

The Relationship of the EU with Africa

Ten Reasons Why the Maghreb Pivots to Africa

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Geographically, the Maghreb is an integral part of the African continent. Historically, the Sahara has been a space through which goods, ideas, beliefs and people have circulated in both directions. And yet, very often, the countries and societies from the Maghreb have given priority to other geographic or cultural identities (Arab, Mediterranean and Muslim) rather than perceiving themselves as part of the African polity. This is changing, at least when it comes to economic cooperation and foreign policy.¹ The Maghreb countries are pivoting to Africa and this is a deliberate (geo)political choice. Why now? Is this the result of transformations in the rest of the continent or does it reflect changing priorities in the Maghreb capitals? To what extent does this evolution mirror the competitive or conflicting dynamics that have characterized intra-Maghreb relations since the independences? Do external factors favour this foreign policy reorientation? And to what extent is this altering the position of the Maghreb in global affairs? In order to provide some answers to those questions, this article sheds light on a preliminary list of ten reasons – more could surely be added – explaining why the Maghreb is looking south.

1. Africa's Relative Weight

In 2020, there are an estimated 1.3 billion people living in Africa, representing 17% of the world's population. By 2050, the UN predicts this number may have almost doubled (2.5 billion), which means that one out of four people in the world would be living in an African country. This demographic growth will be accompanied by rapid economic growth too. In 2011, the World Bank stated that Africa was on the brink of an economic take-off, much like China was 30 years earlier.² Many international financial organizations now concur that Africa's weight in the world's economy will only grow, although the speed and robustness of the growth will vary from one country to another. A significant part of this growth will occur in urban areas. In fact, 80% of the population growth is expected to happen in urban areas; already by 2025, there will be more than 100 African cities with over a million inhabitants. This rapid transformation requires major investments and development projects and this process is likely to translate into rapid increases in productivity.

This growth – demographically and economically – is changing Africa's position in world affairs. Not only is the rest of the world paying more attention to Africa, but African voices are more influential. Countries in North Africa that had occasionally neglected this continental dimension are well aware that posi-

¹ See ABDERRAHIM, Tasnim and AGGAD, Faten. "Starting afresh: The Maghreb's relations with sub-Saharan Africa," *ECDPM Discussion Paper*, 225. ECDPM, 2018. Available online: <https://ecdpm.org/wp-content/uploads/DP-225-Starting-afresh-Maghreb-relations-sub-Saharan-Africa-ECDPM-Apr-2018.pdf>; SOLER I LECHA, Eduard. "Los países del Magreb pivotan hacia África... y no son los únicos," *Anuario Internacional CIDOB 2019*, pp. 157-164. Available online: www.cidob.org/ca/articulos/anuario_internacional_cidob/2019/los_paises_del_magreb_pivotan_hacia_africa_y_no_son_los_unicos; and DWORKIN, Anthony. "A return to Africa: Why North African states are looking south," *ECFR Policy Brief*, 2020. Available online: www.ecfr.eu/page/-/a_return_to_africa_why_north_african_states_are_looking_south.pdf

² WORLD BANK *Africa's future and the World Bank's support to it: Africa regional strategy*, 2011. Available online: <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/393441468202137255/africas-future-and-the-world-banks-support-to-it-africa-regional-strategy>, p. 2.

tioning themselves as an integral part of this new African reality increases their individual economic and political attractiveness for external partners or investors.

2. A Continent of Opportunities

Even if Africa still faces many challenges in the form of protracted conflicts, rampant inequalities or humanitarian crises, it is increasingly seen as a continent of burgeoning opportunities. In other words, Africa is “the place to be,” considered an investment with a high expected return. This assessment is partly based on the fact that some of the fastest-growing economies in the world are on this continent. Before COVID-19, international financial institutions expected the growth of countries such as Ethiopia, Rwanda, Senegal, Ghana, Tanzania and Ivory Coast to rise above 6%. More broadly, the rise of new African middle classes, very dynamic civil societies and charismatic leaderships at national and local levels has contributed to generating a wave of afro-optimism that is not only spreading through Africa, but is also encouraging international partners to change pre-existing perceptions about the continent.³

Some of the countries in the Maghreb were among the first ones to frame Africa as an opportunity rather than a risk. Morocco is, perhaps, the most evident example. In that respect, one of the most interesting aspects of Morocco’s African policy is the leading role of its business sector. Large conglomerates such as the *Office Chérifien des Phosphates* (OCP), technological companies such as Maroc Telecom, the three largest banks – Attijariwafa Bank (AwB), Banque Populaire (BP) and Banque Marocaine du Commerce Extérieur (BMCE) –, and also many small and medium enterprises have all consistently increased their presence in Africa’s markets.⁴ Other countries in the Maghreb – namely Tunisia – seem interested in replicating Morocco’s perceived success.

3. A Regionalist Momentum

Another facet of this afro-optimism are the prospects for regional cooperation. Politically, the African Union (AU) is becoming increasingly relevant as a positive force delivering African solutions. Economically, the most relevant development was the signing in 2018 of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA). Its full implementation – initially foreseen for July 2020 – has momentarily been delayed due to the pandemic, but the technical works are expected to resume soon. The constitution of the pan-African free trade area is expected to very significantly boost intra-African trade (from today’s 13% to 25% or more) and, consequently, will increase the attractiveness of Africa for international investors.⁵ In parallel, some parts of the continent are reinforcing subregional cooperative mechanisms when it comes to political dialogue, security provisions and monetary and trade integration. A classic example of this subregional dynamism is that of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which is made up of 15 members, including Nigeria, the largest African economy and also the most populated country on the continent.

Some Maghreb countries have traditionally played a major role in the development of African regionalism. Libya, under Gaddafi’s rule, was one of the driving forces in the transformation of the old Organization of African Unity into the AU in 2002. Algeria, a country that projected itself as an anti-colonial power once it regained its independence in 1962, also developed a robust Africa policy and has consistently played a major role in the AU’s Peace and Security Council. Tunisia temporarily hosted the headquarters of the African Development Bank (from 2003 and 2014), and even though it went back to Abidjan – it had left the Ivory Coast due to the deterioration of the political and security conditions there – some central services are still operating from Tunis. Morocco, instead, had disengaged from African regionalism in 1984, quitting the Or-

³ The change of narrative regarding Africa’s future is well illustrated by the front page of *The Economist* in December 2011 (African Rising – The hopeful continent), in sharp contrast to the one published 11 years earlier depicting the continent as a “hopeless” case.

⁴ OUKESSOU, Taoufik et al. *Développement des entreprises marocaines en Afrique: réalité et perspective*, Ministère de l’Économie et des Finances du Maroc et Agence Française de Développement, 2018. Available online: www.finances.gov.ma/Etude/depi/2018/D%C3%A9veloppement_des_entreprises_marocaine_en_Afrique.pdf

⁵ Although estimates substantially vary depending on the sources and time frame, we are referring here to this 25% goal, as stated in the framework of the Africa-EU partnership. See: <https://africa-eu-partnership.org/en/afcfta>

ganization of African Unity in retaliation for the admission of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) as a full member.

The constitution of the pan-African free trade area is expected to very significantly boost intra-African trade and will increase the continent's attractiveness for international investors

As time went by, it became clearer that the Moroccan strategy had failed. Not only did it increase the influence of the SADR and Algeria in African affairs, but also it was incompatible with Morocco's plans to increase its economic, political and social presence across the continent. Thus, after intense negotiations, Morocco rejoined the AU in 2017, even though this meant agreeing to form part of an organization that had the SADR as one of its members. As part of the same strategy, Morocco submitted its application for membership to the ECOWAS in 2017. Although West African countries are interested in maintaining or even reinforcing bilateral relations with Morocco, neither the members of this organization, nor its economic agents, are enthusiastic about the prospect of Morocco becoming part of the sub-regional bloc, as it is seen as a disruptive economic competitor, and because it could significantly alter the existing power structure.⁶

4. Migration Flows

Regarding international migration, the position of the Maghreb has significantly changed in the last two decades. Once countries of emigration, they have become transit and destination countries for sub-Saharan African migrants. In the past, it used to be Libya that attracted most African migrants in the

region, but this was abruptly interrupted with the 2011 war. Nowadays Morocco is the most popular destination, with 700,000 sub-Saharan migrants living in this country, many in an irregular situation.⁷ This has profound implications for societal dynamics all across the Maghreb: straining social protection systems, increasing the diversity of the respective societies and re-energizing the debate on the prevalence of racism and discrimination at a time when the #BlackLivesMatter movement has placed this topic at the centre of the global conversation. The pressure to control its southern borders has consequences for local communities that are heavily dependent on smuggling activities. Migration has altered the way Maghreb countries relate not only with other countries in Africa, but also with international partners, mainly with the European Union and its Member States. For instance, the fact that Mauritania has become a transit area for West African migrants travelling north or trying to reach the Canary Islands has changed the value and content of bilateral relations with Spain. Migration – or, more precisely, human smuggling – is also one of the main priorities of European countries and institutions in Libya. Morocco and Tunisia have also referred to their cooperation on migration, border control and maritime surveillance, as an argument to increase the financial and technical support received by European institutions and neighbouring EU countries. This also has an EU-African dimension dating back to the year 2006. That year, coinciding with an increase in irregular migration along the so-called Western route, Morocco promoted what is still known as the Rabat Process, a platform for bi-regional cooperation on migration, which also became a foreign policy tool for improving Morocco's bilateral relations with a significant number of the participants in this dialogue.

5. The Maghreb-Sahel Insecurity Nexus

The reasons why the Sahel has gained prominence on the international agenda are well-known: fragile

⁶ MUNSHI, Neil. "Morocco's Ecowas bid sparks African fear and suspicion," *Financial Times*, 24 January, 2020.

⁷ For further details and updated data on sub-Saharan migration to Morocco, see, for instance, EL GHAZOUANI, Driss. "A Growing Destination for Sub-Saharan Africans, Morocco Wrestles with Immigrant Integration," Migration Policy Institute, 2019. Available online: www.migrationpolicy.org/article/growing-destination-sub-saharan-africans-morocco

states, underdevelopment, environmental degradation, political destabilization, the multiplication of illegal trafficking routes, the presence of various criminal and terrorist groups with international connections and the realization that this region is becoming Europe's southern border.⁸ The 2012 crisis in Mali was an eye-opener for many international players but, due to their proximity, the countries of the Maghreb had known for a long time about the fragility of those countries and the multiple risks emanating from this region. In fact, when it comes to security dynamics it has become increasingly difficult to disentangle the Maghreb from its southern neighbours to the extent that experts and members of the policy community have depicted a Maghreb-Sahel insecurity nexus.⁹

African countries are increasingly concerned by the idea of Libya becoming a scenario where non-African powers compete for influence

This nexus has particular significance for Mauritania, as it is both a country from the Maghreb and the Sahel. For Algeria, the Sahel has been a major foreign policy and security priority, and Algiers has traditionally played an influential political role in Mali and, more specifically, in the Tuareg issue. One of the recent novelties is the proposed amendment of the Algerian constitution to allow the Algerian army to participate in missions outside its borders, which raised the question of whether Algeria was getting ready to become a relevant security actor in its im-

mediate neighbourhood.¹⁰ Morocco, well aware of the increased importance of the Sahel for its international partners, and particularly for France, also started to devote more attention to it. In that respect, Rabat has shown support for the G5 – the institutional mechanism created in 2014 by Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad to face the security and development challenges of the region – which is strongly supported by France, the United States and other global actors. Morocco also backed the French intervention in Mali, although was not formally engaged in it.

6. The African Dimension of the Libyan Crisis

As explained above, Libya used to play an active role in African affairs and even aspired to being perceived by its fellow African countries, as well as by external actors, as a regional power.¹¹ This was Gaddafi's highly personalistic foreign policy priority. The man who crowned himself as "king of kings" promoted the re-founding of the African Union and invested large amounts of money in several countries on the continent. Some of Gaddafi's African friends, such as Uganda's President, Yoweri Museveni, explicitly opposed the international intervention in 2011, and the AU unsuccessfully tried to stop the conflict. The AU did launch a last-ditch mediation effort through a panel of African leaders, chaired by the Mauritanian President, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. This emergency initiative presented a road map that included the distribution of humanitarian aid and dialogue between the Libyan parties, and reiterated the need for an end to all hostilities. However, it fell on deaf ears.¹² At that time, the African Union was not seen by the opponents of the Gaddafi regime as an honest broker. This also coincided with episodes

⁸ GHANEM-YAZBECH, Dalia (ed.). "The Sahel: Europe's African Borders," *EuroMeSCo Joint Policy Study*, n. 8, 2018. Available online: www.euromesco.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/EuroMeSCo-Joint-Policy-Study-8_The_Sahel_Europe_African_Border.pdf

⁹ For a broader discussion, see Luis MARTINEZ and Rasmus A. BOSERUP "Beyond Western Sahara, the Sahel-Maghreb Axis Looms Large." In: OJEDA-GARCIA R., FERNÁNDEZ-MOLINA I., VEGUILLA V. (eds) *Global, Regional and Local Dimensions of Western Sahara's Protracted Decolonization*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2017; and ROUSSELIER, Jacques. "The Forgotten Maghreb – Sahel Nexus" *Sada*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 31 October, 2017. Available online: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/74588>. Regarding the terrorist threat, see, for instance, LOUNNAS, Djallil. "Jihadist Groups in North Africa and the Sahel: Between Disintegration, Reconfiguration and Resilience," *MENARA Working Paper*. n. 16. <http://menara.iai.it/portfolio-items/jihadist-groups-in-north-africa-and-the-sahel-between-disintegration-reconfiguration-and-resilience/>

¹⁰ GHANEM, Dalia. "Why is Algeria breaking with half a century of non-interference?" *Middle East Eye*, 19 May 2020.

¹¹ STURMAN, Kathryn. The Rise of Libya as a Regional Player, *African Security Review*, 12:2, 109-112, 2003 DOI: [10.1080/10246029.2003.9627226](https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2003.9627226)

¹² For further details on this road map and also on the AU's role and position during the Libyan crisis see Alex de Waal (2013), "African roles in the Libyan conflict of 2011". *International Affairs*, 89: 365-379. doi:[10.1111/1468-2346.12022](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12022)

of racism against black citizens and foreigners in rebel-controlled areas.

As a result of this protracted instability, Libya has ceased to be an African actor, becoming instead an African problem. Its African neighbours are mainly concerned about the risk of contagion and how the threats are spilling over to the other side of the border. African countries are increasingly concerned by the idea of Libya becoming a scenario where non-African powers, such as the Gulf countries, Turkey, Russia and some EU members, compete for influence and consequently provide the combatants with political, military or financial support.

Libya's neighbours realized many years ago that once weapons enter Libya they can easily be smuggled across the border.¹³ The 2012 crisis in Mali was certainly amplified by the availability of weapons and fighters coming from Libya. Additionally, some of the armed groups that control parts of the Libyan territory, such as the Tuareg or Tubu militias in the south of the country, have strong ties across the border, thus reinforcing the idea that the evolution of this conflict has direct implications for its southern neighbours.¹⁴ The displacement of the fighting to the south of the country in 2019, as part of Haftar's failed offensive to seize Tripoli, only reinforced the perception that conflict could spill over Libya's southern borders. One aspect that Maghrebi and sub-Saharan Africans share is an acute perception of vulnerability to the threats emanating from Libya. They regret that they are given too small a role in the attempt to put an end to this conflict, in comparison to those regional or global actors that continue to fuel the conflict through their support of the fighting parties.¹⁵

7. The Rivalry between Morocco and Algeria

The relationship between Rabat and Algiers is an ambivalent one. On the one hand, both states officially aspire to achieving greater integration in the Maghreb – in fact, this goal is contained within their respective constitutions – and in official communications the neighbours often refer to one another as brotherly nations. On the other hand, the fact that the two countries fought a war right after Algeria's independence, their different positioning in the cold war dynamics, the closure of the border between the two countries since 1994, the unresolved Western Sahara issue, periodic controversies steered by political statements and press incidents and antagonistic diplomatic strategies in multilateral organizations or areas where both countries compete for influence, configures a far more contentious relationship with significant regional implications.¹⁶

Africa is one of the spaces where this rivalry has materialized. As explained above, Morocco and Algeria followed different strategies in the Sahel, and to a great extent prioritized those diplomatic or security cooperation mechanisms that excluded the other. Seen from Rabat, Algeria's traditional strategy in the Sahel had sought to weaken Morocco and to position itself as one of Africa's few great powers.¹⁷ Seen from Algiers, the intensification of Morocco's Africa policy, in the Sahel, but not exclusively, benefits from the vacuum left by Algeria, aggravated by former President Abdulaziz Bouteflika's ill health that prevented him from carrying out official visits, while Mohammed VI has been able to give priority to Africa when it comes to his international travel.¹⁸ Despite

¹³ BØÅS, Morten and UTAS, Mats. "Post-Gaddafi Repercussions in the Sahel and West Africa," *Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 35, no. 2 (2013), 3–15.

¹⁴ LACHER, Wolfram. "Libya's Fractious South and Regional Instability. Small Arms Survey, Security Assessment in North Africa," Dispatch No. 3, February 2014. Available online: www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/R-SANA/SANA-Dispatch3-Libyas-Fractious-South.pdf.

¹⁵ GHILÈS, Francis and KHARIELF, Akram "How Libya impacts North Africa," *Notes Internacionals CIDOB*, n. 227, 2020. Available online: www.cidob.org/es/publicaciones/serie_de_publicacion/notes_internacionals_cidob/n1_227/how_libya_impacts_north_africa

¹⁶ For a detailed analysis on this rivalry and its regional implications see HERNANDO DE LARRAMENDI, Miguel. "Doomed regionalism in a redrawn Maghreb? The changing shape of the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco in the post-2011 era," *The Journal of North African Studies*, 24:3, 506–531, 2019. DOI: 10.1080/13629387.2018.1454657; LOUNNAS, Djallil & MESSARI, Nizar. "Algeria – Morocco Relations and their Impact on the Maghrebi Regional System," *MENARA Working Paper*, n.20,2 018. Available online: <http://menara.iai.it/portfolio-items/algeria-morocco-relations-and-their-impact-on-the-maghrebi-regional-system/>; and MOHSEN-FINAN, Khadija, "A Fragmented Maghreb Facing a Security Challenge," in *Mediterranean Yearbook 2015*, Barcelona: IEMed, pp. 81–84, 2015. Available online: www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxiu-sadjunts/anuari/med.2015/IEMed%20Yearbook%202015_FragmentedMaghrebSecurityChallenge_KhadijaMohsenFinan.pdf

¹⁷ KHOUTTROUB, Smail. "L'intensification des menaces sécuritaires dans la région sahélo-saharienne et l'avenir des relations maroco-algériennes" in CEI (dir.), *Maroc-Algérie, analyses croisées d'un voisinage hostile*, Paris: Karthala, p. 204, 2011.

¹⁸ BENCHIBA, Lakhdar. "Algérie bat en retraite en Afrique. Immobilisme politique et économique" *Orient XXI*, 2 March, 2017. <http://orientxxi.info/magazine/l-algerie-bat-enretraite-enafrique,1734>

the fact that the persistence of the Hirak movement may oblige the new Algerian leadership to focus most of its efforts domestically, it still aims to make up lost ground in Africa.

In this competition, each of the two countries deploys its foreign policy toolkit. Algeria tries to build on its anti-colonial and anti-imperialist trajectory, a discourse that still resonates strongly in some African capitals. It relies upon ancient alliances and projects itself as a strong military and diplomatic actor.¹⁹ The aforementioned constitutional revisions are aimed at better exploiting those assets. Finally, it also stresses the geographical factor. Algeria is the continent's largest country and, unlike Morocco, borders with Mali and Niger. Another example of this proximity is that the southern city of Tamanrasset is closer to Abuja, Nigeria's capital, than to Algiers. In that vein, Algeria tries to present its vast territory as a natural passage for infrastructure (roads, pipelines, optical fibre lines) connecting the Mediterranean and the Gulf of Guinea.

Morocco is now promoting its own model of moderate Islam and offers cooperation in the religious field as an alternative to the models that have been exported from the Gulf region

Morocco has redoubled its efforts to counter its peripheral position, underlining its Atlantic character and deploying a foreign policy strategy aimed at going beyond its traditional circle of friends, which used to be restricted to the French-speaking West African countries.²⁰ Unlike Algeria, it puts the focus on the dynamism of its economic sector and stresses its role as an international investor and gateway for transcontinental projects. Morocco, which had previously used Sufism – the mystical current of Islam – as part of its foreign policy in Africa, is now promoting its own model of moderate Islam and offers coopera-

tion in the religious field as an alternative to the models that have been exported from the Gulf region. Finally, it is also trying to compete with Algeria when it comes to infrastructure projects. The best-known example is the project of an underwater pipeline that would not only connect Nigeria with Morocco, but also all the other coastal countries of West Africa.

8. The Global Competition and the Scramble for Africa

It is not only Morocco and Algeria that compete for influence and projects in Africa. Other global and regional powers are aggressively increasing their presence in strategic areas – military bases, ports, rare minerals, etc. – and are also deploying soft power instruments (scientific cooperation, scholarships, schools for local elites and in some cases religious activities). The realization of Africa's growing weight and the generalized perception that it offers many opportunities has increased the attention of a wide range of extra-regional powers. In the last two decades, Chinese economic and political investment in Africa has become a reality discussed at length in academic and policy circles. The opening of the Chinese military base in Djibouti was seen as proof of Beijing's long-term interest in the continent, but also as an indication of a more ambitious policy and the centrality of Africa in Beijing's global strategy. More recently, Turkey, India, Russia and the Gulf countries have also increased their presence in the continent, summits and official visits have become more frequent, together with military contracts and development cooperation projects. This has increased the anxiety of the old powers – France may be the best example – that had always seen Africa as their *domaine réservé*.

More broadly, in an increasingly competitive and even conflictual global order, any reinforced presence by a certain global or regional power in Africa raises suspicion among its competitors, who, as a consequence, will try to balance it out. The old motto of Africa as “the forgotten continent” is no longer valid. Quite the op-

¹⁹ ZOUAIR, Yahia. “Algeria's role in the OAU/African Union: From national liberation promoter to leader in the global war on terrorism,” *Mediterranean Politics*, 20:1. 2015. pp.55-75

²⁰ MESSARI, Nizar. “Morocco's African Foreign Policy,” *MENARA Future Notes*, n. 12, 2018. Available online: <http://menara.iai.it/portfolio-items/moroccos-african-foreign-policy/>

posite, the continent receives a lot of attention, perhaps even more than the continent can absorb. The Maghreb does not escape from those dynamics. As explained by Michaël Tanchum, one of the consequences of Morocco's deliberate attempt at becoming a "geopolitical gatekeeper in a new global competition for the manufacturing value chains in the West-Africa-to-Western Europe Corridor" is that "Morocco itself has become an arena of global competition in which China, Russia, and the Arab Gulf states are playing an increasingly significant role."²¹ Thus, when trying to understand the African policies of the Maghreb countries we also need to incorporate this extra-regional dimension. As explained in the 2018 edition of this Yearbook, intra-Gulf rivalries have defined the games of regional alliances in the Maghreb, with strong connections with similar dynamics in West Africa.²² Mauritania, due to its location, is a very interesting case. It was the only country of the Maghreb that broke off relations with Qatar, coinciding with a significant increase of investment, development and military cooperation from Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have also supported the G5 in the Sahel, and this policy, together with their policies in Libya and political manoeuvres in Tunisia has raised tensions with Algeria.

9. The European Factor

The European Union, and even more so its Member States, are not passive bystanders in this global competition. The French President, Emmanuel Macron, in the 2019 ambassadors' conference, made the following diagnosis: "Today, there are Chinese, Japanese and Turkish strategies in Africa, each with their own approaches, and of course an American strategy in Africa. I sincerely believe that ours must not be a strategy of market share and influence, of

predatory hegemony, which is sometimes at the core of some of the projects which I have just mentioned."²³ The former President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, candidly presented the renewed interest of Europe in Africa as a counterweight to the growing Chinese influence.²⁴ It is not by hazard that his successor, Ursula Von der Leyen, chose Addis Ababa, the city hosting the headquarters of the African Union, for her first official visit outside the EU. Moreover, Europeans are trying to preserve their traditional economic influence in Africa, at a time when the framework regulating trade and cooperation relations with sub-Saharan Africa – the Cotonou Agreement – has recently expired. While the EU has been negotiating a new agreement for the African-Caribbean-Pacific (ACP) group it also aims to develop a continent-to-continent partnership, as expressed in the Strategy with Africa, released in March 2020.²⁵

Where does the Maghreb stand in this new approach? Until not that long ago, there was a clear distinction between the policies towards North Africa – that fell under the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the European Neighbourhood Policy and the rest of the continent. This distinction started to get blurred with the 2016 European Global Strategy, which addresses sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb countries and the Middle East in the same section, specifically mentioning the growing interconnections between North Africa and the rest of the continent. The creation of a single financial instrument to unify all external policies, known as NDICI, also offers the possibility of developing continental approaches. Maghreb countries have mixed feelings. On the one hand, the EU approach is coherent with their renewed interest for Africa, and they could try to project themselves as key players in this new framework. They could try to profit from the interest of Europe in African affairs, which contrasts with a certain frustration when it

²¹ TANCHUM, Michaël. "Morocco's Africa-to-Europe Commercial Corridor: Gatekeeper of an emerging trans-regional strategic architecture," *AIES Fokus* 08/2020. www.aies.at/download/2020/AIES-Fokus-2020-08.pdf

²² SOLER I LECHA, Eduard. "Gulf Rivalries Reach North Africa," in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2018*, Barcelona: IEMed, 2018, p. 53-57. www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxiu-adjunts/anuari/med.2018/IEMed_Gulf_NorthAfrica_Medyearbook2018_Eduard_Soler.pdf

²³ Conférence des ambassadeurs et des ambassadrices – Address by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic (Paris, 27/08/2019). <https://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/vues/Kiosque/FranceDiplomatie/kiosque.php?fichier=bafr2019-08-28.html#Chapitre6>

²⁴ HARDING, Andrew. "Juncker unveils EU's Africa plan to counter China," *BBC News*, 12 September 2018. www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45496655

²⁵ EUROPEAN UNION. *Towards a comprehensive Strategy with Africa*, Brussels, 9.3.2020 JOIN (2020) 4 final (online). [Accessed on 01.07.2020]: https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/communication-eu-africa-strategy-join-2020-4-final_en.pdf

comes to Middle Eastern affairs. On the other hand, they do not want to lose their specificity as privileged partners or give up on the idea that the countries around the Mediterranean should have a distinct relationship with the EU and a specific regional cooperation mechanism, which is now mainly represented by the Union for the Mediterranean.

10. The Pandemic

It may be too early to discuss here what the effects of COVID-19 are for Africa and the Maghreb. When writing this article, most of the continent had registered fewer cases than other regions and proved able to deploy innovative and cooperative solutions. While most analysts tentatively conclude that the pandemic is an accelerator of pre-existing trends, in Africa there is still a lot of uncertainty, mainly due to the economic and social consequences of strict lockdowns, the alteration of global supply chains and the impact on countries that were heavily reliant on tourism, remittances and oil revenues. COVID-19 affects everyone, but not with the same intensity, and both in the Maghreb, as well as elsewhere in Africa and in the global South, vulnerable workers in the informal sector have been hit hard, and this will require specific policies to mitigate the effects.²⁶

What does it mean for Maghreb's policies towards Africa? COVID-19 may delay the entry into force of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), but continental trade liberalization is mainly seen as a way to mitigate the impact of the pandemic in Africa.²⁷ The realization of a hyper-dependence on China for basic protection goods (facemasks, gloves, etc..) and from other suppliers for more sophisticated equipment, such as ventilators, is pushing African economies to revisit their industrialization plans with a regional approach. Some countries have already

adapted to the new reality, transforming their factories and exporting medical equipment to their African neighbours. Morocco is one of the best examples, with Rabat launching what some depicted as "face-mask diplomacy," when in June 2020 it organized an operation to send 8 million facemasks and 30,000 litres of hydroalcoholic gel to 15 African countries.²⁸ A second dimension in this adaptation strategy concerns international trade and investment flows. Morocco and Tunisia are speculating about the effects that COVID-19 could have for global value chains and are openly positioning themselves as attractive destinations for reshoring or nearshoring strategies.²⁹ It will be worth observing to what extent those strategies include an African or Euro-African dimension to increase their appeal to foreign investors.

Conclusion: The Broader Picture

This article has analysed ten reasons that lie behind Maghreb's pivot to Africa, but it is worth underlining that it is part of a broader phenomenon. International relations, foreign and security policies and development cooperation have been bound by conventional definitions of what a region and subregion is, who is in and who is out. In that respect, the Maghreb was analysed and operationalized as part of the Arab world or the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, thus neglecting its African dimension. This is no longer possible. And this is not exclusive to the countries of the Maghreb. The growing interconnections between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa, between South Asia and the MENA region and the geopolitical gordian knot in the Eastern Mediterranean are all good examples that illustrate how regional boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred or why interregional relations are becoming more relevant.

²⁶ GALLIEN, Max and VAN DEN BOOGAARD, Vanessa. "To fight Covid-19, only the formal economy is getting tax breaks. The informal economy may be asked to foot the bill," ICTD, 8 April, 2020. Available online: www.ictd.ac/blog/covid-coronavirus-tax-breaks-informal-economy-workers/

²⁷ See, for instance, OULMANE, Nassim; SADNI JALLAB, Mustapha and RÉLOUENDÉ ZIDOUEMBA, Patrice. "The African Continental Free Trade Area and measures to facilitate trade could significantly mitigate COVID-19's economic impact in Africa," in *Africa in Focus*, Brookings Institution, 22 May, 2020. Available online: www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2020/05/22/the-african-continental-free-trade-area-and-measures-to-facilitate-trade-could-significantly-mitigate-covid-19s-economic-impact-in-africa/

²⁸ "Coronavirus: le Maroc joue la 'diplomatie du masque' vers l'Afrique subsaharienne," *Le Monde*, 15 June 2020 www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/06/15/coronavirus-le-maroc-joue-la-diplomatie-du-masque-vers-l-afrique-subsaharienne_6042873_3212.html

²⁹ OCDE "L'investissement dans la région MENA à l'heure du COVID-19," 4 June, 2020. Available online: www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/l-investissement-dans-la-region-mena-a-l-heure-du-covid-19-03cbddc6/