

Dossier: An Unexpected Party Crasher: Rethinking Euro-Mediterranean Relations in Corona Times, 25 Years after the Barcelona Process

The Challenges of Euro-African Relations in the Post-Covid-19 Era

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In 2021, Euro-African relations will reach a turning point. The sixth Africa-EU Joint Strategy Summit, an event launched ten years ago, will be unlike the others on more than one count. Its Agenda will likely not be limited to following up on the political dialogue of the previous forum and the Africa-Europe Alliance initiatives, nor to seeking soft consensus on the perennial questions of emigration and security, and even less so to reconciling positions on the calibration and procedures of European aid. The context is different, Covid-19 has been there. Its deep marks, its jolts, its unpredictable waves are forcing the Africa-EU Alliance ship to clarify its horizon, choose its course and stabilize its rudder.

The pandemic is in the process of modifying the conception of future relations, if it hasn't already, in an even more uncertain and more complex environment than before. Questions are raining down: How will the pandemic affect the global geo-economy? How will these effects impact relations between the two continents? What will the effects of technological innovations and digitalization be on global value chains? How will they change the way we live and work in the future? The answers to these questions remain unclear. It is from their content that opportunities will emerge which Europe and Africa can seize to protect themselves against common risks and rebuild solid, lasting relationships based on respect for human security and solidary commitment between partners.

An Institutional Framework for Euro-African Relations to be Reconstructed

In their long trajectory, Euro-African relations have always been marked by turbulence and even geopolitical upheavals. Such developments have left their mark on the consensus laboriously built upon the foundation of common values and shared prosperity; they revealed ambiguities about the meaning of this narrative and doubts regarding the effectiveness of the commitments. They upset partnership models. The future Summit will be held in a context that is complex for both partners. The transition to democracy has failed in Africa, a continent that has not entirely broken with the instability and uncertainty that characterize it (political fragility, stumbling blocks in institutional political reforms, development model crisis) despite the few advances made by the rule of law and electoral democracy in many countries. Europe is less and less attractive to its partners for various reasons: a loss of economic power, diminished influence in global geopolitics, a rise in populism, difficulties in regenerating its model in terms of identity, projects, decision-making efficiency and a discourse that blames migration.

The two partners are negotiating a turning point in the redefinition of their development models and their institutional decision-making mechanisms. Africa is fully invested in a continental free-trade project and the reform of the African Union's institutions to endow its flagship organization with a renovated architecture, effective decision-making processes and financial autonomy. It is from this perspective that it is preparing its 2021 Summit of Heads of State. Europe has just renewed its institutions. It has established a new policy to consolidate European

unity around a desire for geopolitical repositioning and a development strategy focused on the technological and industrial future of a green Europe. In the struggle against the ravages of Covid-19, it has adopted an ambitious and innovative recovery plan through its financial solidarity mechanisms. In this dynamic, the Commission has proposed a new global framework for the future partnership with Africa which emphasizes five key areas: ecological transition and access to energy, digital transformation, growth and sustainable jobs, peace and governance, migration and mobility. The new strategy cuts across areas of concern for Africa, but the common objectives remain to be specified and the means to achieve them should be defined through in-depth dialogue within a logic of co-decision.

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Today the European Union (EU) has three different frameworks to organize cooperation with Africa: the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) for North African countries, the Cotonou Agreement with the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (ACP), and the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES), whose first summit was held in 2000. The final goal of these initiatives is the same overall: “to turn Africa into an area of co-operation and shared prosperity, of democracy and peace.” The existence of these three frameworks creates certain confusion, or even the impression of counterproductive redundancy. For the moment, assessment of the partnership is nuanced. Its limits are the subject of pressing concerns expressed by both partners. The five Europe-Africa Summits successively held since the Joint Strategy was launched have not been commensurate with the founding principles (balanced

partnership) nor truly made much progress towards attaining the fundamental goals announced (shared prosperity). These summits have not kept all their promises, in particular with regard to Africa. The programmes and actions initiated in their wake have not seized all the opportunities to adjust the asymmetry of relations between the two continents and improve the well-being of African populations.

The turbulence of the international environment, and the economic and financial crises evoke the chronic instability of relations between the two partners. The migratory issue and political conflicts focalize Europe's attention. The prolongment of the post-Cotonou negotiation period, the slowing of the Euro-Mediterranean dynamic, the uncertainties on the future of the new ENP, and the deliberations in preparation for the sixth Africa-EU Summit reveal differences in the vision and scale of priorities, as well as the vacuity of the principles of shared prosperity, adherence to a common vision, and joint management of issues and challenges.

The Cotonou Agreement will be reviewed and presumably renewed after the protracted negotiations. In a Mediterranean consisting of two vast geopolitical ensembles (Western and Eastern), with diverging situations and evolutions, the African Mediterranean countries (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt) and Europe demand a proximity that calls for determined commitment to a new “South Mediterranean neighbourhood” policy. The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), a project intended to lend new life to the Barcelona Process, has been harmed by divisions within Europe, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the failure of the Arab Spring movements. The 5+5 Dialogue remains a pertinent forum which requires strong initiatives to make it a political hub of cooperation in the western Mediterranean.

This institutional imbroglio results in a partnership dynamic handicapped by the existence of significant overlap, and a lack of consistency, coordination and complementarity in the vision, mobilization and allocation of resources. Plural Africa and northern and Mediterranean Europe do not speak with one voice, neither regarding their common interests nor their shared concerns, and even less so regarding the portrayal of their interests to other powers and the international community. Once considered viable, the scheme of institutional review of relations by establishing a continent-to-continent framework has

encountered resistance from both sides and no longer seems to have the support of stakeholders. In an international world that is increasingly complex and shaken by pressing issues, the frameworks of EU-Africa relations must be revised. This revision will take time. In any case, the two partners have an obligation to obtain results in establishing a constructive partnership despite the diversity of their respective viewpoints on adequate institutional support. Moreover, today one must think of mechanisms for making the points of view held by the various existing frameworks converge, as well as a new approach to the shared priorities of plural Africa in the face of the effects of Covid-19 and the risks of a resurgence of health crises of this magnitude, which would put the common strategic interests of the two continents under tension.

The definition of a common vision will not do without reflection on the mode and location for building a unity of view which has thus far been hampered by the specific logics of relations maintained in cooperation spaces that are either too vast or too small to allow “structured and convergent cooperation” on a continental scale. The existing frameworks should be adapted to current-day challenges. This process entails a joint political will, but above all, “South-South decompartmentalization,” namely through integration of the economies of North African countries along the south shore amongst themselves, and the settling of conflicts detrimental to the Maghreb. This integration dynamic is difficult, but it is the two partners’ role to foster it, creating a new neighbourhood strategy and a new model for Euro-African relations going beyond the old representations and strategies, which have become unsuitable for today’s challenges.

The frameworks and tools of this partnership should be adjusted and articulated: today, in a Europe where there are multiple skill levels, in an Africa where South-South seeks to strengthen its ties, the North and South-shore western Mediterranean countries more involved due to their geographic proximity must be active, not only in their own relations, but also with the other African countries in order to convince their partners that the future of Europe will be played out in Africa and that Africa has privileged relations of proximity with Europe. In this way, the contours of a “major North-South region” could be drawn, made up of Europe, the Mediterranean, the Maghreb and

Africa in general, which would weigh in on the future of globalization. For it would allow the resources of northern and southern countries to be combined in everyone’s interest. This is the preliminary condition for Europe, the Maghreb and Africa to give substance to a vision and a converging strategy in a dynamic conducive to effective responses to their common challenges.

It is primarily the responsibility of Africa to design an institutional framework of coordination that would enable its different regions, its communities and economic groupings, and its continental organization to make clear a common vision of multidimensional relations with Europe

At the continental level, it is primarily the responsibility of Africa to design an institutional framework of coordination that would enable its different regions (North, West, Centre, East), its communities and economic groupings, and its continental organization to make clear a common vision of multidimensional relations with Europe, broken down into clearly stated priorities. The Joint Summit of Heads of State is today a simple forum for political dialogue, which, however important it may be, is not a place for the emergence of programmes and projects with a strong impact on the major issues of the partnership between the two continents.

Covid-19 and Its Challenges

Africa is still relatively unaffected by the virus. Various factors have contributed to this: the relative youth of the African population, and the early nature of the measures taken by African states are factors that have most likely had a positive effect. The relative efficiency of African coordination since the onset of the crisis has also played a positive role, even if the African Union does not yet have the capabili-

ties and prerogatives for common action to match that of the EU.¹ In any case, the significant presence of co-morbidities, the difficulty in enforcing social distancing measures, the population's high mobility, and the concentration of a large part of the population in overcrowded and poorly equipped areas vulnerable to the spread of diseases (nearly 43.5% of the total population of Africa live in urban areas) mean that the prolongation of contamination curves could lead to a critical situation.

Even if the propagation of Covid-19 was successfully stopped, the disease would still entail economic damage. The price of oil, representing 40% of African exports, has fallen by half, and other major exports such as textiles, tourism and flowers, have plummeted. The impact on African economies could be a slowdown in growth estimated at between 1.8% and 2.6% in 2020. According to World Bank estimates, Covid-19 will push at least 5 to 29 million people below the extreme poverty line of \$1.90 a day. The probability of vulnerable households falling into transient poverty has risen by 17.1%, that of their remaining in poverty for a decade or more has increased by 4.2%, and the probability of them moving out of poverty has decreased by 5.9%. Health-care systems in African countries are weaker than those in other regions of the world, with fewer hospital beds, intensive care units and health professionals than elsewhere.

To respond to health emergencies, establish social security schemes for the most vulnerable, protect jobs and sustain economic activity, Africa would need a fiscal stimulus of at least \$100 billion (UNECA). Its limited scope for action risks being crippled by three major problems: high debt-to-GDP ratios; budget deficits; and borrowing costs. Africa will need innovative financing mechanisms: a debt moratorium, better access to emergency financing mechanisms, and credit lines for economic recovery and social regulation.

Europe has injected thousands of billions of dollars into its Covid-19 programmes on health, social safety nets and economic recovery. Despite all the difficulties, the last European Summit succeeded in

drawing up a solidarity-based recovery plan. Europe has made the Green Pact its priority. It wishes to make it a source of inspiration for the success of its co-operation relations. The challenge of the Green Pact is to adopt decisions over the coming years that will make it possible to achieve radical change in the organization of societies, i.e. to change the way we live, move around, produce or consume. Virtually all sectors of activity are concerned: trade, energy, transport, industry, agriculture, finance, construction, food, tourism, digital, etc.

The coronavirus crisis is not just a health, economic and social crisis; it is a geopolitical issue that challenges the current relations between the two continents

European and African economies are interconnected. United in action, they must fight the pandemic together. However, the coronavirus crisis is not just a health, economic and social crisis; it is a geopolitical issue that challenges the current relations between the two continents. Whereas the pandemic is mobilizing minds on health, economic and social issues, it does not make the other crises (climate, migration, stability, peace and security) disappear, and may even aggravate them. The crisis is likely to accentuate current developments: tensions within Europe; Sino-American rivalry, particularly the deployment of the Silk Road; the return of Russia to the Mediterranean; and the rise of regional powers (Turkey, Gulf countries) in North and East Africa to advance their own interests. Localized threats and disasters (the expansion of Islamist radicalism beyond the Sahel zone, the fragmentation of the Maghreb, African pre- and post-election conflicts) are likely to increase in scale under the effect of Covid-19 and have serious regional or continental consequences. The health crisis makes it more im-

¹ For example, the joint initiatives taken in the various African economic communities, in particular the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the East African Community (EAC) or the Co-operation launched by the African Union's Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), ...

perative than ever for Europe and Africa to strengthen their own strategic autonomy.

The health crisis calls for a united, solidary and massive response by states on the two continents. Europe and Africa should not only act together, but also raise awareness of the focal points of their mutual interests and strengthen their strategic autonomy, taking into account the multiple dimensions of this notion. It is the credibility of the partnership in the eyes of the citizens of the two continents that is at stake, with the risk of fuelling centrifugal forces which, as we have already seen with Brexit, could have concrete effects not only in human and economic terms, but also from a geopolitical standpoint.

Issues of the Immediate Future

The crisis associated with the coronavirus pandemic should lead Europe and Africa to in-depth reflection on the principles of human security, balanced interdependence and, ultimately, solidarity. These principles should become the two partners' joint compass. Human security is now an essential dimension of international security. States have had to deal with the pandemic and protect their populations. Considering the global risks, human security is by nature a solidary security, which should combine the responsible exercise of sovereignty with cooperative and functional multilateralism. It cannot be left solely to the versatile or neglectful unilateralism of states.

Thus, at a time when the world is experiencing a deep crisis, particularly due to the probable impact of Covid-19, the objective of ensuring human security for populations offers the Euro-African partnership new fields of action. While the approach to human security remains the sole responsibility of each state, whether in Europe or Africa, a common concern seems to be developing – despite the great diversity of risk perceptions and the heterogeneity of the responses adopted – on the re-emergence of the imperatives of social resilience (health, food security, climate/environment, value creation, mobility) which should provide more input than before into cooperation policies between the two partners.

The notion of security as the traditional keystone of foreign and defence policy will probably also have to be extended to other areas that refer to strategic

production: whether in the health sector (drugs, medical equipment, etc.) or in other sectors of vital importance (food, energy, telecommunications, etc.). Neither continent can afford to be unsustainably dependent on distant sources of supply in sectors and activities linked to the “economy of life,” especially during major crises.

The commitment to human security expressed by European and African institutions, should accelerate the implementation of flagship programmes that create the conditions and incentives to progressively redress the unbalanced economic interdependence

The commitment to human security expressed by European and African institutions and by political leaders on both continents should accelerate the implementation of flagship programmes that create the conditions and incentives to progressively redress the unbalanced economic interdependence of the two continents maintained by dysfunctional global trade and investment, the most striking manifestation of which is highlighted today by the lack of self-sufficiency in medical goods and services.

At a time when the International Community will have to reach new agreements on climate change, world trade and development financing, the two continents have an interest in defining their common ground in international negotiations that will have a profound impact on Euro-African relations.

Health Security

Africa is currently the continent on which health indicators remain the most worrying. Access to global aid for health is complex due to its mobilization through new financing mechanisms. Africa wishes to act to “strengthen health systems by allocating the necessary human and financial resources.” In this context, in parallel with efforts to support Afri-

can countries in the health crisis, it seems necessary to put the strengthening of health systems back at the forefront (through state investment and the involvement of development banks) and to develop a new public/private financing framework that is sustainable in the long term. Major action must be taken against the growing scourge of counterfeit medical products and falsified medicines, which pose a serious threat to public health. This ongoing commitment needs to be reinforced by co-operation that is more focussed on developing health infrastructure and strengthening the capacities and competencies of institutions and authorities in charge of responding to persistent health and demographic challenges.

The Partnership will be tested in its support for the promotion of accessible, sustainable, resilient and quality national health systems to achieve universal health coverage and support health programmes. It is imperative to take into account African specificities to provide an adequate response to the shortcomings of African health systems. In particular, it is essential to develop community-based epidemiological surveillance networks that complement health systems.

Food Security

Food and, more broadly, food systems (all the actors and activities that contribute to feeding human beings) are today at the crossroads of major and highly interdependent health, ecological and economic challenges that must be addressed systematically, through what some call the “food-health-environment-agriculture nexus.”

Food security is a recurrent theme in several strands of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) process taken up at African Union (AU) summits. Covid-19 has raised the profile of agriculture as an African priority and highlighted the interconnections between food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture. It provides an opportunity to pay greater attention to food and food security and to shift prevailing agricultural models towards less production-intensive farming systems, enhancing the potential of family farming and giving preference to shorter, closer and better-connected urban concentrations. The roadmap approved by both sides provides guidance to the new EU leaders on how Europe can sup-

port Africa in achieving its ambitions for nutrition and food security, especially through the AU's Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP). The sustainability of food systems, insofar as the need to use resources sustainably (e.g. water, land and forests), improve agricultural value chains and reduce food wastage. Exchanges between the two partners on the potential of agro-ecology, agro-forestry and intelligent agriculture are recurrent, but they get bogged down in discourse on the technical, political and investment conditions necessary for the advent of sustainable agriculture, to the detriment of real progress.

Energy and Climate Change

Africa is at the forefront of the world's regions suffering the impact of climate change, which could cause the continent to lose between 5% (Central Africa) and 15% (West and East Africa) of its GDP by 2050. Emissions need to decrease significantly between 2020 and 2030 to reach a net zero level by 2050 if the continent is to stay on track to meet the temperature target under the Paris Agreement. Europe wants to prioritize low-carbon development and help African countries prepare national and regional climate-resilient and low-carbon development strategies, with a particular focus on agriculture and sustainable and renewable energy.

It is generally agreed that Europe brings a positive note to multilateral climate action, wishes to reduce its emissions and encourages its partners to do the same. Being in the vanguard of “climate change diplomacy” is not enough, however, and using conditionality on access to the European market for non-carbonized exports can be unproductive. Europe can play a much more important role by federating international support to African emerging economies, vulnerable countries and LDCs around ambitious programmes that give more weight to adaptation than to mitigation, facilitating access to affordable and environmentally sound technologies. African countries want to be convinced that a transition to low-carbon economies is a realistic alternative to carbon-intensive models. Adaptation costs in Africa are estimated to reach \$50 billion by 2050. As Africa's room for manoeuvre in meeting its determined contributions to climate action is further limited by Covid-19, climate change financing – particu-

larly through the Green Fund – is crucial for African countries. There is a need to develop proposals for the transfer of affordable and accessible climate change mitigation and adaptation technologies to trigger the desired systemic changes in agricultural and industrial systems.

Trade and Regional Value Chains

One of Africa's immediate challenges is to make the construction of the Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) a reality in order to bolster intra-African trade. This zone, which came into being in 2020, is in the process of forging its pillars (establishment of lists of tariff concessions, rules of origin, non-tariff barriers, liberalization of services) ... It will soon start negotiations on weighty matters: intellectual property, competition policies, e-commerce... without which the commitments of the first phase could not go very far. Essential for Africa's prosperity, this zone will also be a test for Europe insofar as its willingness to go further within the framework of Free Trade Agreements than the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), which are losing momentum.

Today, trade regimes have been diversified: Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreements and prospects for deeper integration (North Africa), EPAs (ECOWAS-Mauritania, and Southern Africa), Everything But Arms (EBA in Southern and Eastern Africa), Generalised System of Preferences (GSP), Most Favoured Nation. The partners – the African Regional Economic Communities, the AU Commission and the EU – must all work to avoid political fragmentation in their support for these processes. The new Partnership should aspire to lend renewed impetus to the exchanges between the two partners. Development needs, asymmetrical liberalization and regional preference are cornerstones on which the new architecture of trade in goods and services in the region should be built. The promotion of joint investments would facilitate the connection of the two partners' production systems and their productive integration with a view to aligning the partners' strategies in the global and regional value chain system.

But trade and investment are not an end in themselves. They are a means to promote better policy interactions, boost economic ties, stimulate innova-

tion and anticipate upcoming economic transformations. Once the pandemic is over, the global economy will be increasingly regulated by digital technologies. Covid-19 has already accelerated the digitization of both the supply chain and the consumer journey in developed markets. These changes should not exclude Africa from future sources of growth and development. Africa still faces major challenges in reaping the full benefits of digital technologies. 76% of the population has a mobile phone subscription but only 25% of Africans currently use the internet and 4G penetration on the continent is still low. The EU-AU Summit in Vienna in December 2018 established guidelines for cooperation between the two continents regarding the digital economy and contributing to the realization of an African single digital market. The current economic situation calls for increased mobilization of the necessary resources to attain – within an acceptable timeframe – the objectives outlined in the four established priorities: affordable broadband, skills in the digital era, digital entrepreneurship, and online services and the data-based economy.

Regulation of Migration and Mobility

European migratory policy, already complex in its conception and implementation, was the subject of profound controversy and virulent contestation from several Member States before the Covid-19 crisis. The pandemic was likely to provide 'arguments' for the opponents of an already poorly developed policy who sought to protect Europe's borders from external danger. Some countries have taken advantage of Covid-19 to carry out migration measures not permitted by the European framework and without establishing a link between immigration and the pandemic. European migration policy, in its most humanitarian version – that of refugee protection –, has been shaken by the pandemic and the return of national borders. The impact of this crisis on migration will hardly be neutral; hence, attitudes, policies and actions in this area, which is essential for defining a balanced and mutually supportive partnership, must be changed.

In various declarations, leaders from the two continents have pledged to take action to combat illegal immigration, strengthen the link between migration

and development, and advance in setting up structures for legal migration. The two partners are far from providing an integrated response to this issue. An imbalance persists between the actions of the EU Mediterranean Task Force to prevent and reduce illegal migration flows and efforts to create safe and legal migration channels. The deep divisions among EU Member States on how to address this migration crisis, in particular over their respective shares in hosting refugees, is hampering the reform of EU migration policy.

Covid-19 offers an opportunity to establish a more balanced and pragmatic partnership serving the joint interests of Europe and Africa

The risks of resumption of population movements observed in the Mediterranean region encourage further reflection on a new migration policy that is more innovative, effective and concerned with the rights of refugees. A policy that would benefit from sufficient resources and political leadership to tackle the problem and encourage countries to cooperate more fully in addressing the complete range of migration's positive and negative effects on sustainable economic, social and environmental development for all in countries of origin and destination.

Conclusion

Covid-19 offers an opportunity to establish a more balanced and pragmatic partnership serving the joint interests of Europe and Africa. To move in this direction, both partners will need to follow up on the good intentions expressed at the previous EU-Africa Summit. In particular, they will have to define new engagement mechanisms that involve the private sector and civil society. But the main challenge will nonetheless be for the partners to find a way to address these issues effectively and as a united front, despite the political turmoil and tensions caused by conflict and fragility. Part of the

global turmoil concerns Europe's neighbourhood and involves other equally important world players. Its effects on post-Summit political processes could be particularly disruptive. Crises, such as those in the Sahel and Libya, or the economic and financial fallout from Covid-19, have created divisions that could complicate the outcome of the partnership processes.

Are both partners ready to implement a new Partnership model? The question remains open. Given the Libyan crisis in the Mediterranean, as well as the Sahel and Horn of Africa crises and the muscular approaches accompanying them, it is possible that the concerns and plays of the major powers or second-tier regional actors will dominate the agenda of Euro-African relations and that political energies will be diverted away from global development objectives in favour of crisis management. The Covid-19 crisis offers an opportunity to think and act differently. The joint efforts that would be deployed for a real exit from this systemic crisis would contribute to the advent of human security and regional solidarity between the two continents. The persistence of the epidemic further underlines the interdependence of vulnerabilities and the need for a rigorous, comprehensive and sustainable Partnership framework, centred on getting the two continents out of the limbo of a string of risks which, in many respects, could be the primary factor in losing the privileged nature of the Euro-African Partnership over the other partnerships that Africa is establishing (for instance, China and Japan, to cite only the most prominent).

Well before the scale of the Covid-19 crisis was fully recognized, leaders from both continents had agreed to deepen their cooperation and political dialogue. The scope of Covid-19's devastating effects will become clearer in 2021. In addition to health and humanitarian concerns, many have expressed fears for the stability, state consolidation and security of the region. Covid-19 calls for a different set of reactions than usual. The long-term aspects of this crisis require policies of resilience beyond immediate measures of economic, social or financial support. In the face of the current crisis, the future Summit will have to deploy resources of ingenuity to materialize a response that is commensurate with the scale of the challenge and translate it into coordinated, concerted decisions.

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