



CDRC

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Resetting Africa-EU Relations in the New Geopolitical Context: An African Perspective on "What Should Change and Why?"



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Centre for Dialogue, Research and Cooperation (CDRC)

## Resetting Africa-EU Relations in the New Geopolitical Context: An African Perspective on “What Should Change and Why?”

### Introduction

Recently, the Belgian Embassy in Addis Ababa hosted a discussion on Europe-Africa relations, featuring an expert presentation that challenged Europe to reassess its relationship with Africa with renewed vision and commitment. This paper builds on the issues and arguments presented during the meeting, offering an African perspective on how the Europe-Africa partnership should be reimagined and contextualized to reflect Africa’s evolving interests and priorities. While some of the ideas discussed could have been referenced, the CDRC Digest follows a commentary format rather than a formal academic article structure, and as such, the arguments are not extensively cited.

The Africa - Europe relationship has been historically shaped by colonial legacies, economic dependencies, and shifting geopolitical interests. Over the decades, this partnership has evolved into a complex, multifaceted framework underpinned by a series of agreements, strategies, and institutional engagements. Traditionally, the focus was heavily skewed toward development aid, reinforcing Africa’s dependence on external assistance. However, recent shifts have prioritized investment, security cooperation, and sustainable development, signaling a transition towards a more interest-driven and strategic engagement.

As Africa undergoes profound economic, demographic, and political transformations, there is a growing imperative to redefine this relationship in a manner that promotes equity, mutual respect, and self-reliance. The

continent's young workforce, vast natural resources, and emerging markets present untapped opportunities, yet structural imbalances persist, limiting Africa’s ability to fully capitalize on its potential. Addressing these imbalances requires a fundamental shift—moving beyond paternalistic approaches toward a model of co-development, where African agency, priorities, and aspirations are placed at the center of engagement.

This paper seeks to provide an African-centered perspective on how the AU-EU partnership can be recalibrated to serve both continents. It highlights key structural challenges, outlines areas for enhanced cooperation, and offers policy recommendations for fostering a more equitable, pragmatic, and forward-looking partnership in an era of global multipolarity.

The foundation of Africa-Europe cooperation lies in EU Agreements with the Organization of African, Caribbean, and Pacific States (OACPS), starting with the Lomé Conventions (1975-2000) and transitioning to the Cotonou Agreement (2000-2020). These frameworks emphasized trade preferences, development support, and political cooperation. The ongoing Samoa Agreement (2021-2040) seeks to modernize this partnership by addressing global challenges such as climate change, migration, and digital transformation. However, the Africa-Europe relationship is much more deeply rooted, extending beyond formal agreements. Historically, during Europe’s imperial rule, Africa’s resources were largely exploited to fuel European industries. In the post-independence era, Europe attempted to restructure its engagement with Africa, but many aspects of the relationship remain skewed.

Africa’s partnership with Europe remains

significant. The European Union (EU) is still a major trade partner, accounting for 30% of Africa's exports and imports, and is also the largest source of foreign investment and development aid. However, this relationship is marked by evolving complexities and growing uncertainties. Trade figures, for instance, reflect a significant shift: in 2000, Europe accounted for 50% of Africa's trade, but this share has steadily declined as Africa diversifies its economic partnerships, particularly with China, India, and other emerging economies.

This diminishing trade share underscores intensifying global competition for influence in Africa. As the global order undergoes transformation, Africa and the broader Global South are emerging as critical strategic players. Major powers—including China, the United States, and Russia—are competing for influence by forging economic partnerships and investing in key sectors. Initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the increasing outreach of Gulf states highlight this shifting landscape.

At the same time, Africa is actively redefining its role on the global stage. The African Union's recent inclusion in the G20 and its growing alignment with emerging powers like BRICS signal Africa's aspirations for a more influential geopolitical position. AU officials are also advocating for reforms in global governance, particularly the UN Security Council, while representing the continent's interests in climate negotiations and other multilateral forums. As Africa seeks to consolidate its standing, it must critically assess its partnerships, ensuring they yield genuine economic benefits rather than perpetuate outdated narratives.

As discussions intensify on defining a unified "African position" in its engagement with Europe and beyond, this paper aims to

analyze the complexities of Africa-EU relations and explore how they can be reshaped to reflect Africa's evolving priorities in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment.

### **Africa and Europe: Neighbors and Strong Partners, Yet Complicated by Colonial Legacies**

Africa and Europe share a long and intertwined history—one in which Europe has often viewed Africa as its "backyard." As the closest neighboring continents, they are natural partners, bound not only by geography but also by deep economic and strategic interests. The AU-EU partnership represents one of the most comprehensive and institutionalized frameworks for cooperation between Africa and Europe, built on decades of shared history, economic ties, and political collaboration with all their complexity. The European Union has played a dominant role in Africa, serving as the continent's leading trade partner, top investor, and largest provider of development aid. At the same time, Africa remains a critical supplier of chemicals, raw materials, minerals, and agricultural goods that sustain European industries.

While contemporary Africa-EU relations aspire to move beyond the traditional donor-recipient dynamic shaped by colonial legacies, achieving a truly equal and mutually beneficial partnership remains a challenge. The partnership is designed to address shared challenges, promote sustainable development, and enhance peace and security through structured dialogue and multi-level engagement. However, disagreements and deep-seated mutual frustration persist. A central point of contention in Africa-Europe relations is the balance between engagement and interference. African leaders frequently

emphasize the need for Europe to support the continent's development without undermining African agency. However, individual European states—particularly former colonial powers—are often accused of meddling in African political and economic affairs under the guise of partnership. France, in particular, continues to face criticism for its deep involvement in the governance and economies of its former colonies. As a result, many African governments have increasingly turned to alternative global powers, such as China, Russia, and emerging middle powers, for economic, diplomatic, and security cooperation. This shift has led the EU to denounce what it sees as Moscow's "destabilizing influence" while simultaneously advocating for a more balanced and equitable engagement with Africa.

Despite the strength of the Africa-Europe partnership, power asymmetries persist. The EU's control over aid, investment, and trade terms reinforces a dynamic in which Africa is invariably the dependent actor. Many African stakeholders argue that the EU continues to approach the continent with a "postcolonial" mindset—one that is paternalistic and dismissive of African agency. These structural imbalances are evident in negotiations, where the AU and EU ostensibly engage as equal representatives of their respective member states. However, power dynamics within both unions influence decision-making, often to Africa's disadvantage. This is without overlooking the real weaknesses on the African side that are internal.

Lingering tensions over the legacy of European colonization further complicate the asymmetric power dynamic. Many Africans believe that colonial-era exploitative structures persist in postcolonial relations, with European powers yet to fully

acknowledge or atone for the lasting damage of colonial rule. This erodes trust, hinders open dialogue, and obstructs progress toward an interest-based partnership. While mistrust and resentment persist, the AU has made reparations a key policy priority, declaring 2025 the "Year of Justice for Africans and People of African Descent Through Reparations." Beyond financial compensation, reparations are framed as part of a broader strategy to address economic injustice and structural inequalities—an approach that could further complicate AU-EU relations. From an African perspective, Europe's reluctance to confront historical grievances while insisting on "*moving forward*" without genuine reckoning remains a major obstacle. As a recent ISS article noted, for the AU and Africa, the 2025 "*Year of Reparations*" is just the beginning. The real challenge is securing global recognition and ensuring that reparative justice remains a long-term priority, ultimately evolving into the envisioned "*AU Decade of Reparations*." The movement will be more sustainable if it is framed as a response to Africa's past and as a foundation for shaping a more just global future.

However, as the AU and EU reassess their global positioning and install new leadership, they may face challenges in coordinating a continent-to-continent partnership. Their relationship is further complicated by the rising influence of right-wing political forces, the increasing politicization of international cooperation, and the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, which is diverting significant development resources toward the war effort. Far-right parties have gained electoral momentum, and in several countries, right-leaning parties are assuming government responsibility. This shift, coupled with deepening fractures in transatlantic relations, could lead Europe to adopt a more domestically focused approach—putting

pressure on previous narratives and policy frameworks while advancing a more Eurocentric diplomacy and transactional concerning its external engagements. Indeed, Europe is recalibrating its development and aid spending, with right-wing governments pursuing ideological and geopolitical funding policies—testing Africa’s strategic choices and commitments.

Accommodative policies toward far-right politics within Europe often translate into stricter anti-immigration measures, as controlling migration is a central agenda for these political movements. This shift in policy focus means that efforts to reset and strengthen Europe-Africa relations—particularly in trade, development cooperation, and investment—would be deprioritized. As European governments respond to domestic political pressures by tightening border controls, restricting asylum policies, and reducing immigration quotas, the broader diplomatic and economic engagement with Africa risks being overshadowed. This could stall initiatives for fostering equitable partnerships, address historical imbalances, and promote sustainable development across the continent. Moreover, the securitization of migration may lead to a transactional approach to Africa, where cooperation is primarily framed around border control and migration management rather than long-term economic or political collaboration. Consequently, critical areas such as trade agreements, infrastructure development, climate action, and capacity-building initiatives could receive less attention, pushing Africa-Europe relations to the back burner.

On the other hand, the European Union (EU) has grown increasingly uneasy about Africa’s expanding engagements with other global powers, particularly Russia. This concern

stems from the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, geopolitical rivalries, competing economic interests, and broader strategic calculations. Africa’s deepening ties with Russia—whether in military cooperation, energy deals, or diplomatic alignment—challenge the EU’s traditional influence on the continent and raise questions about shifting power dynamics in the region.

However, the profound global shifts unfolding with the return of President Donald Trump to the White House and the evolving global disorder—characterized by rising multipolarity, weakening multilateralism, intensifying great-power competition, economic disruptions, and escalating security challenges—should prompt Europe to reassess and adapt its approach toward Africa. The growing competition for resources, markets, and political alliances means that the EU can no longer afford to take its historical ties with Africa for granted. Instead, Europe must strategically recalibrate its engagement, ensuring that its partnership with Africa is not perceived as paternalistic or purely transactional but as mutually beneficial, pragmatic, and grounded in shared interests. Yet, this expectation of a fundamental shift in Europe’s approach may be overly optimistic from Africa’s perspective. While African nations seek a more balanced and equitable partnership, entrenched economic and geopolitical interests in Europe may limit the extent to which the EU is willing to move beyond traditional power dynamics.

Moreover, as Africa increasingly diversifies its partnerships—engaging not only with Russia but also with China, the Gulf states, Turkey, and emerging Asian economies—the EU faces mounting pressure to offer competitive, flexible, and interest-driven collaboration. To maintain relevance and influence, the EU must prioritize investment over aid, equitable trade agreements, and genuine respect for

African agency in shaping its future. All this is not going to be easy given the latest developments and the very unorthodox approach by President Trump which appears to have upended the transatlantic alliance that used to define the post-Cold War period.

For Africa-EU relations to evolve into a truly equal partnership, structural changes are necessary. Moving beyond outdated frameworks requires Europe to engage with Africa, recognizing its agency and aspirations, while addressing the historical injustices that continue to shape perceptions and interactions.

### **Africa's Strategic Importance Amid the EU's Weakening Leverage in the Global Geopolitical Landscape**

As the world transitions into a multipolar order, Africa is emerging as a key region of strategic importance, driven by its vast potential for growth. Over the past decade, the continent has been frequently hailed for its economic promise, earning labels such as "Rising Africa" and the "African Miracle." Eleven of the world's 20 fastest-growing economies are African, underscoring the region's dynamic growth. However, this progress remains uneven, with stark differences between countries. While nations like Rwanda, Kenya, and Ghana lead in innovation and development, others face persistent challenges such as debt, conflict, and weak governance, highlighting the complexity of Africa's economic landscape.

Africa's demographic advantage further amplifies its strategic significance. It is home to the world's youngest population, with 70% of its citizens under the age of 30. By 2050, 80% of global population growth will occur in Africa, with the continent's population projected to double. This demographic shift presents immense economic opportunities

but also necessitates substantial investments in education, healthcare, and job creation to prevent instability and youth unemployment.

Beyond its demographic advantage, Africa possesses critical resources that position it as a key player in addressing global challenges, particularly in renewable energy and agriculture. With 60% of the world's arable land, Africa has the potential to become a global leader in food production, enhancing food security both regionally and internationally. However, unlocking this potential requires investment in agricultural innovation, sustainable farming practices, and modern infrastructure to boost productivity and resilience against climate change. Overcoming the peace and security dilemma must also be considered as key for realizing this immense potential.

In addition, Africa is abundantly endowed with renewable energy sources, including solar, wind, and hydroelectric power, making it a strategic partner in the global energy transition. With the right investments, Africa can not only meet its own growing energy demands but also export clean energy, contributing to global decarbonization efforts.

Equally important is Africa's young, tech-savvy, and entrepreneurial population, which is driving a wave of digital innovation across key sectors such as fintech, e-commerce, and digital services. Expanding digital access and ensuring broad-based inclusion remain critical challenges, as large segments of the population still face barriers to connectivity, digital literacy, and financial inclusion. Addressing these gaps through targeted policies, infrastructure development, and private-sector investment will be essential for unlocking Africa's full potential in the digital economy.

## The EU's Weakening Global Influence

While Africa's global influence is rising, the EU—once a dominant economic power and a leading advocate for international cooperation—is experiencing a relative decline. The EU's share of the global economy has steadily diminished, largely due to the rapid economic rise of Asia. In 1980, the EU accounted for 34% of global GDP, but by 2022, this had dropped to 20%, with projections indicating a further decline to just 12% by 2030. The war in Ukraine is draining Europe's resources and further undermining its industrial competitiveness, as the shift from cheaper hydrocarbons to more expensive energy sources—driven by geopolitical tensions and rivalries—raises production costs. This energy transition, while necessary for Europe's long-term sustainability, has immediate economic consequences, including higher inflation, reduced industrial output, and supply chain disruptions.

Moreover, the conflict is diverting financial and political resources that Europe would have otherwise allocated to strengthening global partnerships, including those with Africa. As European priorities shift towards security, defense, and economic stabilization, Africa risks being pushed further down the EU's agenda. This shift could weaken longstanding commitments, particularly in development assistance, investment, and peacekeeping support, and reinforce Africa's drive to diversify its international partnerships beyond Europe.

This decline is compounded by demographic shifts and internal political divisions. The EU faces a demographic crisis, with an aging and shrinking workforce. Projections suggest that by 2100, only half of the EU's population will be of working age, posing significant challenges to economic growth, innovation,

and social welfare systems. Additionally, rising internal tensions, political polarization, and populism have weakened the EU's cohesion. Brexit, the United Kingdom's departure from the bloc, is a stark example of this fragmentation. Disagreements on migration, fiscal policies, and the rule of law further strain unity, complicating decision-making and undermining the EU's ability to present a unified front on global issues. Disruptions and shifts in existing transatlantic cooperation frameworks are creating significant challenges for Europe, placing immense pressure on its strategic autonomy and global positioning. As traditional alliances face political, economic, and security tensions, Europe must navigate an increasingly uncertain geopolitical landscape, balancing its own interests with evolving U.S. policies. These challenges could weaken Europe's global influence, forcing it to reassess its approach to international partnerships, including its relationship with Africa. In fact, recent developments appear to be ominous, perhaps requiring both Africa and the EU to go back to the drawing board.

## Geopolitical Competition and Africa's Expanding Partnerships

Despite its historical ties and ongoing cooperation with Africa—particularly in peace and security—the EU's influence in the region is waning. While the EU has provided significant support to Africa-led initiatives under the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), it is losing leverage in volatile regions such as the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. The growing presence of non-traditional actors, including Russia and China's strategic investments, is reshaping Africa's security and economic landscape.

Recognizing this shifting dynamic, Africa has been actively diversifying its partnerships. Emerging powers such as China, Russia,

India, Türkiye, and the Gulf States are expanding their presence on the continent, treating Africa as a little better as a strategic partner rather than merely a recipient of aid. This shift reflects Africa's growing geopolitical agency as it moves away from its traditional dependence on Western institutions toward a more balanced, multi-aligned foreign policy approach. There is no doubt that this is an emerging phenomenon that warrants close attention, as the role of national interest in shaping relations can never be overlooked.

In this regard, Africa faces significant challenges—including conflict and instability, climate change, and the urgent need to create millions of jobs—that could hinder its progress. Managing these issues while leveraging new partnerships will be critical to Africa's future trajectory.

### **The EU's Struggle to Retain Influence**

As the global balance of power continues to shift, the EU faces mounting challenges in securing alliances and maintaining its influence. Internal political divisions, geopolitical uncertainties, and competition from emerging powers have weakened its position in the Global South, particularly in Africa. While the EU remains an important partner, it is struggling to win the "battle of hearts and minds" as Chinese investments, Russian influence, and new alliances such as BRICS+ gain traction.

Moreover, the EU's historical relationship with Africa—rooted in colonial legacies—remains a point of contention. Many Africans view the EU's conditional approach to aid and development as self-serving, exacerbating a trust deficit that undermines efforts to build sustainable partnerships. If the EU is to maintain a meaningful role in Africa, it must rethink its engagement strategy, moving beyond outdated frameworks and embracing

a genuinely equal and mutually beneficial partnership.

### **Framing the Narrative: The African Perspective on the AU-EU Relationship**

Over the past two decades, Africa's relationship with the EU has faced distinct challenges, largely centered around issues of agency, equity, and mutual respect. A key concern for Africa is how to break away from the prevailing dynamic in which "the one who holds the purse sets the agenda." Many African stakeholders perceive the EU as overly dominant in shaping the terms of engagement, often sidelining African priorities and imposing strategies with limited consultation. The persistent "post-colonial" mindset in EU-Africa relations reinforces a unidirectional influence, where the EU dictates the framework of cooperation—even on issues central to Africa's governance, security, and development—thereby patronizing and undermining Africa's agency.

### **Diverging Perspectives on Governance**

Governance remains a critical area of divergence between Africa and the EU, with stark differences in priorities, approaches, and perceptions. The EU's governance agenda—rooted in human rights, democracy, and the rule of law—is often perceived by African nations as prescriptive, inconsistent, and self-serving. Africans view the EU's emphasis on imposing norms and values that include LGBTQI+ rights, electoral transparency, and adherence to international legal frameworks like the International Criminal Court (ICC) as external impositions that fail to align with Africa's sociocultural contexts, historical trajectories, and governance models.

In response, African leaders have increasingly called for a more balanced

partnership—one based on mutual respect, reciprocity, and collaborative problem-solving rather than a top-down approach. The African Union (AU) continues to champion the principle of “African solutions to African problems,” advocating for regionally driven responses to governance and security challenges. There is also a growing insistence on moving beyond the traditional donor-recipient dynamic toward a model that prioritizes African agency. Many African leaders argue that governance should be addressed as part of a broader, mutually beneficial partnership rather than as a set of conditions tied to aid and trade agreements. These conditions, in their view, undermine national sovereignty and fail to acknowledge Africa’s capacity to navigate its governance challenges on its terms.

### **Energy, Climate Commitments, and Perceived Double Standards**

While sustainable energy remains a vital area of collaboration between Africa and the EU, it is also a domain of conflicting priorities and perspectives. The EU’s emphasis on a green energy transition aligns with its global climate commitments, yet Africa’s developmental aspirations present a more complex narrative of equity, growth, and sustainability. Many African nations assert their right to expand energy consumption to drive economic development, industrialization, and improved living standards. They argue that the global push for emissions reduction places an unfair burden on countries that have historically contributed the least to climate change while limiting their economic growth potential.

Frustration over EU inconsistencies has further strained relations. Since the AU-EU Summit in Brussels in 2022, African leaders have grown increasingly skeptical about the EU’s delivery on key commitments, particularly under the Global Gateway

infrastructure strategy and climate finance pledges. The EU’s response to the energy crisis triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine—marked by increased investments in fossil fuels, including new gas import deals—has exposed what many Africans see as a double standard. While African nations are urged to transition to renewable energy, the EU’s continued reliance on fossil fuels for its own energy security underscores a disconnect between rhetoric and practice.

### **Tensions Over the ICC and Governance Selectivity**

Another key point of contention is the EU’s strong support for the International Criminal Court (ICC). Many African leaders argue that the ICC disproportionately targets African states and leaders while failing to hold Western actors accountable for alleged violations. This perception of selective justice has fueled skepticism toward the EU’s broader governance agenda.

Additionally, the EU has been criticized for adopting a selective approach to governance, promoting democratic values in principle while simultaneously supporting authoritarian regimes when it serves its strategic interests—particularly in regions critical to European stability, trade, or migration control. This perceived double standard has further eroded trust in the partnership.

### **Toward a More Equitable AU-EU Relationship**

For the AU-EU relationship to evolve into a truly equal partnership, European policymakers must acknowledge African perspectives and realities. Addressing these divergences requires a shift from prescriptive policies toward inclusive, dialogue-driven cooperation that respects Africa’s agency and

strategic priorities. Only by bridging these divides can both continents build a sustainable and mutually beneficial partnership that reflects the changing global order.

### **Partnership of “Equals”: Lofty Ideal or Hollow Rhetoric?**

Major AU- EU policy declarations, including those from the 6th AU- EU Summit in 2022, consistently advocate for a “partnership of equals.” These declarations emphasize shared values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law while highlighting mutual interests in addressing climate change, security, economic development, and migration. They stress the importance of reciprocity—building a relationship based on shared ownership, mutual accountability, and respect. The shift in language from a “partnership for Africa” to a “partnership with Africa” has been framed as evidence of growing African agency in shaping the relationship.

However, while these statements outline an ambitious vision, critics argue that such aspirations often remain rhetorical and do not translate into meaningful shifts in the power dynamics between the AU and the EU. Structural imbalances persist in bargaining power, economic strength, and negotiating capacity. The EU operates with complex but unified policy positions, whereas Africa, despite the AU’s coordinating role, remains fragmented in its approach. Furthermore, the strategic partnership documents that define AU-EU relations are often drafted with significant EU influence, further reinforcing asymmetry.

A key issue is the EU’s conditional financing approach, which allows it to retain substantial control over funding priorities. This dynamic can be summarized as: “We

finance what you ask us, provided that you ask us what we want to finance.” In practice, EU funding often aligns with its strategic interests rather than African priorities.

### **Persistent Asymmetries and African Frustrations**

African leaders frequently express frustration over the EU’s perceived inflexibility on critical issues such as migration, fair trade agreements, and equitable climate financing. A common sentiment is that “the EU never makes concessions on issues that really matter to us.” Despite rhetorical commitments to mutual interests, Africa continues to be seen largely as an aid recipient rather than an equal partner. The legacy of dependency remains deeply embedded in many aspects of the relationship.

Given these realities, some experts argue that a more realistic framing would be a “fair partnership” rather than a “partnership of equals.” They point to alternative models, such as the Africa-India partnership, which Prime Minister Narendra Modi has promoted as a collaboration between two developing regions with equal populations, shared colonial histories, and a future based on South-South cooperation.

Counterarguments suggest that the notion of a “partnership of equals” does not necessarily imply parity in power but rather an open and honest dialogue on shared priorities and the way forward. However, African voices are often marginalized in decision-making processes, reinforcing perceptions of inequality and undermining the spirit of equal partnership.

### **Signs of a Shifting Balance**

Despite these persistent disparities, there are

signs of a gradual power shift. Africa's growing assertiveness on the global stage is reshaping the narrative from dependency to mutual interest. The AU's inclusion in the G20 and its expanding role in platforms like BRICS+ signal a more prominent geopolitical position for the continent. Similarly, the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) reflects Africa's agency and intent to position itself as a unified and influential economic bloc.

However, the journey toward a truly equal partnership remains long and complex. Overcoming current asymmetries will require the EU to adopt a more flexible and inclusive approach—one that moves beyond paternalism and acknowledges Africa's agency. At the same time, the AU must strengthen its cohesion and assert its priorities more proactively. Achieving a balanced relationship will demand sustained efforts from both sides to redefine their interactions and address the historical power imbalances that continue to shape AU-EU relations.

### Europe as a Competitive Alternative for Africa: Can the Global Gateway Counter China's BRI?

The European Union's (EU) Global Gateway initiative represents an ambitious attempt to reconcile two often competing objectives: promoting sustainable development in Africa while simultaneously advancing the EU's geostrategic and economic interests. On the one hand, it seeks to foster sustainable growth by addressing Africa's critical infrastructure and investment needs. On the other hand, it is designed to counter the growing influence of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and secure partnerships in strategic sectors such as energy, digital infrastructure, and transport.

With a target of mobilizing €300 billion in investment from the EU budget, member states, and the private sector between 2021 and 2027—half of which is allocated to Africa—the initiative underscores the EU's recognition of Africa's growing strategic importance in shaping the global order. Branded as a "values-based" alternative to China's BRI, the Global Gateway represents a shift from traditional development aid toward stimulating trade, investment, and economic partnerships. However, its success will depend on how well it aligns with Africa's most pressing priorities.

### Flagship Projects and African Priorities

The Global Gateway has identified 225 flagship projects as tangible symbols of its commitment to reshaping Africa-EU relations. These projects span a range of sectors, including:

- **Infrastructure:** Upgrading transport corridors to enhance trade and logistics across Africa.
- **Digital Connectivity:** Expanding digital access and integration through submarine cable installations.
- **Health Security:** Supporting local vaccine manufacturing to strengthen Africa's healthcare resilience.
- **Clean Energy:** Investing in geothermal, solar, and hydrogen projects in Kenya, Morocco, and Namibia to support Africa's green transition.

These investments align with Africa's demand for equal partnerships focused on industrialization, infrastructure development, and economic empowerment. However, concerns persist over whether the initiative will deliver on its promises or if it will become yet another unfulfilled commitment. Another key challenge is ensuring that these projects align with Africa's Agenda 2063, the

continent's long-term development vision. Without a strong connection to Africa's own priorities, skepticism over the initiative's true impact will continue.

### **China's Enduring Influence in Africa**

Meanwhile, China remains a dominant economic partner for many African nations, offering large-scale investments in hard infrastructure and capitalizing on Africa's youthful population and growing consumer market. Chinese financing has played a pivotal role in addressing Africa's infrastructure deficit, particularly in transport, energy, and industrial development. Moreover, China's approach—characterized by fewer conditionalities and a pragmatic, business-oriented model—has made it an attractive partner for African governments seeking rapid development solutions.

While the EU aims to reset its partnership with Africa, competing with China in a field where Beijing has been deeply entrenched for over a decade remains an uphill task. African nations increasingly view China and other emerging powers as offering more flexible, less intrusive partnerships, in contrast to the EU's conditional approach to funding and governance.

### **The Challenge of Rebuilding Trust and Relevance**

Although recent European policies signal a strategic shift towards Africa, questions remain about their true intentions whether the effort is to re-imagine the relationship with a new perspective or to demand Africa to behave the way Europe wants it since it is receiving money. Hence, there is value for money, and Africa should meet Europe's demand, ignoring Africa's most pressing needs and its autonomy to make choices.

One area of concern is the European Peace Facility (EPF)—whether it will genuinely serve Africa's security interests or become an instrument for advancing European priorities at the expense of African agency.

Ultimately, for the EU to position itself as a credible and competitive alternative to China, it must go beyond rhetoric and ensure that its commitments translate into tangible, African-led development outcomes. Otherwise, the Global Gateway risks being perceived as just another geopolitical maneuver rather than a genuine effort to build a sustainable and equitable partnership with Africa. What should never be ignored in all this is the fact that it is the convergence of interests that dictate the African position, not a conviction that altruism drives the policy of this or that country which can only be the result of naivety.

### **The Importance of Structural Transformation in AU's Partnership Agreements**

As discussions on revitalizing the AU-EU partnership continue, the African Union (AU) faces a complex set of challenges. In Europe, the rise of right-wing and far-right parties could lead to increased polarization and fragmentation of EU foreign policy, potentially disrupting engagement with Africa. These political shifts may also push the EU towards a transactional approach, prioritizing deal-making over long-term strategic cooperation. Given this evolving landscape, the AU must set clear priorities and strengthen its institutional capacity to engage with partners on a more equal footing. First of all, of course, it has to put its house in order taking into account how much the future is bound to be more complex and the challenges more difficult.

## Breaking Away from the North-South Dependency Model

A core issue in AU-EU relations is the persistence of North-South asymmetries, where Africa remains heavily dependent on European funding. To redefine this dynamic, Africa must move toward a co-financing model, where African states contribute their own resources alongside EU funding. This would enhance Africa's autonomy in shaping its priorities, particularly in financing its own institutions rather than relying on external support. The African Union's dependence on EU funding for peace missions is a case in point—Africa must build and sustain independent institutions using its own resources. The new guiding principle should be: "No African solutions to African problems without African resources to build and sustain African institutions."

## Structural Imbalances in AU-EU Trade Relations

The AU-EU trade relationship remains deeply imbalanced, reinforcing Africa's traditional role as an exporter of raw materials while the EU supplies high-value manufactured goods. Currently, two-thirds of Africa's exports to the EU consist of raw materials and energy, whereas European exports to Africa are largely industrial and technology-based products. This imbalance hampers Africa's industrialization, trapping it in a cycle of commodity dependency and preventing the continent from moving up the value chain.

Industrialization is central to Africa's economic transformation. With abundant natural resources and a growing workforce, Africa has a unique opportunity to shift from exporting raw materials to producing finished goods. Developing industries in mineral processing, agricultural transformation, and textile manufacturing can significantly

increase value, create jobs, and enhance economic resilience. Without this shift, the possibility of meaningful structural transformation will remain elusive.

## Fragmentation in Economic Partnerships and the AfCFTA Challenge

Africa's economic partnerships with the EU remain fragmented, often negotiated at the national or regional level rather than as a unified bloc. This weakens Africa's bargaining position and risks undermining the objectives of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which aims to create a single African market. Such fragmentation could lead to trade distortions and complicate efforts to strengthen intra-African trade.

To address this, African countries must:

- Unify their trade policies to negotiate as a collective entity.
- Overcome infrastructure deficits and non-tariff barriers that hinder intra-African commerce.
- Push the EU to shift from aid and trade-based engagement toward greater investment in productive sectors, particularly infrastructure, industrialization, and technology transfer.

## The Governance Factor: Strengthening Internal Accountability

Africa's governance challenges—including corruption, human rights violations, and weak economic stewardship—have historically affected its partnerships. Too often, African political elites prioritize external recognition over domestic accountability, making decisions based on geopolitical optics rather than negotiating for Africa's best interests. Being invited to international summits is sometimes seen as a symbol of status rather than an opportunity

to secure meaningful economic gains.

For Africa's partnerships to truly transform, governance structures must also change. African states must:

- Reduce dependency on external aid by mobilizing domestic resources effectively.
- Ensure fairer distribution of natural wealth to benefit citizens rather than political elites.
- Enhance state legitimacy through policies that prioritize economic inclusion and development.

Ultimately, structural transformation in Africa's partnerships cannot be achieved without parallel transformation in domestic governance. Africa must put its own house in order, shifting from reactive diplomacy to proactive strategy and ensuring that international partnerships serve its long-term development goals rather than external interests.

### **Towards a More Effective and Equitable AU-EU Partnership**

The AU-EU relationship stands at a pivotal moment in a rapidly evolving global landscape. Africa is undergoing profound economic, societal, and political transformations, presenting both opportunities and challenges. With abundant natural resources, a growing workforce, an expanding middle class, and emerging business sectors, Africa offers undeniable potential for global partnerships. However, this narrative of opportunity must not obscure the structural imbalances the continent faces, including:

- Rising public debt levels and weak domestic revenue mobilization.
- There is a need for stronger public finance management to ensure

sustainable development.

- Limited regional integration, despite the ambitions of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)—it remains more costly to trade within Africa than to export outside the continent.

These economic imbalances contribute to fragile growth patterns, where positive trends do not always translate into widespread prosperity. The much-discussed demographic dividend can only be realized through strategic investments in education, job creation, and structural transformation. Africa must develop new growth models that prioritize economic diversification, industrialization, inclusive development, and human capital enhancement. Moreover, Africa must take greater responsibility for its own security, reducing dependence on external actors.

Despite notable economic progress, growth has not been inclusive enough to significantly curb poverty or generate sufficient jobs. These factors shape Africa's global partnerships, particularly its engagement with the EU.

### **Redefining the AU-EU Partnership: A Shift Towards Equality**

To build a more balanced and mutually beneficial partnership, Africa must move beyond a "donor-recipient" dynamic and establish a relationship based on shared interests. A partnership aligned with the principles of Agenda 2063—Africa's strategic vision for economic transformation—should be the guiding framework. This requires:

- Moving away from Eurocentric models of engagement and treating Africa as an equal partner rather than a beneficiary.
- Fostering regional integration, strengthening intra-African trade, and

reducing dependency on external markets.

- Driving industrialization and leveraging Africa's demographic dividend to reshape global economic dynamics.

However, achieving these goals demands political will, collective action, and strategic investment in key sectors such as infrastructure, education, and governance. The EU must also streamline its Africa strategies, ensuring they are coherent, transparent, and aligned with Africa's priorities. A unified and consistent European approach will build trust and unlock the full potential of Africa-Europe collaboration in an increasingly multipolar world.

### Governance: Bridging the Divide

Governance remains both a pillar of AU-EU cooperation and a major source of divergence. Addressing these differences requires a balanced and inclusive approach that recognizes Africa's agency and diverse governance pathways. Collaborative efforts should:

- Prioritize shared objectives such as stability, development, and human rights, while avoiding prescriptive models and double standards.
- Shift away from conditionality-based engagement, which has often hindered trust and led to one-sided partnerships.
- Foster mutual respect and reciprocity, ensuring governance discussions reflect African priorities rather than externally imposed frameworks.

By adopting a more equitable governance approach, Africa and the EU can create a partnership that is both effective and sustainable.

### Addressing Policy Disagreements: A Path Forward

Major policy misalignments in peace and security, multilateral reforms, migration, and mobility continue to strain AU-EU relations. These differences must be tackled proactively, particularly in the lead-up to the 7th AU-EU Summit in 2025. A reset in engagement requires:

- Joint solutions that align with both sides' strategic interests while respecting Africa's sovereignty and agency.
- Moving beyond prescriptive policies and embracing genuine dialogue as the foundation of cooperation.
- Recognizing that Europe's self-perception as an altruistic force in Africa has not delivered transformative development. Sustainable progress must come from collaborative, interest-based partnerships, not one-sided aid paradigms.

Ultimately, fostering a balanced, respectful, and future-oriented AU-EU partnership requires rethinking outdated models, embracing Africa's evolving role in global affairs, and committing to long-term, mutually beneficial cooperation.

### Conclusions

The Africa-EU partnership is a multi-actor collaboration shaped by both necessity and the evolving geopolitical uncertainties. The AU-EU framework represents a sophisticated and inclusive model of cooperation, signaling a shift beyond traditional donor-recipient dynamics toward mutual respect, shared objectives, and strategic engagement. However, realizing these aspirations requires bridging trust gaps, aligning priorities, and ensuring that cooperation delivers tangible benefits for the citizens of both continents.

By prioritizing institutional dialogue and people-centered initiatives, the AU-EU partnership has the potential to drive transformative change and serve as a global model for equitable international cooperation.

The AU and EU face a range of pressing challenges—from climate change and migration to economic development and security—that demand joint action. By pooling resources and expertise, both regional blocs can tackle shared priorities more effectively, foster sustainable economic growth, and create mutually beneficial opportunities. However, ensuring long-term success requires transparency, accountability, and a genuine commitment to equitable partnerships. Joint action plans must be guided by inclusivity and shared ownership, ensuring that strategies reflect the aspirations of African and European citizens alike.

### **Africa's Strategic Role in the Partnership**

While interdependence between the AU and EU is evident, Africa must take the lead in shaping the partnership to serve its strategic interests. The AU needs to:

- Develop a cohesive and proactive strategy to engage with the EU, moving away from fragmentation and presenting a unified African position in negotiations.
- Leverage its growing geopolitical influence to secure more favorable terms in partnership agreements.
- Strengthen institutional capacity to ensure effective implementation and accountability in joint projects.

By doing so, Africa can transition from being a passive participant to a co-architect of the partnership, ensuring that cooperation leads

to tangible development outcomes. The Paris Agreement serves as a successful example of Africa and Europe working together on global challenges, demonstrating the potential for strategic collaboration when both continents align their interests.

### **Recalibrating Europe's Approach**

In an era of increasing global competition, the EU must reassess its engagement with Africa to consolidate its partnerships. This requires:

- Upgrading public diplomacy to better understand and respond to African priorities.
- Shifting from a top-down approach to one that genuinely incorporates African perspectives and respects African agency.
- Delivering on commitments in a timely manner, ensuring that promises translate into concrete action and impact.

A more responsive, flexible, and interest-based engagement will restore trust and strengthen cooperation, preventing Africa from turning to alternative partners that may offer more pragmatic and less conditional forms of collaboration. It should thus be taken for granted that whenever Africa makes a choice what lies behind the preference is the convergence of interests and is not driven by any other consideration.

### **Key Steps Toward a Strategic AU-EU Alliance**

To move from a traditional North-South aid model toward a true strategic alliance based on shared interests, Africa and the EU must take the following steps:

1. **Redefine Engagement Frameworks:** the values that underpin outdated models like

the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP)-EU partnership should be reassessed with dynamic, co-development-oriented agreements that align with Africa's aspirations for self-reliance and economic autonomy. This shift would signal a commitment to equality and mutual respect.

#### 2. Prioritize Critical Investments:

- Increased funding in mutual areas of interest, such as green energy (hydrogen, solar, and geothermal).
- Investments in value-added manufacturing to reduce Africa's dependence on raw material exports.
- Technology transfer and digital transformation initiatives to empower Africa's youth and entrepreneurs, unlocking the continent's vast potential.

**3. Strengthen Local Capacity:** The partnership should support Africa in building strong institutions and governance mechanisms while respecting Africa's agency in developing homegrown solutions to its challenges. Capacity-building efforts must emphasize sustainability, accountability, and inclusivity.

**4. Foster Trust through Reciprocity:** To restore confidence in the AU-EU partnership, Europe must move away from paternalistic approaches and adopt a genuine dialogue-based model, rooted in shared ownership, mutual interests, and respect.

A redefined AU-EU partnership—grounded in shared prosperity, strategic investments, and mutual respect—will not only transform Africa's economic and governance reality but also strengthen Europe's position as a trusted partner in an evolving global order. By breaking away from outdated paradigms and embracing a forward-looking, interest-driven partnership, Africa and Europe can shape a new, equitable chapter in their longstanding relationship.