

The Relationship of the EU with Africa

Great Expectations: The EU-Africa Partnership against the Backdrop of Covid-19

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2020 started as a year of great ambitions for the EU-Africa partnership, which was to be the big arena for the von der Leyen Commission to demonstrate its “geopolitical” credentials. Since taking office in December 2019, the new European leadership had pursued an ambitious diplomatic agenda vis-a-vis Addis Ababa and African states, and on 9 March, as much of Europe was closing down in response to the coronavirus, the European Commission released the communication, “Towards a comprehensive Strategy with Africa.” A planned EU-Africa Summit in October 2020 has not been cancelled. If it goes ahead, it is likely to be very different, both in format and focus.

With Europe caught up in responding to the health and economic crises at home, and Africa facing already devastating economic consequences, the basis of the relationship has shifted. With the onset of Covid-19, the geopolitical uncertainty and challenges that had been growing for years, were in no way mitigated, but took on new forms, raising the stakes when it comes to the European response. This crisis has also provoked further questions about the shape of the current multilateral order, the current void of global leadership and the potential for new forms of multilateral cooperation to emerge.

In Africa many processes are on hold or will be affected moving forward. Economic integration is being slowed down by border closures and other con-

tainment measures, while the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) will not start on 1 July as originally planned. Furthermore, African governments, focused on preventing the virus overwhelming their fragile health systems and causing economic chaos, may have less interest in partnering with the EU in the immediate future beyond immediate crisis response.

It is likely that in the short term the EU-Africa partnership will be dominated by questions of supporting healthcare systems, ensuring universal access to any eventual cure or vaccine, and efforts to ease the economic burden on African countries, alongside traditional concerns about migration and security on the European side. But the growing debates that the Covid-19 crisis have provoked – about how to sufficiently support health systems, the scale of European integration and the kind of globalization the continent should pursue – will also undoubtedly have an important impact on the EU-Africa relationship.

Beyond immediate internal crisis management, the EU will have to consider how it integrates its external relations into its recovery plans, particularly those relating to Africa. It should not retreat to a security first approach to Africa, nor stick to an excessively rigid adherence to its March Africa strategy, but must be ready to address the new challenges and possibilities that will arise in the aftermath of Covid-19.

Before Covid-19

Before Covid-19, the new “Geopolitical Commission” had a clear programme for its five years in of-

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face, which has been adapted but not abandoned in the face of Covid-19; a programme that was geopolitical insofar as it centred on building European “strategic autonomy” in key areas such as defence and technology; on demonstrating global leadership in the green transition and building an innovative green and technologically savvy economy; on protecting and strengthening the rules-based international order where possible; and on emphasizing the linkages between the internal and external dimensions of policies across every European Commission portfolio, and thus mainstreaming foreign policy across the Commission (von der Leyen, 2019, Teevan, 2019).

Conditionality and programmes around democracy and human rights have largely failed in the past, and China’s success in Africa is partly to do with the fact that it focuses on business and not on values

A core foreign policy goal of the EU’s geopolitical ambitions was a renewed partnership with Africa, which sought to give new steam to the relationship with the African Union and its members. This focus on Africa built on a growing understanding that tackling underlying security and migration challenges would require a more holistic response that responded to underlying economic, political and social challenges; a sense of the need to respond to Europe’s loss of influence amidst the growing number of external actors showing an interest in Africa, notably by highlighting combined European investment and encouraging further investment; and an understanding of the opportunities for European businesses that might arise from supporting Africa’s adoption and implementation of the AfCFTA. In addition, as the Trump Presidency has undermined the multilateral system, the EU has become increasingly aware of its need for new allies, and of the potential strength of an EU-AU alliance at multilateral fora (Teevan & Sherriff, 2019).

Having made clear her aims for the partnership with Africa before taking office, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen chose Addis Ababa for her first trip outside of Europe, after taking office in December 2019. Council President Charles Michel also visited Addis Ababa for the African Union Summit in early February, and 20 Commissioners joined von der Leyen for a second trip in late February to discuss joint priorities with their counterparts at the African Union Commission. This alone was seen as a sign of new political momentum in a partnership that was historically dominated by the Directorate General for Development Cooperation from the European institutions side. The EU’s Africa Strategy on 9 March was supposed to provide the basis for the EU’s ongoing negotiation with the AU and African leaders over the coming months.

The Africa Strategy sought to cover all aspects of EU-Africa relations, resulting in a document that was somewhat overloaded, yet still constituted a strong statement of intent from the EU institutions. Amongst its key elements were five proposed “partnerships”; the green transition and energy access; digitalization; sustainable jobs and growth; peace and governance; and migration and mobility. Most of these themes were not particularly new, although the overall rhetoric and indeed the organization of the strategy demonstrated certain trends that have been emerging in recent years, but more clearly conceptualized under this Commission. These include: placing the EU Commission’s overarching priorities, the climate and digitalization, upfront as key themes for the partnership; a strong emphasis on the combined investments of EU Member States, making the EU the principle source of investment in Africa, and a focus on infrastructure, leveraging private investment in Africa and supporting the AfCFTA; and the move away from including democracy, rule of law and human rights as a separate pillar, instead subsuming these under the peace and governance heading. This reflects both a sense that conditionality and programmes around democracy and human rights have largely failed in the past, and that China’s success in Africa is partly to do with the fact that it focuses on business and not on values (European Commission & HRVP, 2020a; Medinilla & Teevan, 2020).

Alongside the continent-to-continent approach, the EU continued to negotiate with the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries to replace the Co-

tonou agreement, which they had hoped to do by April 2020. This agreement was supposed to frame EU cooperation with Sub-Saharan African countries beginning in 2021 (European Council, 2020). North African countries, whose more close-knit bilateral partnerships with Europe are covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy, showed little interest in participating in it. The result was that the process sat strangely with the continent-to-continent approach increasingly evident in other areas of EU policy (Medinilla & Bossuyt, 2018; de Groof et al., 2019). The von der Leyen Commission's strong focus on Africa appeared to be well received in Addis Ababa and other African capitals, but it was still unclear whether all of the rhetoric would lead to a real change in direction in EU-Africa relations. The EU's Africa Strategy was too dense in ideas and too loose in specific plans to really signal very much about the direction of travel. Some reports from European and African sources suggested that the Commission-to-Commission meeting in February 2020 was relatively positive. However, some European officials complained that the AU did not appear to have a clear strategy in terms of what it wanted from Europe; an old complaint that seems to reflect an expectation that the AU should follow the same *modus operandi* as the EU. Ultimately, it is impossible to say how EU-Africa dynamics would have played out had Covid-19 not fundamentally changed the political, economic and societal changes facing both continents.

Covid-19, Geopolitics & Europe's Response

Before Covid-19, the EU was trying to position itself in a global race for green transition, technological innovation and investment in Africa. Covid-19 has redrawn the debate, adding economic recovery, epidemic responses, debt relief, investments in biotech and mask diplomacy as new fields for global competition. Like much of the world, Covid-19 caught the EU by surprise, sending it into renewed problem solving mode on the domestic front, and raising new difficulties for its geopolitical aspirations. And yet the geopolitical problems Europe faces have not gone away. Indeed, Covid-19 has perhaps amplified the EU's sense of being caught between the US and China; of needing new allies in order to uphold some kind of multilateral coopera-

tion; of being overly dependent on other global powers for medical supplies and thus needing to develop its economic "sovereignty."

As the scale of the Covid-19 outbreak across Europe became apparent in March 2020, the virus swiftly began to surpass all other concerns, with the result that in the early weeks there was little real discussion or follow-up on the EU's Africa strategy. Meanwhile, although to date Africa has not faced an outbreak on the scale that Europe has seen, the continent has struggled to prepare its ill-prepared health systems for the virus' arrival. Moreover, the scale of the economic challenges facing the continent are immense and risk rolling back many years of progress on development goals, causing thousands to fall below the poverty line. Emerging and developing economies saw capital outflows of around \$100 billion by the beginning of April, with both exports and remittances falling massively as lockdowns took hold across much of the developed world, while oil and other commodity producers faced the effects of falling prices (Georgieva, 2020; Bisong et al., 2020). The World Bank projected that economic growth will decline to between -2.1 and -5.1% in 2020 from 2.4% in 2019, leading to the first African recession in 25 years (World Bank, 2020).

As Europe struggled to respond coherently to the internal challenges posed by the virus, responding largely in a piecemeal and sometimes nationalistic manner, there was little real space for external action. It was rather China, having by March gained control over its own outbreak, that became increasingly visible on the world stage, supplying PPE to African countries, but also to a number of EU Member States in well-promoted acts of "mask diplomacy" (Tadesse, 2020; Brattberg & Le Corre, 2020). Others, such as Russia, Turkey and even Cuba, also managed to provide medical supplies or doctors to different countries, while Europe largely focused inwards (Krasnyak, 2020; Pitel, 2020; Phillips & Giuffrida, 2020). Europe's lack of preparedness, combined with the apparent generosity of other global and regional actors, appeared to suggest the EU had surrendered any claim to leadership in responding to the crisis.

However, on 8 April, the EU sought to respond decisively and show solidarity with Africa and the rest of the world, notably through the announcement of the "Team Europe" package of €15.6 billion from the EU

institutions (and up to €20 billion including Member States' contributions) to support global efforts to deal with the virus (Commission & HRVP, 2020b; EEAS, 2020a). It should be noted that this package, which includes €3.25 billion in funds for Africa (of which €1.19 billion is for North Africa) (European Commission, 2020a) is made up of reallocated and not new funds. While still considerably more than any other global power has announced, it amounts to relatively small grants for most countries and is small in comparison with the liquidity needed by many African countries to reinforce their health systems and deal with the economic consequences of the crisis.

Not surprisingly, it is in the neighbourhood that the EU has acted most decisively, announcing €3.07 billion in grants for the whole neighbourhood, as well as €3 billion in macro-financial assistance that was made available to Tunisia, Jordan and several countries in the Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries (Council of the EU, 2020). Tunisia was thus the one African country that received truly significant support, receiving €250 million in budget support, a tripling in funds for an ongoing healthcare programme from €20 million to €60 million, and €600 in concessional loans (Bergamini, 2020; EEAS, 2020b).

Perhaps more importantly in terms of supporting Africa, the EU has sought to demonstrate solidarity by supporting debt relief for developing countries, and by showing leadership in raising funds to guarantee global access to any potential vaccine. Ahead of the 15 April G20, France notably worked with South Africa and the African Union to advocate for a debt moratorium and increased liquidity for developing countries, while a number of key EU and member state leaders joined African leaders in a Financial Times letter calling for a debt moratorium, a new allocation of special drawing rights (SDRs) at the IMF and global preparation for the fair distribution of vaccines and therapeutics (Mallet & Khalaf, 2020; Ahmed et al, 2020).

The EU Commission also showed an awareness of the need for global solutions and multilateral leadership at the Global Pledging Conference on 4 May, when it and many of its members spoke about a potential vaccine and therapeutics as global public goods in stark contrast with the US' "America First" approach and China's slower response on this topic (European Commission, 2020b). Similarly, the EU led on drafting a resolution reaffirming

support for collective action and equal access ahead of the World Health Assembly (World Health Assembly, 2020).

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Thus, despite a slow initial response to the global challenges posed by Covid-19, the EU and its Member States have begun to respond in a more concerted and effective manner to some of the immediate challenges that the virus poses globally and notably for Europe's partners in Africa.

Shifting Dynamics

The crisis is causing many fundamental changes in the political and economic landscapes in Europe and Africa, and ultimately pushing integration dynamics and common responses on both continents in new directions. The EU struggled to respond collectively to the health crisis, but is slowly coming together around a shared recovery package, thereby potentially spurring greater European integration. The AU played an important role in crisis management on the continent and in advocacy at international fora, but with the postponement of the 1 July start-date of the AfCFTA, the crisis has also slowed down the African integration agenda for the time being (Adeshokan, 2020; Medinilla et al., 2020).

Despite the EU's rocky start in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis and the sometimes acrimonious language exchanged between political actors in northern and southern EU Member States, the recovery fund and Merkel's hint at further Treaty changes suggest that the EU institutions may ultimately emerge from the crisis strengthened (European Commission, 2020c; Goßner, 2020), although there is still a long way to go. The branding of the EU's external support

as “Team Europe,” although not yet fully fleshed out and perhaps lacking buy-in from some Member States, shows an awareness of the EU’s need to better brand and communicate its joint actions in the world. The EU Commission is also seeking to use the recovery as an opportunity to develop the Union’s image as a champion of green transition, but there are still many questions about the degree of buy-in of Member States, and about the spillover effects this would have on the EU’s partners, notably in Africa.

The AU proved itself an effective crisis manager during these past months, leveraging partnerships, particularly with China, to boost preparedness and testing, and as a result building up its own legitimacy. Leadership arrangements between institutions and Member States have evolved, and the crisis appears to have strengthened the foreign policy mandate of the AU Bureau led by South African President Cyril Ramaphosa. The impact of this crisis diplomacy, by demonstrating the value of common action, may have a lasting effect on the continent’s foreign policy in years to come. A growing number of voices are calling for the AfCFTA to be at the heart of African recovery (African Union Commission et al., 2020; Tempest et al, 2020; Gopaladas, 2020), but ultimately its implementation will be a gradual and negotiated process, meaning that deep economic integration is still a long-term goal. In the short term, the continent’s needs remain great and will require adherence to common action at the continental level and a sustained response from the international community.

Moving Forward

All this has a profound effect on the relations between the EU and Africa, and should lead to a new way of doing business. The EU and AU should build on the leadership networks and momentum created by the management of the COVID crisis to get the AU-EU process back on track. Moving forward, the process should focus less on strategies and procedure, and more on negotiating how to progress on a few clear priority areas. This should include developing a new joint vision on health, negotiating a way forward on recovery, investments and the place of the green agenda in the partnership, and finding

ways to work together at multilateral fora where mutually beneficial.

The Covid-19 crisis brings public health back with a vengeance. Despite the length and level of detail of the EU’s Africa Strategy in March, health was a very limited element in it, while pandemics were not even mentioned. After Covid-19, health can no longer be a side note, but instead will need to be one of the key topics for EU-Africa cooperation in the near future and potentially even beyond. The EU’s early support for making any vaccine or therapeutics available as a global public good was a smart move, but will now need to be followed up with policies and actions so that this can become a reality (Mazzucato & Torreele, 2020).

The EU’s plan to make Europe a green champion through the adoption of the Green Deal and a strong focus on technology and innovation appears to still be on track, and indeed is featured strongly in the European Recovery Plan, despite murmurs from some Member States that now might not be the time. The EU Commission’s latest proposals for the seven-year Multiannual Financial Framework do show an awareness of the need to follow up on the “Team Europe” package, including a proposed €15.5-billion increase for European global action compared with previous proposals, and stating: “The EU must continue demonstrating solidarity with its partners across the world in the fight against COVID-19.” However, the EU will also need to fully evaluate and respond to the potentially negative impact that its green agenda might have on Africa and other developing countries, including the potential barrier that the proposed carbon border tax might pose for African exports.

The crisis also adds fuel to the fire of the debate on the limits of globalization and has led to a bubbling of debate on the need to shorten and diversify supply chains. A growing chorus of European politicians have highlighted Europe’s dependency on China for essential medical supplies and called for value chains to be brought closer to home. Some have gone as far as to suggest relocating European supply chains to the neighbourhood and Africa (Martin, 2020; Borrell, 2020; Mallet & Khalaf, 2020). Such moves could lead to growing economic integration between the two continents in the coming years. The EU and its Member States should continue to seek to support private investment on the continent; not

just through existing investment leverage measures, but also by looking to improve private sector knowledge of the opportunities available in different African countries through the development of knowledge hubs, business associations and delegations. The AU's focus on the implementation of the AfCFTA has been delayed at least in the short run, but just as Covid-19 poses questions for the EU's value chains, it similarly increases the importance for African countries to develop intra-African value chains and increase trade with neighbouring countries. Multiple African policymakers, business leaders and think tanks have stressed that implementing the AfCFTA is essential to strengthen African economies in the aftermath of Covid-19. This will be further complicated by the liquidity problems faced by many African countries, which may make it more difficult for them to remove import tariffs and certainly to finance major infrastructure. The EU had already planned to increase its support for financing infrastructure to assist the AfCFTA, but should also set about starting a dialogue with the AU on how it can help the AfCFTA to get back on track.

Although the timing is difficult, the EU should build on the lessons learned from this crisis to begin to think about how to respond to the climate crisis - not just domestically but on a global scale

Although the timing is difficult, the EU should build on the lessons learned from this crisis to begin to think about how to respond to the climate crisis – not just domestically but on a global scale. The crisis has clearly demonstrated the importance of collective action on global public goods (Rodrik, 2020). This momentum, which is clearly evidenced by the level of support for the World Health Assembly resolution, drafted by the EU and supported by the African states and China – and even by the US' unwillingness to block that resolution – should be built on in order to develop a similar momentum around the climate as a global public good. The EU should not

assume common interests, but rather come to the negotiating table with a truly open mind, ready to negotiate across thematic areas so as to reach a truly equitable and sustainable solution for Africa, whilst also showing a willingness to work trilaterally with China to advance in this area.

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