. African futures: Horizon 2025. EU Institute for Security Studies. Report Nr 37. September 2017; Crisis Group 2017: Time to Reset African Union – European Union Relations. Bruxelles: Crisis Group Africa Report N° 255; Friends of Europe. 2017. EU-Africa Relations: Strategies for a renewed partnership

2 Bossuyt, Jean 2017: Can EU-Africa relations be deepened? A Perspective on Power Relations, Interests and Incentives. Maastricht: ECDPM Briefing Note No.97

3 Crisis Group 2017: Time to Reset African Union – European Union Relations. Bruxelles: Crisis Group Africa Report N° 255.

venient to engage in bilateral agreements or to sponsor ad hoc coalitions such as G5 Sahel force and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in the Lake Chad basin, thus side-lining the African Union which, however, also lacked a more comprehensive strategy to fight jihadism or terrorism on the continent.

1.2 Developmental Aspects, Trade and Regional Integration

Europe remains the most important trade partner (35.9% of Africa's trade), FDI provider and donor for Sub-Saharan Africa. European countries continue to be important markets for most but not all African countries. Through its Investment Strategy the EU wants to support the private sector with up to € 44 billion through its External Investment Plan (plus € 4.1 billion from EU budget), but in most African countries the private sector remains weak or is heavily regulated by the state through formal and informal institutions. Because EU-Africa relations have historically been state-centric they thus rather continue to be shaped by the aid paradigm with the ACP partnership as its most symbolic indicator.

The ACP partnership between the EU and seventy-nine countries from sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific, reflecting primarily the colonial past, might no longer be appropriate for a number of reasons. The Cotonou Agreement expires in 2020 and will be renegotiated over the next two years, but both the EU and many African governments seem to stick to this framework[4], and at least during the recent EU-AU summit the ACP framework was not questioned, as it mainly secures a fixed amount of ODA to ACP countries. ODA has certainly lost in importance in some countries (especially with the silent end for direct budget aid), and the instrument is seen quite critically by African civil societies. But some African countries are facing such a structural shortage of own tax income that their public administrations and especially investments might be seriously weakened without ODA (and income earned through customs duties which is threatened by further trade liberalization).

The Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) created a bad reputation for Europe in Africa. Their failure was written on the wall as they tried to combine a WTO compatible trade-liberalization programme (with the assumption of long-term social and economic developmental benefits) with a developmental approach of 'Everything but Arms'. This practically meant distinguishing liberalization schemes for different categories of African countries while insisting on all of them belonging to free trade areas supposed to create joint regional markets. Regionalization was a radical departure from the logic of Lomé and Cotonou, where ACP countries had engaged in collective bargaining. Any post-Cotonou framework that might emerge in the next two years will have to deal with these new constellations.

1.3 Migration

The migration issue has not been pushed on the agenda by Africans, and, in stark contrast to peace and security or trade and development, it is also not Africa's issue, but of importance for some selected African countries, either because their regimes mostly produce refugees, or because they are located along the path to Europe. Migration links both continents with up to nine million African migrants living in Europe, which are estimated to contribute around € 21 billion per year in remittances to the social and economic development of their homelands. At the same time, the majority of African countries has long histories of migration which are in no way related to Europe and there are many more African refugees living within Africa than beyond. Uganda welcomed an estimated one million of refugees from South Sudan in 2015-16, making it the third largest host country of refugees worldwide (UNHCR 2016).

4 Bossuyt, Jean 2017: Can EU-Africa relations be deepened? A Perspective on Power Relations, Interests and Incentives. Maastricht: ECDPM Briefing Note No.97

In the field of migration, no joint strategy has emerged. While EU states have been clearly divided over the management of migration, EU strategy vis-à-vis Africa has been dictated by short-term political considerations and strong domestic political pressure in the wake of the massive influx of refugees in 2015. It has ignored established institutional channels of cooperation (such as the EU-ACP framework or the African Union) and opted for ad-hoc policy measures and direct negotiations with selected African partner countries within the Partnership Framework (including the Emergency Trust Fund) and the EU External Investment Plan. Through these measures the EU is trying to address the root causes of instability, forced displacement and irregular migration, but also compromising its stance on good governance and human rights, as well as its role as a normative power, by directly financing and politically recognizing some of the most autocratic regimes on the continent such as Eritrea or Sudan.

The attempts to push African governments into automatically receiving deported migrants has not been received well, especially as African governments compare the EU financial assistance offered with the potential of lost remittances. There is a changing perception of migrants in the political discourse of many African states. Migrants who were previously stigmatized as deserters of the nation, are now called 'development partners'. African and European elites have clearly diverging interests. The EU wants to prevent (irregular) migration but leaves little space for regular migration from Africa to Europe. Given the demographic dynamics of many African states and the surplus of semi-skilled or unskilled labor, migration pressure is likely to continue; at the same time, Europe's ageing societies will rely on the influx of (skilled) labor in the future.

2. Critical Parameters

Many variables will decide about the future of Europe's relations with Africa. We will in the following concentrate on Brexit, African Agency, and the role of China.

2.1 Europe after Brexit

In Euro-African relations, it has never been entirely clear whether the EU can speak for all member states, and both the United Kingdom and France maintained a strong influence both outside EU structures and within, that is, in shaping EU policies. The decision of UK to leave the EU is likely to have some consequences for EU-Africa relationships.

In financial terms, the UK provides a considerable part of EU budget, and thus also of the European Development Fund (EDF), through which, inter alia, the African Peace Facility is funded. Even if UK should decide to continue contributing to EDF after Brexit, the financial budgets for Africa will be more restricted.

The political attention of African actors will move towards the French-German couple, and with its various initiatives (Marshall-Plan, G-20 Compact) Germany during 2017 has certainly raised expectations about a more sustained engagement. Many African elites outside Francophone Africa remain suspicious about France's role in Africa, and, in the absence of the UK, will look for Germany to assume its role as a counterpart and guardian of a developmental and civilian approach to EU-African relations.

A final consequence of Brexit is the tendency of the EU to look inwards and the necessity to prioritize the crisis of European cohesion and tackling the questioning of core European values and norms in some member states. The rise of populist parties and the refugee

crisis reduces the policy space in Europe-Africa relationships, at least in the short term. Within the EU, foreign policy remains an intergovernmental rather than supranational issue, and thus necessarily follows the changing preferences within member states, limiting the possibilities for joint action.

2.2 Which Africa?

The question of who will be able to speak on Africa's behalf, is even more complicated. Africa's strong heterogeneity has even further increased over the last two decades, not only in the cultural sense, but also socially, politically, and with regard to economic growth and the quality of statehood. This growing heterogeneity makes it difficult to formulate joint positions, a point the EU had to realize when negotiating the EPAs.

The question of who is speaking for Africa and will do so in the future, is at the same time a question of agency. There is no European Union on the African side. The African Union had a remarkable development over the first 15 years of her existence, and has now embarked on an ambitious strategy of further institutional transformation. We should, however, be careful to compare the AU as a structure or organization to the EU, or to assume, that it will be the only or necessarily most important counterpart for Europeans in dealing with the manifold challenges that might arise in Africa. Within the multi-layered structure of African regionalism, it is far from certain that the AU commands and the so called Regional Economic Communities (RECs) are just the supporting pillars of the edifice. Within the AU and the RECs selected member states often dominate decision-making, but regional powers which could speak for the continent hardly exist. Many bureaucrats working within regional organizations have a clearer vision of continental integration but mostly lack the mandate to enforce policy decisions against the will of weak member states which are determined to defend their sovereignty. The AU faces many difficulties in formulating a single position, for example to coordinate voting in the UN Security Council. Where African countries manage to matter in global governance, it often seems to depend on more idiosyncratic factors such as leadership by individual statesmen (the late Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi at COP)

Africa's polities and societies are dynamic, but so far we have a lack of meaningful political representation in many countries, we face weak civil societies and weak private sectors. The joint commitment from the 2007 JAES for a 'people-centered partnership' has faced obvious restrictions, because of the limited trust that many regimes have in uncontrolled political participation of their populations. There is a stable core of democratic regimes, but it is not the majority which is, on the contrary, ruled by autocrats or somehow struggling to maintain some limited form of democracy or electoral regime. The EU should still work with African governments, but needs to be cautious about their capacity to fully understand the preferences of their citizens or to know 'what will work against migration'.

There are finally an estimated 9 million of Africans who live in Europe – they have a hard life in making their voices heard both in Africa-EU relations but also in the politics of their homelands.

2.3 What about China?

There have been many debates about what the rise of China means for Europe's role in Africa.[5] It clearly forces the EU to reconsider its interests and its role in Africa. While China's rise is impressive, including a massive migration of Chinese to Africa, Chinese willingness to invest in Africa will not replace Europe any time soon. No African countries have decided to kick out European donor organizations, but there is a growing assertiveness in many places which will force Europeans to better explain why their offers and deals are superior.

5 Grimm, Sven, and Christine Hackenesch 2017: China in Africa: What challenges for a reforming European Union development policy? Illustrations from country cases, Development Policy Review 35/4, 549-566.

China's challenge to Africa-Europe relations has, however, to be distinguished according to the different contexts outlined above.[6] We have a small group of liberal democratic countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. The elites within this group of liberal states remain partners of Europe. They will continue to strengthen multilateral policy-making but need fair deals in trade and development matters. In these countries China faces quite unusual situations such as being exposed in public media for labor conditions. In a second category of countries, the developmental autocrats (Ethiopia, Rwanda) already try to emulate China, sometimes with success. They are certainly willing to discuss with the EU about global governance but not about national governance (even though they are not ready to sell out to China anyways). It is in the remaining and third group of mostly autocratic countries with clientelist modes of policy-making, that often come together with highly unfavorable demographic structures, that the struggle continues both about further political transformation but also about geopolitical influence of Europe and China.

Given the fact that these countries still form a majority of AU member states, this struggle will also be decisive for the capacity of the African Union to serve as a more pro-active counterpart for the EU.

3. Conclusion

The Abidjan summit did not result in a major innovation in EU-Africa relations. This should not come as a surprise. More important is to use the momentum that has arisen from major changes on both the European and African side. The renegotiation of the Cotonou Agreement is a major window of opportunity to rethink creatively the established instruments and modes of cooperation, and to move forward from a traditional Cotonou-like donor-aid-relationship towards a more substantial partnership.

6 Hartmann, Christof, and Nele Noesselt 2017: 'Ende der Neutralität. Pekings Doktrin der Nichteinmischung gilt für Afrika nicht mehr, Internationale Politik 72/3, 107-113.

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