European Parliament

Towards a new EU strategy with Africa

A renewed focus on outreach

SUMMARY

Africa has been put at the core of the Commission's geopolitical work programme. In March 2020, the European Commission and the High Representative of the EU for Foreign and Security Policy proposed to build a new and comprehensive partnership with Africa. Although the proposal mainly builds on existing frameworks, its high profile and clear commitment to the African Union (AU) make it an important milestone in a partnership effort initiated several years ago.

In order to preserve its own economic and security interests in the face of increased geopolitical competition, the EU intends to continue to be an important player on the African continent. The EU and the AU have converging interests in a number of areas, such as the fight against climate change and the promotion of a sustainable, job-creating African economy. However, they still have to find common ground on migration, security management, and fundamental values.

The comprehensiveness of the proposed strategy is challenged by the gaps and overlaps of the current variable-geometry partnerships. The coronavirus outbreak will probably lead to a redefinition of the strategy's priorities even before it is adopted. At the same time, it shows the need to strengthen the links between the two continents in order to tackle the most urgent global issues.

The Chairperson of the African Union Commission and the President of the European Commission, 27 February 2020.

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Streamlining existing actions

Adopted on 29 January 2020, the European Commission's work programme for 2020 announced that the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 'will develop a new comprehensive strategy with Africa to boost economic relations, create jobs in both continents and deepen our partnership across the board'. The Commission and the High Representative took a first step 'towards a comprehensive strategy with Africa' on 9 March 2020 with the publication of a joint communication. As the title suggests, the joint communication is not a full-fledged strategy as such, but a proposal to jointly develop a strategy with Africa. It reflects the aspirations of Agenda 2063 – the African Union's vision for an 'integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa' – while at the same time presenting the axes on which the EU wishes the strategy to focus, namely through five partnerships:

1. partnership for a green transition and energy access;
2. partnership for digital transformation;
3. partnership for sustainable growth and jobs;
4. partnership for peace and governance;
5. partnership on migration and mobility.

The focus on these axes does not come as a surprise. They were already a part of the EU toolkit for its relations with Africa. The joint communication of 9 March clearly lists the existing programmes and frameworks that should serve as the foundation for the new strategy (see Table 1). The desire for a new approach – one that turns Africa into a privileged partner in the framework of multilateralism as opposed to a mere recipient of development aid – has existed for several years. The communication underlines that the strengthening of EU-Africa relations has risen to the top of the Commission's geopolitical agenda. The proposed partnerships bring together nine actions. A tenth action encourages the deepening of the EU-Africa alliance in international fora, with a view to strengthening 'the international rules-based order and the multilateral system, with the UN at its core.'

Table 1 – Main existing frameworks, programmes, and tools for EU-Africa relations; links to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Proposed actions	Frameworks and tools (EU, AU, others) – related SDGs
I. Partners for green transition and energy access	
Proposed Action 1 – partner with Africa to maximise the benefits of the green transition and minimise threats to the environment in full compliance with the Paris Agreement.	Nationally Determined Contributions of the Paris Agreement. SDGs 2 (zero hunger), 6 (clean water), 7 (affordable and clean energy), 8 (decent work and economic growth), 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure), 11 (sustainable cities and communities), 12 (responsible consumption and production), 13 (climate action), 14 (life below water), and 15 (life on land).
II. Partners for digital transformation	
Proposed Action 2 – partner with Africa to boost the continent's digital transformation.	SDGs 4 (quality education), 5 (gender equality), and 9.

Proposed actions	Frameworks and tools (EU, AU, others) – related SDGs
III. Partners for sustainable growth and jobs	
Proposed Action 3 – partner with Africa to a) substantially increase environmentally, socially, and financially sustainable investments that are resilient to the impacts of climate change; b) promote investment opportunities by scaling up the use of innovative financing mechanisms; and c) boost regional and continental economic integration, particularly through the African Continental Free Trade Agreement.	European Green Deal COM(2019)640; Africa-Europe Alliance for Sustainable Investment and Jobs COM(2018) 643; External Action Guarantee Economic Partnership Agreements and other EU trade agreements with African partner countries; African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA); SDGs 1 (no poverty), 2, 7, 8, and 9.
Proposed Action 4 – partner with Africa to attract investors by supporting African States in adopting policies and regulatory reforms that improve the business environment and investment climate, including a level-playing field for business.	EU External Investment Plan; Africa-Europe Alliance for Sustainable Investment and Jobs COM(2018) 643; Sustainable Business for Africa Platform; International Platform on Sustainable Finance; SDGs 1, 9, and16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions).
Proposed Action 5 – partner with Africa to rapidly enhance learning, knowledge and skills, research and innovation capacities, particularly for women and youth, protecting and improving social rights, and eradicating child labour.	SDGs 1, 3 (good health and well-being), 4, 5, 8, and 10 (reduced inequalities).
IV. Partners for peace and governance	
Proposed Action 6 – partner with Africa to adapt and deepen the EU's support to African peace efforts through a more structured and strategic cooperation, with a particular focus on regions where tensions and vulnerabilities are highest.	EU-Africa Peace Facility support for the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA); CSDP missions; EU-Africa Partnership on Peace and Security; EU-AU Memorandum of Understanding on Peace, Security, and Governance; AU-led 'Silencing the Guns' initiative; AU Peace Fund; SDGs 6 (peace, justice, and strong institutions).
Proposed Action 7 – partner with Africa on integrating good governance, democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and	AU-EU Human Rights Dialogue; AU-EU coordination on electoral observations; African Governance Architecture; SDGs 5, 10, and 16.

Proposed actions	Frameworks and tools (EU, AU, others) – related SDGs
gender equality in action and cooperation.	
Proposed Action 8 – secure resilience by linking humanitarian development, peace, and security interventions at all stages of the cycle of conflicts and crises.	EU Global Strategy and the European Consensus on Development (although not explicitly cited in this proposed action).
V. Partners on migration and mobility	
Proposed Action 9 – partner with Africa to ensure a balanced, coherent, and comprehensive approach to migration and mobility.	EU trust fund for Africa; EU partnership framework on migration for bilateral relations with partner countries; Joint Valletta action plan; Khartoum and Rabat processes; AU-EU-UN Trilateral Task Force on Migration; SDGs 1 and 10.
Working together to implement the partnership	
Proposed Action 10 – partner with Africa to strengthen the international rules-based order and the multilateral system, with the UN at its core.	Treaty on European Union; EU Global Strategy; European Consensus on Development; AU Agenda 2063; ACP-EU partnership and association agreements between the EU and North African countries; AU-EU Commission to Commission meetings; AU-EU Political, Peace and Security Committees; Sectoral Task Forces under the Africa-Europe Alliance; 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; Paris Agreement; SDG 17 (partnerships).

Table by EPRS, based on mentions in the text and footnotes of the Joint communication to the European Parliament and the Council – Towards a comprehensive Strategy with Africa, JOIN(2020) 4 final.

Building blocks and stumbling blocks

Business, trade, and jobs (proposed partnerships I, II and III)

EU and African leaders share the view that there is a need to promote an environment that enables business development. This appears as key for creating jobs at a pace commensurate with Africa's rapid population growth, although the extent to which this would reduce or increase migration to the EU is subject to debate. The Africa-Europe Alliance for Sustainable Investment and Jobs (COM(2018) 643), launched by the previous European Commission, aims to stimulate investment and facilitate business, by improving education, lifelong learning, political stability, and security. The European Commission forecasts that the Alliance could help create 10 million jobs by the end of 2023. The comprehensive strategy proposed in March 2020 also targets youth and women and clearly refers to the Alliance, which is itself supported by the external investment plan – designed to leverage public and private investment by providing technical assistance and new guarantees to

cover potential default by borrowers. The exact amount of funds available under each of these instruments depends on the adoption of the multiannual financial framework for the 2021-2027 period, still under negotiation.

The proposed strategy notably focuses on the digital transformation of Africa. The joint communication points out that 'a 10 % increase in digital coverage could result in an increase of over 1 % in African GDP'. Fostering digital infrastructure and enhancing digital literacy and skills are priorities of the 2017 'EU4Development' policy. The High-Level Forum, Africa-Europe 2018 Taking cooperation to the digital age, and the EU-AU Digital Economy Task Force, a platform of donors, civil society, and businesses involved in the digital sector, have highlighted the need for private investment in the digital area in the wake of the Africa-EU Alliance for Sustainable Development and Jobs. Improving the regulatory framework could help increase the market share of European IT businesses. The broader use of digital facilities also requires a secure legal environment, something that has deteriorated in recent years, as several African governments have shut down the internet amid social protests.

In line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its own commitment to climate neutrality by 2050, the EU encourages Africa to base its development on a green transition. Given that research is pivotal to this aim, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre has been working closely for a long time with African partners to help tackle vulnerability to climate change and harness their potential in sustainable energy resources. The EU also hopes to secure access to strategic minerals that are key to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. A partnership for a green transition also requires the reduction of negative spillover effects from EU countries into African countries. Such spillovers can negatively affect African countries' performance towards the achievement of the SDGs.

The EU considers trade liberalisation as a way to foster economic diversification and job creation in African countries. In compliance with WTO rules, the EU has undertaken to negotiate Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA) with regional groups of African countries. While this type of free trade agreement provides for safeguards, such as a phased-in liberalisation of trade on a sector-by-sector basis, EPAs have encountered strong resistance from some African countries, which consider that the conditions set out in the EPAs would make it difficult for them to develop competitive industry and to guarantee export duties on raw materials. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa warned that the African EPAs could have a negative impact on intra-African trade in that it could create competition between the sub-regions. The new proposed strategy relies on the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) to help bridge such gaps and enable trade negotiations on an equal footing.

Migration and security issues (proposed partnerships IV and V)

The EU is putting forward a migration control policy that responds to the concerns of EU citizens. For their part, African countries, especially those that reap economic benefits from emigration, criticise the growing impact of EU migration policy on development cooperation. However, since the Valletta action plan of 2015, a common approach has emerged to tackle the root causes of illegal migration, notably one based on converging interests in the fight against transnational criminal networks. Despite the Valletta action plan, the EU request to strengthen the fight against irregular migration could result in the criminalisation of assistance to foreign migrants in transit. Repressing people whose livelihood depends in part on revenues from trafficking and on the provision of goods and services to migrants risks further destabilising local economies, as was the case of Niger. Disagreements between the EU and African countries have also emerged in the context of the negotiations for a new agreement between the EU and African, Caribbean, and Pacific countries (ACP). While the EU wishes to introduce more effective provisions for the prevention of irregular migration and a binding legal obligation to readmit irregular migrants, the ACP negotiating mandate insists that return and readmission procedures to the countries of origin should be decided by each individual country.

The joint communication proposes to restructure EU cooperation in the field of African peace efforts by strengthening this cooperation in those parts of Africa where tensions are highest. This includes a review of existing regional strategies for the Horn of Africa, the Gulf of Guinea, and the Sahel, and the development of similar strategies for Libya and the Great Lakes. The AU welcomes EU aid on security matters provided it respects the principle of finding African solutions for African problems, which, in the words of the Chairperson of the AU, is 'the overriding theme in addressing conflicts on the continent'. This is a challenging aim, since the AU peace and security architecture is mainly financed by non-African donors, in particular the EU.

Multilateralism (proposed action 10)

Criticism of global governance and the role of multilateral institutions has gained momentum since populist leaders took office. Against this backdrop, the EU and the AU reaffirm their belief in the principle of multilateralism – enshrined both in the Treaty on European Union (Article 21) and the AU's Constitutive Act (Article 3). Both blocs have a common interest in seeking convergence in the United Nations (UN) and other international fora. They often act jointly in areas such as climate change – 2017 EU-AU communiqué on the Paris Agreement – and migration and security – the AU-EU-UN task-force on Libya. Trilateral meetings between the UN Secretary-General and the leaders of the AU and the European Commission highlight their 'joint commitment to promote an effective multilateral system'. The EU is also committed to promoting Africa's role in international relations by strengthening African regional organisations.

As concerns the proposed comprehensive strategy, Jutta Urpilainen, the Commissioner for International Partnerships, reiterated that the Commission will build on previous commitments and that the EU 'would like to work closer with [its] African partners on the multilateral rule-based system that is being called into question more and more'. However, in multilateral fora, the positions of African countries and the EU are not aligned on all issues. For example, the AU's backing for the withdrawal of some African states has challenged the role of the International Criminal Court. Many AU member states do not wish to recognise LGBTI rights as part of the 'common values' between the two blocs. In July 2016, all African members of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) either abstained or voted against a resolution establishing a mandate for an independent expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

One comprehensive strategy for diverse partners

The proposed EU strategy for Africa centres primarily on the African Union. It has focused on the structures put in place by the current Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES). The main lines of the proposed strategy were presented at the 10th AU-EU Commission to Commission meeting, held in Addis Ababa on 27 February 2020. It will only become a strategy *with* Africa as opposed to a strategy *for* Africa if it is endorsed by African countries at the next triennial AU-EU Summit, due to be held in Brussels in the autumn of 2020. African and EU heads of state or government might commit to a common strategy and related actions at the end of that Summit. However, declarations in the framework of JAES Summits are not binding, and their implementation depends primarily on each individual country.

Important aspects of EU relations with Africa fall outside the scope of the JAES. European Neighbourhood Policy towards north-African countries is implemented mainly through bilateral agreements. The EU also has relations with African regional economic communities, which have loose relations with the AU, and other blocs of countries, such as the G5 Sahel – in particular in the context of its integrated strategies for the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Gulf of Guinea. Political dialogues on migration involve the EU and African countries in various configurations, such as the Khartoum and Rabat processes, which also involve Norway and Switzerland. Sub-Saharan African countries and the EU are bound by the Cotonou Partnership Agreement (CPA), which also involves Caribbean and Pacific countries. The CPA has its own institutional set-up – where the AU is not represented as such – and its own source of funding – the European Development Fund. It covers

cooperation in a wide range of areas and has an elaborate mechanism for dialogue and dispute-settlement. A new ACP-EU partnership is currently being negotiated; the CPA was due to expire in February 2020, but its provisions have been extended until the end of 2020. The negotiating parties have agreed that the future partnership, often referred to as 'post-Cotonou', will comprise common principles (a framework agreement) and three distinct and binding regional pillars, including one for Africa. It is not yet clear how this African pillar will fit into the comprehensive strategy with Africa, as the African Member States of the ACP group did not follow up on the AU's will to negotiate an Africa-EU agreement outside the scope of the EU-ACP.

European Parliament

The European Parliament shows continuing interest in the EU's relations with African countries. In particular, a resolution adopted ahead of the 2017 Africa-EU summit calls for intensifying the political dialogue, focusing on areas very similar to the proposed partnerships of 2020 – economic development (via trade, economic partnership agreements), good governance (including human rights), human development (through public services covering basic needs, such as education, health, access to water and sanitation, gender equality, science, technology and innovation), security and the fight against terrorism, migration and mobility, and the environment (including climate change).

Parliament debated EU-Africa relations with Commissioner Jutta Urpilainen in plenary on 11 February 2020. On behalf of the Committee for Development (DEVE), Committee Chair Tomas Tobé supported the concept of a comprehensive strategy with Africa, provided this strategy includes a concrete plan, an analysis of possible negative and positive outcomes, and effective tools for monitoring and coordinating aid.

DEVE will draft a report in association with the Committees for External Affairs (AFET) and for International Trade (INTA). Parliament had invited the Commission to discuss the joint communication in plenary on 10 March. However, that debate had to be postponed, owing to the emergency measures aimed at stopping the spread of the coronavirus.

Outlook

Many commentators welcomed the EU proposal as a genuine initiative for more balanced relations. Most appreciate its commitment to the SDGs and its focus on human development. A number of NGOs have called for more involvement of African and European civil societies (including diasporas) and local governments in shaping and implementing the strategy.

Some observers note that the strategy is needed for the EU to face the 'geopolitical competition' coming from China, Russia, Turkey, India, and the post-Brexit United Kingdom, at a time when individual EU Member States have a growing interest in the African continent. The High Representative and the Commissioner for International Partnerships acknowledge that there is a need to focus more on 'what is distinct about the EU[: ...], human development and sustainability [and] the right of people to shape their own lives in freedom and with their rights protected'.

At the 10th AU-EU Commission to Commission meeting on 27 February 2020, the Chairperson of the AU Commission stressed that the EU should not impose its values, and take into account differences – citing 'international criminal justice, sexual orientation and identity, death penalty, centrality of the African Union in certain crises'. He added that 'only the recognition and acceptance of these differences and the language of openness will allow us to remove the obstacles that may hinder our cooperation'. The AU High Representative for Partnerships with the EU, Carlos Lopes, appointed in 2018, is critical of the EU policy for Africa, which may make it more difficult to find a common strategy.

However, the EU hopes for a common strategy by the end of 2020, 'a pivotal year in the relationship between Africa and the European Union'. The European Council had planned to hold a strategic

debate on the common strategy in June. EU Heads of State or Government should seek to adopt a common position before the AU-EU Summit – due to take place in Brussels in autumn 2020. However, the coronavirus outbreak has delayed the AU-EU ministerial meeting which was scheduled in May to prepare for the Summit. More importantly, the priorities and content of the proposed partnerships might be reconsidered in the wake of the emergency measures that are hitting both the EU and African economies. Public health in particular will probably be given much more attention in the new proposal. Likewise, measures to fight the Covid-19 pandemic and to prevent future ones will give new impetus to partnerships in areas such as the fight against climate change and the promotion of the digital transformation. In short, the Covid-19 outbreak has demonstrated the need for an in-depth rethinking of the EU-Africa relationship.

MAIN REFERENCE

European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council – Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa, JOIN(2020) 4 final (and related documentation).

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