

Multilateral Cooperation between the EU and Africa

Resetting the Agenda

The EU presents itself as a 'privileged partner' of Africa and characterises the latter as a 'natural partner' in the search for a new world order, an order based on norms, rules and greater equity for developing states. Africa's geo-strategic importance due to its proximity to Europe, its growing value as a trading and investment partner, and the continent's effectiveness and importance as a role player in the southern hemisphere and multilateral fora, are also matters of high and continued saliency in European strategic perceptions. These goals could only be realised if Africa can finally overcome underdevelopment, political instability, and becoming a modern, stable and predictable community of states; hence the importance of the EU role as a donor, strategic and developmental partner for Africa.

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Introduction

By all accounts, multilateralism,¹ as an alternative to orthodox bilateralism and state centrism, is the emerging paradigm for future international relations. While the world is still dominated by bilateralism and unipolarism (albeit fading), there is a visible if not inexorable shift towards a multilateral, post-Westphalian identity and globalisation. While the sovereign national state will no doubt – and for some time to come – remain the dominant reference point for national governments and citizens alike, issues like peace and security, finance and trade, technology, pandemics, energy availability, human rights and global warming – in the sense that they know no borders and affect mankind as a whole – will inevitably continue to be internationalised and progressively multilateralised.

Both the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU) could be characterised as 'champions of multilateralism'. At the same time, however, they are not identical organisations, and the manner in which they exercise and promote multilateralism differs in many respects. For the EU, multilateralism is a regional necessity as well as a universal mission. As stated by EU President José Manuel Barroso.²

Globalisation has ... thrown up non-traditional security challenges with no respect for national frontiers. Global pandemics can spread faster; a lack of secure energy could push us into a worldwide recession; and climate change could have serious geopolitical and social repercussions. Multilateral engagement is essential for dealing with threats. The EU has multilateralism in its DNA ... The EU's commitment to the multilateral system of global governance through the UN and other bodies are clear.

In comparison with the EU, the AU exercises multilateralism in a more limited fashion. It is not intended as an exercise with a global scope or mission as that of the EU, focusing particularly on the African continent in regional context. It manifests mainly on the diplomatic level, particularly on intra-African continental or AU level, the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) as well as other multilateral institutions, particularly the United Nations (UN) and the EU.

The *raison d'être* of the Africa–EU Partnership

Although the EU's special engagement with Africa goes back to the Treaty of Rome in 1958, the notion of a strategic political partnership and dialogue became policy only at the first Africa–EU summit in Cairo in 2000. Changed global circumstances and strong competition for African cooperation and goodwill (particularly from China), coupled with the imperative to strengthen and protect European security interests, forced Brussels to look at Africa as a neighbouring continent with new eyes and revise the methodology of traditional trade and aid relationship. From this perspective, the Joint Africa–EU Strategy (JAES) concluded

at the Lisbon summit in 2007 could be viewed as a vehicle 'for up-scaling European commitment to economic and political advancement in a strong, united African ally, in exchange for African positions that are more sympathetic to European needs and expectations bilaterally and globally'.³

As pronounced by the European Commission in 2007,

Africa is now at the heart of international politics, but what is genuinely new is that Africa ... is emerging, not as a development issue, but as a political actor in its own right. It is becoming increasingly clear that Africa matters – as a political voice, as an economic force and as a huge source of human, cultural, natural and scientific potential ... The EU and Africa are old partners, but in a world transformed ... the EU remains an important partner of Africa ... [If] the EU wants to remain a privileged partner and make the most of its relations with Africa, it must be willing to reinforce, and in some cases reinvent, the current relationship – institutionally, politically and culturally. The adoption of the EU's Africa Strategy in 2005 was an important first step but it is now time to move on from a strategy for Africa towards a political partnership with Africa.⁴

Although Africa is less forthcoming about reciprocating the depiction of a 'special relationship' with the EU, and seldom, if ever, takes the initiative or proclaims the importance of the relationship, it mostly shows willingness to negotiate and cooperate with the latter on matters of mutual concern. Acting in concert mainly through the AU and the RECs, African countries actively engage the EU to find solutions to the continent's perennial problems, particularly peace and security, underdevelopment, poverty, deficiencies in governance and human rights,

and marginalisation in global affairs, as well as to promote, institutionalise and expedite regional integration. In this endeavour, Africa realises the utility and importance of a strategic multilateral partnership with the EU – its powerful and affluent continental neighbour. This does not mean, however, that there is an exact confluence between African and EU pursuits and interests. Africa pursues a more restrictive agenda as compared to the EU's more global and expansive one: the EU looks for global and regional partners to support and enhance its mission and quest for greater international relevance, while Africa is more interested in reliable development, trading and security partners, as well as diplomatic support for the causes pursued by itself and the rest of the 'global South'. Where their interests do meet is the realisation that the stability, security and the eradication of poverty and underdevelopment in the African region affect both, albeit in different ways, and are of mutual interest. Therefore, while the relationship is essentially an asymmetrical one in terms of political/economic/developmental power, it is necessitated by various degrees of mutual dependence of a complex nature.

A New Phase of AU/EU Interaction

In the period between the Treaty of Rome (1958) up to the conclusion of the JAES of 2007, the EU interface with Africa was mainly through the instrumentality of African–Caribbean–Pacific (ACP) trade and development agreements, successively under the Yaoundé, Lomé and Cotonou compacts. The EU also interacted bilaterally, and still does, with most individual African states, mainly with regard to conventional matters such as bilateral diplomatic representation, aid, security and

humanitarian assistance. Delegations representing the European Commission are situated in 41 African capitals. Most members of the EU maintain their own diplomatic relations with African states, while some have also separate official development assistance (ODA) programmes going. In the case of South Africa, the bilateral course was also followed with the conclusion of the comprehensive Trade, Development and Cooperation Agreement (TDCA) in 2000 and the Strategic Partnership (2007). With regard to the regional Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), the EU follows an eclectic approach as it deals with individual states as well as with regional groupings. As far as sub-regions are concerned, apart from interaction with the RECs, the EU engages with the Euro–Med Partnership and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in Africa north of the Sahara.

The JAES builds on the existing complicated, if not cumbersome, diplomatic/bureaucratic architecture put in place over time, reflecting the scope, regularity and continuation of interaction. In its multilateral interactions, as in the case of the JAES in particular, the EU 'takes Africa as one' working by way of annual 'college-to-college' meetings between the European Commission (EC) and the AU Commission, as well as the Brussels-based Africa Working Group (COAFR). For the purpose of multilateral interaction, the EU–Africa dialogue takes place by way of the following:

1. Summits every three years
2. Africa/EU ministerial meetings
3. Joint Africa–EU task force
4. Joint informal Africa/EU expert groups
5. Interaction between the European Parliament (EP) and the Pan-African Parliament (PAP)

Multilateralism is the EU's preferred way of international interaction, also and particularly

with Africa⁵ whom it regards as a 'natural partner'. For this reason it prefers to deal with Africa, a continent comprising 54 nation states, 'as one'.⁶ According to the EU Commission,

... for too long the EU's relations with Africa have been too fragmented, both in policy formulation and implementation ... neither Europe nor Africa can afford to sustain this situation. The purpose of this Strategy for Africa is to give the EU a comprehensive, integrated and long-term framework for its relations with the African continent ... The EU Strategy for Africa will, therefore, for the first time, address Africa as one entity. Under this Strategy, the EU will reinforce its dialogue with pan-African institutions.⁷

What emerges from this is the architecture for EU/Africa multilateral engagement with the emphasis on exploiting the recently revised Cotonou Agreement, the Trade and Development Agreement (TDCA) and the EU–Mediterranean partnership, covering respectively EU relations with sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa and the Maghreb, with the principal objective of promoting the achievement of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG) in Africa and strengthening the sound strategic partnership between an enlarged Europe and a re-emerging Africa.

The 'new phase' in the Africa–EU relations was introduced by the adoption of the 2007 JAES, which entails the following:

A solid framework for long-term, systematic and well integrated cooperation ... a new strategic partnership and a Joint Africa–EU Strategy as a political vision and roadmap for the future cooperation between the two continents.⁸

The holistic view of Africa is the centrepiece – the new paradigm – underpinning the EU's

strategy. It accords with Africa's view of itself, being in line with the traditional intra-African policies of pan-Africanism, African unity, African fraternity and the post-colonial quest for African integration.⁹ Intensified multilateral intercontinental interaction is, therefore, the logical outcome of the JAES arrangement, the common meeting point between the two regional actors.

In dealing with 'Africa as one', the EU engages the AU mainly through the AU Commission (AUC). In contrast to other regional and global organisations, including the UN, the EU and the AU operate in their legally designated areas almost as super states taking binding decisions on behalf of all their member states. This is a unique example in the field of interregional multilateral/bilateral cooperation in the sense that it brings together 80 states under one roof, an important example of EU's commitment to 'multilateral global governance', as outlined by Barroso.

While the logic of multilateralism underscores the JAES, it is not necessarily the optimal approach when dealing with all the issue areas and the complex agenda affecting both sides, considering the restrictive structural–functional parameters of the systems the EU and the AU operate from respectively. The EU, through its various structures and procedures, applies supra-nationalism (federalism) and state centrism eclectically and pragmatically.¹⁰ Depending on its mandate in each specific case, it may act autonomously, in tandem or in competition with its member states. The AU, on the other hand, being confederal/intergovernmental, can only act by way of consensus among all its member states. Significantly, it has yet made no shift, not even a partial one, from state-centrism to supra-nationalism as the EU did in its trade and development policies. It does not deviate from the paradigm of intergovernmental

or interstate cooperation and can only make binding decisions by way of consensus of all its 53 member states.¹¹ These systemic and procedural differences render the EU and the AU and its family of regional economic communities (RECs) structurally and functionally two very different types of regional organisations. Both are directly and uniquely affected by the particularistic parameters of their respective policy environments, notably in terms of their respective capabilities, freedom to act, agendas and regional mandates.

The fact that multilateral diplomacy is the primary foreign policy instrument available to both the AU and the EU brings both advantages and disadvantages. Most importantly, in an environment still strongly dominated by conventional nation states, the political influence of both the EU and the AU is restricted in determining the global agenda. Influencing the global agenda, albeit for different objectives, is an important goal of both role players, but at the same time they have to contend with the dominance by the major powers, acting individually or in concert as permanent members of the UN Security Council, the G8 and the G20 in particular. Both parties suffer from a 'deficit of recognition', regionally and globally. Both are confronted with similar problems of relevance impacting on the role they could or should play in shaping their own respective regional environments as well as the future of the world. On the other hand, speaking with one voice in a multilateral context is an important leverage factor in international fora, particularly in the UN's General Assembly, its Specialised Agencies, affecting decisions like peace and security, the structuring or restructuring of the global financial and trade architecture, moral issues and global warming.

For these reasons, the EU in particular, due to its nature as an international actor, favours

a comprehensive multilateral 'soft power' system through which it can exercise its influence towards bringing about effective, worldwide, rules-based international dispensation to deal with major world and regional issues. Africa basically shares these objectives, but engages the multilateral approach specifically as an instrument for the advancement of African interests on intra- as well as on extra-continental levels. Notably, the AU is less messianic and expansive than the EU about a global application of multilateralism, engaging it primarily with regard to continental issues and North-South inequities. The EU, more than Africa, pursues a revisionist brand of multilateralism. It aspires to emerge as a normative global role player, based on the conviction that the future of its own integration model and the wellbeing of its citizens are dependent on the evolution of a world governed by norms and rules. African multilateralism in turn is more inward looking, with primarily a trade, developmental, and peace and security focus, concentrating more specifically on greater equity between North and South, the resolution of continental developmental issues, and peace and security problems by influencing the international agenda, rather than seeking recognition as a global role player, competing, as it were, with the major powers. Having been at the receiving end of external exploitation for centuries, and still struggling for its rightful place in the sun in an utterly competitive world, multilateral engagement gives Africa some leverage to escape the shackles of the past and assert itself as a co-architect, with the EU, the UN, the G20 the Brics formation (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and other multilateral organisations, of a new global order which is more equal, more democratic and more accommodating towards the problems of the developing world.

Common Values and Objectives for effective multilateralism

In its public articulation of the relationship, the EU downplays any notion of inequality or asymmetry, being well aware that it could be a stumbling block – a source of African hesitation, and even reluctance, to join the partnership. The emphasis is, therefore, on developing an *uninhibited, spontaneous and cooperative partnership*. The EU is also well aware of a persistent residue of historical scepticism on the part of Africa, and that its real intentions, especially as a post-colonial power, are being second-guessed by the latter. In idealistic, if not patronising, fashion, it is wont to characterise its interface with Africa as a partnership inspired by common values and compatible policies. Since the 2000 Cairo Africa/EU summit, the EU has been at pains to create the impression that it was abandoning its old ways, putting the emphasis on common values and objectives underpinning the relationship, using euphemistic, sometimes patronising terminology such as ‘co-ownership’, ‘partnership’, ‘joint action’, ‘co-management’, ‘co-responsibility’, ‘inter-dependence’, etc., to characterise the relationship.

According to the Council,

Africa and the EU [must] move away from a traditional relationship and forge a real partnership characterised by equality and the pursuit of common objectives ... To integrate in our agenda common responses to global challenges and strengthen our dialogue and cooperation in the multilateral context.¹²

Also, according to the Council,

Africa and Europe are bound together by history, culture, geography, a common future, as

well as by a community of values: the respect for human rights, freedom, equality, solidarity, justice, the rule of law and democracy as enshrined in the relevant international agreements and in the constitutive acts of our respective unions.¹³

This statement, insofar as it refers to history, culture, geography and a common future – with some provisos – is basically true. To add to the list, both Europe and Africa share similar ideals about regionalisation, and both try to promote their international agendas through the instrumentality of soft power, multilateralism and rules-based international interaction.

However, the EU’s statement regarding a ‘community of values’ should be qualified. On the existential/ideological level, Europe is from the developed rich north while Africa is from the developing generally poor south; Europe is unequivocally part of the Western ‘club’ that at present dominates the global agenda, while Africa must be satisfied mostly with G8 promises and palliatives; Europe benefits from globalisation and a liberal trade regime, a situation Africa does not yet share. All these set limits, norms and conditions are on the level of closeness or intimacy of the relationship.

Realising these challenges, EU diplomacy has been shifting gears in search of greater effect, permanence and relevancy, with strategies and tactics continuously being overhauled to meet this objective. The new realities prescribe that the EU presents itself as an authentic, credible and equal partner no longer influenced by neo-colonialist and paternalistic considerations – in other words, that a new start has been made. It is therefore up to the EU to demonstrate that its role in Africa is indispensable, knowing that the contemporary African landscape is also shaped by an intensified competition for basic commodities (which Africa has

in abundance) driven by the rising growth rate of emerging Asian economies led by China and India. In its own right, Africa (or at least an increasing number of African states) seems to be on the verge of an economic take-off, moving to a better future, registering a higher growth rate even at a time of the global economic crisis.

What seems clear and unavoidable, if not inevitable, is that under the emerging scenario, Africa's range of options could increase while its dependence and vulnerability vis-à-vis Europe (and the global north) could or will decrease over time. It is realistic to expect African cooperation with Europe to become increasingly competitive, more difficult to manage, and less predictable. Obviously, JAES is a long-term strategy, but to its immediate detriment is the lack of a 'separate envelope' to finance it, which, under the more competitive circumstances, allows the AU wider options and a more independent posture than in the past.

When the 80 heads of state and government from Africa and Europe adopted the JAES in Lisbon in 2007, they agreed to pursue common interests and strategic objectives together to transcend the traditional donor-recipient focus as a partnership of equals. A European Union Memo, 11 351 articulated the shared long-term vision of Africa-EU relations in a globalised world as follows:

1. Going beyond development cooperation by opening up the Africa-EU dialogue to issues of joint political concern or interests
2. Going beyond Africa by moving away from a focus on African matters only, and openly addressing global and European issues
3. Going beyond fragmentation in supporting Africa's aspirations to find regional and continental responses to some of the most important challenges
4. Going beyond institutions in ensuring a better participation of African and European

citizens as part of an overall strengthening of civil society in the two continents

Based on this shared vision and on common principles, the JAES singles out eight specific partnerships:

1. Peace and security
2. Democratic governance and human rights
3. Trade, regional integration and infrastructure
4. Millennium development goals
5. Energy
6. Climate change
7. Migration, mobility and employment
8. Science information and peace

How does all of this translate into 'effective multilateralism'?

In view of the nature of the traditional pan-African collective decision-making style, culture, and challenges and problems, relations with the EU are of necessity multi-functional and multi-layered, requiring a broadly based structure feeding into multilateralism of 'a special kind'. Thus, the EU's approach to Africa is at the same time holistic, integrative, multi-dimensional, multi-functional, and multidisciplinary, stressing the linkage and interdependence between the various determinants of development, modernisation and stability. The so-called Solana Document¹⁴ uses this holistic approach, emphasising security, economic development and democracy as essential contributors to the establishment of order and stability in the EU's external environment:

In doing so, the EU positions itself as a major actor on the international scene, one that can propose a multi-dimensional approach to crisis-management and therefore claim the status of international power.¹⁵

In Africa, as the EU is wont to pronounce, it has found a 'natural' partner. Multilateralism is the main instrument and conduit of this partnership. Indeed, the major portion of Africa's diplomatic activities, continental and extra-continental, takes place on the multilateral level, and multilateralism is also where most of its influence reposes. With the advent of the JAES, multilateralism has overtaken conventional bilateralism as a primary mode of political interaction between Africa and the EU. The EU engages the continent multilaterally, particularly with regard to foreign policy, trade policy, security and developmental issues, and science and technology. Interregional transactions between the EU, the AU and the RECs have become increasingly prominent in recent years, shifting in focus from mainly trade and development to a broader, more inclusive, political–diplomatic–strategic perspective.

A key objective of current EU foreign policy towards Africa is 'effective multilateralism', which, according to Alvaro de Vasconcelos, aims at putting in place a specific mode or procedure of international interaction:

Summitry and strategic partnerships, both with established and aspiring global players, can ... be made to transcend the purely bilateral sphere to become privileged for jointly shaping the international agenda and, ideally, devising concerted strategies to tackle major challenges.¹⁶

This, essentially, is what the EU's revised approach to Africa proposes to achieve. As mentioned above, it prefers to deal with Africa 'as one', as a single political actor, bringing about a comprehensive multilateral architecture for dealing mainly with sustainable development, peace and security, good and effective governance, economic growth, and trade and macro-economic stability.

While cooperation between Africa and the EU has arguably not yet reached the level of effective multilateralism, the JAES entails a comprehensive strategy to achieve this goal. The three principal pillars of this endeavour are firstly, that cooperation takes place on the basis of partnership, common values, equality and joint ownership; secondly, that a panoply of common objectives, joint action plans and timelines have been put in place to deal with common interests; and thirdly, that a complex bureaucratic–institutional architecture has been established.

All these elements were consolidated in the JAES, depicted by the EU as

... a political vision and roadmap for the cooperation between the two continents in existing and new areas, going beyond the traditional donor-recipient approach, beyond institutions by involving non-State actors, and addressing global challenges such as peace and security, climate change, migration, trade and regional integration.¹⁷

Multilateralism, Complex Interdependence and Privileged Partnership

In many ways, be they political, economic or developmental, the EU is by a wide margin the stronger and more dominant partner in its multilateral interaction with Africa. This power asymmetry does not manifest in a straightforward way in policymaking for both sides, resembling the form or appearance of complex 'lattice work'. Although the EU's demanding relative politico-economic position allows it to dictate the terms of the relationship – insofar as taking the initiative in agenda setting – to dominate negotiations and to lay down the parameters of

negotiations, the new strategic partnership is driven by an acute awareness of an existential complex interdependence by both sides, with the EU more sensitive than vulnerable, and Africa more vulnerable than sensitive. This distinction is based mainly on a calculus of the respective objective regional power configurations, needs and capabilities insofar as they could impact on autonomous decision making or freedom of action and agenda setting.

In economic terms alone, the asymmetry is quite overwhelming: about 40 per cent of Africa's direct foreign investment still comes from the EU. The 27-member EU, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), has a total gross domestic product (GDP) of US\$14,8 trillion (the largest in the world, marginally bigger as that of the US with US\$14,3 trillion). Africa's collective economy stands only at US\$2,2 trillion (1999 calculation based on purchasing power parity), only slightly higher than 3 per cent of the global GDP.

Yet, substantial as these differences may be in Europe's favour, this does not give the latter dominance over Africa in the sense that it renders Africa a captive of its dependence vulnerability. Firstly, the bigger picture shows that Europe's overall international influence is on the decline and the present crisis in the Eurozone may exacerbate it. Part of this decline is reflected in the increase in South–South trade as a component of Africa's total trade, while in 2009 China has emerged as Africa's single largest trading partner. Western Europe's trade with Africa has declined from 51 per cent in 1990 to 28 per cent in 2008.¹⁸ Secondly, as competition for influence in Africa increases, its options will expand. Stronger new competitors could in time blunt Europe's competitive edge and influence in Africa. Apart from competition from the East, the EU faces 'competition' from other OECD powers, members of the

G8 and even its own members. The US, Canada and Japan have major and growing strategic interests in Africa even as they collaborate with the EU in initiatives such as the G8's Africa Action Plan and the UN-driven Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This multi-layered scenario of Africa/Europe/Western interaction renders the total picture even more opaque when considering that at G8 level there is an African Action Plan which commits the EU and some of its key members to interacting via the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). How competitive/adversarial/cooperative/mutually reinforcing these relations are, is still open to debate. Both the EU and the US try to play down the competitive nature of the new 'scramble for Africa'. EU Commissioner Louis Michel stressed that, while the EU and China might be competitors, they are also partners, and pleaded for 'trilateral cooperation'. Is this perhaps a typical case of whistling against the wind?

However, looking at the potential, durability, substance, quality and depth of EU/African relations, this scenario should not be overstressed. Europe seems to have the edge over its new competitors. What brings Africa and Europe together in a 'natural' partnership is a long history (albeit with some bad elements) of enduring quality; something the new Asian players cannot equate in the foreseeable future. In a strict material sense alone, these latecomers can make a profound impact on material- or market-related issues, as they already do, but they cannot really substitute the profound qualitative, value-adding, particularly developmental, normative dimension of European/African involvement – the unique way the two regions interact and complement one another, and their need for one another.

The problem with the current emphasis of 'trade arithmetic' is that it does not relate to

the role of the 'soft power' equation nor does it necessarily translate into long-term easy-to-get and sustainable political advantages for Europe's competitors. Although, as mentioned, Europe's relative international economic power (particularly measured against that of China and India) is on a downward trend, it still remains in a commanding position, particularly vis-à-vis Africa. While Europe cannot totally bank on the permanency of this favourable interdependence scenario, particularly against the background of the new 'scramble for Africa' by competitors from the East, the nature of the complex interdependence syndrome makes long-term future cooperation inevitable.

Evidently the EU wants to translate the Africa-interdependence scenario more permanently in its favour, hence the advent of the JAES in particular. In this quest, it probably realises that the favourable interdependence asymmetry is perhaps more apparent than real, given the value and substance of what Africa, as its neighbouring continent, can bring to the European table: particularly geopolitical strategic security, cheap and abundant labour resources, accessible energy resources, new agricultural capacity for food production, and abundant raw materials. Without access to these resources, and without Africa becoming more stable and predictable, Europe will be exposed to unwanted consequences. What Africa can bring to Europe, and vice versa, is of such a kind that neither can do without the other, and their respective futures are inextricably intertwined as a result of unique mutual dependence.

Effective multilateralism, the EU's response to the Africa challenge, is to be put to the test by practical achievements, problem solving, and success stories in Africa. While on the input side a comprehensive policy framework, institutional architecture, and implementation

and monitoring strategy are in place to provide a framework for Africa/EU relations, the output side of the equation is less straightforward, being affected mainly by self-interest, and ideological and attitudinal differences. In spite of efforts by the EU to conceal differences by emphasising altruism, benevolence and common interests,¹⁹ the relationship remains primarily and essentially interest driven, with goal and value compatibility not always part of the policy mix. While there are indeed broad areas where such compatibility does exist, it is not the case across the entire range of interaction. Attitudinal and policy incompatibility is basically due to the fact that the relationship remains, particularly in the subjective decision-making domain, an asymmetrical relationship in which the 'national interests' of the two parties do not necessarily coincide in various important aspects. Interregional multilateral interaction between Africa and the EU could be depicted, therefore, as a study of the rationale and imperatives of inevitable asymmetrical multilateral cooperation, a derivative of complex interdependence dictated by national interests on both sides.

Even so, it is important to be realistic about Africa's capacity to compete effectively, to influence the international agenda, given its objective position or rating in the global pecking order.

'Africa as One' or 'Africa as Many'?

Should one look beyond the intercontinental political/diplomatic dimension of the JAES, the wisdom and efficacy of dealing with Africa 'as one' are debatable, given the diverse and pluralistic nature of Africa's 54 separate nations. What weighs heavily against the efficacy of holistic theory in particular has been

the failure of integration and developmental efforts in the continent since the end of the colonial period.²⁰ Obviously the EU has latched onto the traditional concept of 'African unity' in an effort to facilitate multilateral cooperation. However, the rather patchy track record of the AU as well as that of its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), particularly regarding integration and development, is hardly reassuring if the same model were to be used to meet new challenges. The same applies to the comprehensive macro-African development strategies of various agencies (the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the UN, the Group of 7/8) that have proliferated since decolonisation. All these have come and gone without much of a footprint or an impact. Now the EU comes forward with yet a new 'grand plan', apparently ignoring the lessons from the past.

Given the vast differences between African countries, the holistic 'one-size-fits-all-approach' comes over as a simplification of a very complex situation, obviating alternative strategies which might be more successful. This approach is put to the test by the present economic surge on some African countries (a minority) due to the choices and policies that have been made by individual national governments. As an alternative, focusing on African countries with a good track record and solid representative institutions, or on sub-regions represented by the RECs, might prove to be a more rewarding exercise. As a symbolic statement of solidarity and mode of rationalisation for the purpose of better bureaucratic control and management of policies, the new EU strategy might make sense, but at the same time policy implementation leading to meaningful outcomes will remain problematic, as is already clear with regard to the patchy implementation of the comprehensive JAES.²¹

Since the Treaty of Rome, the EU followed an eclectic approach – Africa was lumped together with countries of the Caribbean and Pacific (hence the ACP group) while bilateral relations existed with most African countries. Presently, the JAES's 'one Africa' approach is contradicted by fragmentation in rival frameworks, particularly the bilateral Trade, Development and Cooperation Agreement (TDCA) and Joint Strategy (Partnership) with South Africa, the Euro-Med Partnership, the European Neighbourhood Policy Instrument (ENPI) as well as state centrism practised within its own ranks. A glaring contradiction is the way the Cotonou-based Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) are being implemented by the EU. As has been variously pointed out, the EPAs are not conducive to regional integration and might even reverse the process. Moreover, while singing the praises of regional integration in Africa, the Cotonou Agreement will eventually (in 2020) be replaced by six separate EPAs. Needless to say, this undermines the EU's legitimacy with regard to the JAES in particular where the promotion of regional integration is one of the 'thematic partnerships' of JAES, apart from the fact that it has been a longstanding goal of EU engagement with Africa.

The JAES does undertake to gradually integrate pre-existing rival frameworks mentioned above. At the 14th Africa–EU Ministerial Meeting of 26 April 2011, the lack of coherence between the JAES and competing frameworks was acknowledged, but apart from undertaking to improve these relationships over time, nothing meaningful or substantial was done.²² The ministerial meeting reiterated that 'there is no need for a second Action Plan that is fundamentally different in substance from the first Action Plan. The text of the Joint Strategy should remain unchanged in substance'.²³

While these contradictions may cast doubt on the legitimacy and efficacy of what the EU puts forward as a 'new vision' of Africa, it does not obviate the logic of multilateral diplomatic engagement between the two continental regions. Given the commitment of both the EU and the AU to multilateralism, this holistic and inclusive approach is, of course, a logical response. From a functional/normative/teleological point of view, therefore, both parties regard multilateralism as an instrument of diplomatic preference, as best practice, to overcome single-state actor deficiencies, and to promote their own respective interests. Quite clearly, however, a more open-minded innovative approach is needed for successful EU/Africa engagement.

Conclusion

Arguably a multilateral mode of interaction puts the EU in a strategically advantageous position vis-à-vis bilateral self-interested competitors in the context of the new 'scramble for Africa'. The JAES in particular reflects this approach, signifying the EU's commitment to a comprehensive normative multilateral approach to Africa. The EU is probably the most effective external, multilateral and normative role player in Africa, with an impact which seems more real than may always be apparent. However, the question still remains whether the EU-specific model of multilateral engagement is the optimal strategy to maintain, reinforce and consolidate the EU's traditional strengths and role in Africa. A salient question is: will the EU's model of engagement emphasising structural conditions like human rights, democracy, good governance and the rule of law prevail as a preferred alternative to the Asian normless, bilateral non-interventionist approach? In the

end, this is an important criterion to assess the notion of 'effective multilateralism' on the part of the EU.

Since the 1990s an increasing number of African states with strong ties with the EU have indeed become more democratic, more modern, better educated and economically more prosperous.²⁴ Although these developments are the result of complex circumstances, mostly indigenous, they are congruent with the norms/conditionalities of the EU model, and a catalytic impact is discernible. By contrast, China and other Asian countries follow a 'no-strings-attached' model based on 'resource-for-infrastructure concessional loans' in Africa. China, in particular, shuns an interventionist normative 'structural' agenda, but contrary to democratic Europe, Beijing's stance has more to do with its domestic politics, particularly its patchy human rights record, and its resultant stance on non-intervention than respect for national jurisdiction *per se*.

This morally disaffected approach helps it to expand its reach into many African resource producers where the authoritarian leadership seems more interested in a sustained cash flow than sustained development. This raises questions about the efficacy of the EU normative multilateral model in the competitive African environment. Current evidence is that the Asian mode of interaction with Africa is making inroads into areas where Europe has traditionally been the pre-eminent and unrivalled development partner. As a result, Europe's influence in Africa is in a phase of decline. A new 'scramble for Africa' is afoot. Western Europe's trade with Africa declined from 51 per cent 1990 to 28 per cent in 2008, and in 2009 China emerged as Africa's largest bilateral trading partner and the fifth largest investment country on the continent. South-South trade is moving upward all the time.²⁵

It is doubtful whether this trend could be stopped or reversed, not so much because of *what* the EU is doing by way of its development model of engagement, but *how* it does it. The EU seems committed to an inflexible, highly bureaucratic, top-down developmental orthodoxy to guide the practical implementation of its plans and strategies. However, while the JAES is underpinned by a comprehensive and quite formidable ‘master plan’, the EU seems at a loss as to how to implement it effectively and successfully. Particular weaknesses are deficient leadership; flawed prioritising and sequencing of the goals of development; programme-overload, overbearing top-down bureaucratic control and

dominance; confusion and duplication; insufficient funding; and generally, ineffective implementation. Indeed, the 13th Africa/EU Troika (October 2009) asked for a ‘fundamental review’, and even ‘fundamental changes’ to the strategy, but this was refused and, sticking to its guns, the EU prefers to muddle on.

With Europe experiencing its biggest crisis since World War II, with competition from other external actors increasing, and with Africa on the rise as a regional factor and with its options expanding, Europe’s future on the continent could be jeopardised, particularly if the JAES development paradigm is not reviewed and recast.

Notes and References

- In spite of various attempts to define the essence of multilateralism in all its manifestations, consensus has yet to be reached and the concept remains under-conceptualised. Modern multilateralism may manifest differently in different situations. The definition of modern multilateralism formulated by Bouchard and Peterson (*Conceptualising multilateralism – can we all just get along?* Mercury E-Paper No. 1) could serve as a basis for further theoretical refinement: ‘Three or more actors engaging in voluntary and (essentially) institutionalised international cooperation governed by norms and principles, with rules that apply (by and large) equally to all states’ (2011, p.10).
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- The EU prefers to use the reference ‘Africa’ rather than ‘AU’, ostensibly because Morocco is not a member of the latter.
- It is also its stated preference as per the Joint African–EU Strategy (JAES) to deal with Africa ‘as one’. In this article, the term ‘Africa’ also refers to the collective entity as represented by AU.
- As a rule, statements and communiqués, etc. on the EU–Africa relations emanate exclusively from the EU Commission. It is assumed that these reflect a consensus as no evidence exists about their being challenged or contradicted. This, of course, may give a one-sided, asymmetrical nature of the true state of the relationship.
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