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Strategic Competition and Cooperation in Africa

Perceptions, Implications, and Ways Forward

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European policy-makers increasingly view Africa as a theatre of strategic competition with rising powers. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has dramatically raised the stakes of geopolitical competition. It has heightened perceptions that Western interests are being challenged by rival actors, including in Africa. However, such interpretations tend to obscure Africa's growing autonomy in an increasingly competitive international order. Redefining European relations with Africa through the prism of strategic competition disproportionately focuses on challenges rather than opportunities. The current global context abounds with opportunities for partnerships that take African agency seriously and understand the influence of smart and soft power in advancing foreign policy agendas.

The emergence of a multipolar international order has profoundly changed how Africa interacts with the world. African states have entered an era of choice. An increasing number of “non-traditional actors”, mostly emerging economies from the so-called Global South, including China, India, the Gulf states and Turkey, have employed economic and trade diplomacy to build partnerships and project a combination of soft and smart influence. The preferred approach has been to expand and deepen their footprint, primarily economically, but increasingly also politically and to an extent in security and defence, in the case of China, Russia, Turkey and the Gulf states.¹

The dynamic diversification of external partnerships demonstrates that Western states, including from Europe, while remaining important, are no longer Africa's preeminent partners. This is reflected in the relative decline of the EU-27's share in Africa's external trade to 27.4% in 2021, down from 38.4% in 2000.² Similarly, traditional aid has dropped in

¹ Donelli, Federico. “UAVs and Beyond: Security and Defence Sector at the Core of Turkey's Strategy in Africa.” Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief 02, Megatrends Afrika, Berlin, 2022; Eickhoff, Karoline, and Nadine Godehardt. “China's Horn of Africa Initiative: Fostering or Fragmenting Peace?” Megatrends Afrika Working Paper 01, Megatrends Afrika, Berlin, 2022; Huliaras, Asteris, and Sophia Kalantzakos. “The Gulf States and the Horn of Africa: A New Hinterland?” *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 4 (2017): 63–73; Lacher, Wolfram. “African Conflicts amid Multipolarity: Implications of a Changing Actor Landscape.” Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief 03, Megatrends Afrika, Berlin, 2022; Cissé, Daouda. “Chinese Telecommunications Companies in Africa. Alignment with African Countries' Interests in Developing their ICT Sector?” Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief 07, Megatrends Afrika, Bonn, 2022; Sons, Sebastian. “Between Power Projection and Regional Rivalries: Saudi Arabia's Engagement in the Horn of Africa.” Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief 10, Megatrends Afrika, Berlin, 2022; Tanrıverdi Yaşar, Nebahat. “Unpacking Turkey's Security Footprint in Africa: Trends and Implications for the EU.” SWP Comment 2022/C 42, SWP/CATS Network, 2022;

² UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). “UNCTADstat. International Merchandise Trade.” New York, n.d., accessed 17/02/2023.

importance and attractiveness. Aid's share of total financial inflows to Africa has fallen from an average 34.6% (2000–2009) to 24.8% (2010–2019).³

At times, alarmism and fear have characterized Western responses to partnership diversification in Africa, for example when policy-makers have highlighted the dangers of China's "debt trap diplomacy."⁴ At a material level, the US Build Back Better initiative, the EU's Global Gateway and the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment all provide Africa with compelling partnership offers. Russia's increasing activism in Africa, together with the far-reaching and myriad repercussions of Ukraine invasion, have bolstered the idea that Africa has become an important site of strategic competition in a fractured world.⁵

European Perceptions

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, one week after the Sixth European Union-African Union Summit, has dramatically shifted Western perceptions of Moscow's activism in Africa. Russia is not just perceived as a threat to peace and security in Europe, but also as a risk to European interests in Africa. This has reinforced the notion that disruptive competitors are targeting European interests in specific locations in Africa as a strategic end (Mali and the Sahel, Central African Republic, Libya), with the ambition of expanding their activities to diminish European influence and gain local allies.⁶ Such concerns extend to the broader level of international fora.⁷ The vote on UN General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution ES-11/1 (2 March 2022) sent shockwaves through Western diplomatic circles, when almost half of Africa's states (26) declined to support the resolution condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine (1 vote against, 17 abstentions and 8 absent). A subsequent resolution condemning the Russian annexation of Ukrainian territories (ES-11/4 of 12 October 2022) received 30 African votes in favour (18 abstentions and 3 absent).

Although it is debatable whether Russia has as much political influence as some Western actors seem to suggest, the invasion of Ukraine has been a significant catalyst for the narrative that posits a necessity to outplay rivals and competitors both on the global level and in Africa.⁸ Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz called the war "an epochal tectonic shift" ("Zeitenwende"), a further shift towards a multipolar world where "different countries and models of government are competing for power and influence."⁹ The EU's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, has encouraged the EU and its member states to compete in what he calls "the geopolitical marketplace."¹⁰ An increasingly influential discourse argues that the West needs to engage Africa to defend its interests,

³ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). "OECD.stat. Aid (ODA) disbursements to countries and regions [DAC2a]." Paris, n.d., accessed 17/02/2023.

⁴ Chen, Yunnan. "Chinese Debt and the Myth of the Debt-Trap in Africa." *Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI)*, 09/12/2022. Accessed 09/02/2023; Mihalyi, David and Christoph Trebesch. "Who Lends to Africa and How? Introducing the Africa Debt Database." Kiel Working Paper 2217, Kiel Institute for the World Economy, Kiel, 2022.

⁵ Cilliers, Jakkie. "Africa in the World: Thematic Futures." 2022, accessed 17 February 2023.

⁶ Lasserre, Isabelle. "La Russie livre-t-elle une guerre par procuration contre la France en Afrique?" *Le Figaro*, 05/02/2023. Accessed 17/02/2023.

⁷ Singh, Priyal, and Gustavo de Carvalho. "Walking with the Bear? Russia and the A3 in the UN Security Council." *Policy Insights* 118, ISS, 27/10/2021.

⁸ Singh, Priyal. "Russia-Africa Relations in an Age of Renewed Great Power Competition." *Africa Report* 42, ISS, 21/11/2022.

⁹ Scholz, Olaf. "The Global Zeitenwende: How to Avoid a New Cold War in a Multipolar Era." *Foreign Affairs*, 05/12/2022. Accessed 09/02/2023.

¹⁰ Borrell, Josep. "The Global Gateway, a Brand to Boost European Action Worldwide." *European External Action Service*, 15/12/2022. Accessed 09/02/2023.

investing in alliances and partnerships in an effort to elicit friendship and cooperation from African states. The proliferation of diplomatic visits from Europe to Africa over the past year is a marker of those efforts.

With the exception of the Global Gateway Initiative, an EU plan to back infrastructure investments in developing countries, the conviction of EU decision-makers that they need to confront the challenge of competition has not yet been matched by specifics on what a strategic approach in Africa could look like, which goals and priorities should be set in the pursuit of the overall aim, and which instruments and comparative advantages Europe would need to mobilize. To build credible and robust relationships with African states, Europe will need to convince interlocutors in Africa that their aim is to build mutually beneficial partnerships, not just to out-compete rivals and deny them markets and influence.

For the time being, Europe still seems over-focused on the actions of competitors rather than reflecting on its own priorities towards Africa, and addressing past and present shortcomings. In a sense, the European emphasis on competitors as the main source of its problems, while convenient, does fail to address the deep unease in Euro-African relations, upon which Europe's competitors capitalise.

One flaw in the narrative of strategic competition is the designation of other players as competitors without sufficient nuance, as is the case vis-à-vis China, Russia and to some degree Turkey. To be sure these are not like-minded states from a European perspective. But even within this sample of three there is significant diversity in terms of objectives and approaches in Africa. The same is arguably true of their attitudes towards Europe in Africa. For example, Turkey has a far more comprehensive footprint in Africa than Russia and is far less aggressive in hurting European interests.

Finally, the interests and agency of African countries remain relatively unexplored in the European narrative. Noteworthy discursive changes are already clearly perceptible, with a renewed emphasis on “partnership” or “local ownership”.¹¹

African Agency

Africa's agency is the freedom and capacity of states and collective groupings (AU, Regional Economic Communities and Regional Mechanisms) to identify, define and pursue their interests within a changing global environment.¹² Arguably, most African countries regard this context of strategic competition as immensely favourable, as the increasing engagement of foreign powers has allowed them to multiply and diversify international partnerships. This has contributed to strong economic growth in most years since the mid-1990s, but also granted greater political leverage in dealing with external powers. It has reduced dependencies vis-à-vis traditional partners, while ostensibly showcasing alternative development pathways. For a majority of these low and lower-middle-income states, which were accustomed to continuous outside interference by donors under the guise of conditionality policies, strengthening sovereignty became a precondition for increased political autonomy. This autonomy became a necessity with regard to the choice of partners, policies and politics. The continent-wide push for state-led and infrastructure-driven development, often

¹¹ See, for example, *Shaping the Future with Africa. The Africa Strategy of the BMZ. Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. Berlin, 2023.*

¹² De Carvalho, Gustavo, Steven Gruzd, and Chido Mutangadura. “At the Table or on the Menu? Africa's Agency and the Global Order.” *Institute for Security Studies and South African Institute of International Affairs*, 2019; Accessed 09/02/2023; Soulé, Folashadé. “‘Africa+1’ Summit Diplomacy and the ‘New Scramble’ Narrative: Recentring African Agency.” *African Affairs* 119, no. 477 (2020): 633–46.

funded through Chinese loans and international financial markets, illustrates this emancipation, notwithstanding the long-term costs.¹³

Given the vulnerability of African countries to exogenous and endogenous shocks, the global shift towards a more competitive environment represents an opportunity for partner shopping, not a zero-sum game. The comparative advantage of a partnership offer in relation to perceived infrastructure, energy and industrial prerequisites to spur development is crucial. Pragmatism and interests therefore inform partnership choices. This is certainly suggested by the abstentions during the infamous UN General Assembly vote on Russia's aggression against Ukraine. International competition can be beneficial for African states, while being drawn into a major international conflict entails unnecessary risks. That is why the abstentions and absent votes in New York did not necessarily amount to alignment with Russia. Even the military regime in Mali, which is building an alliance with Russia while engulfed in a bitter divorce from France, chose to abstain. This amounts to a neo-nonalignment driven by the pluralisation of partnerships to advance national political and economic agendas.

That does not mean that abstentions at the UN General Assembly have been coherent on all levels. Refusal to condemn Russian aggression has undermined long-standing AU principles of territorial integrity and inviolability of borders.¹⁴ This inconsistency reveals a "vengeful anti-imperialism" that looks at the Ukraine war as a confrontation between "the West" and Russia, with non-alignment as a gesture against the West's record of colonialism and interference.¹⁵

African agency manifests itself also increasingly on the collective level.¹⁶ Continentally and since 2013, *Agenda 2063: The Africa we want* has laid an aspirational foundation upon which to engage partners to deliver on Africa's promise of development and human security. However, increased engagement through international fora, from the EU-AU summits to FOCAC has not inched African countries (with their different endowments) any closer to the Sustainable Development Goals, with only seven years until 2030. Africa's relations with the outside world, including the emerging powers in the Global South, remain asymmetrical. Africa's summits with China, India, Turkey or Russia are meetings where 54 states meet with a single partner.

Given the changing global context, though, collective African agency does matter, deriving strength from numbers. As the world's largest regional voting bloc, Africa carries weight not only for resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine but also for global issues like climate change, maritime security, digitalization and the necessary reform of multilateral institutions, all of which have long-standing implications for the continent and global governance.¹⁷ Given the political heterogeneity and variegated interests of 54 states, it is unrealistic to suppose that Africa will be able to speak with one voice on all matters. But the idea that harmonized and, wherever possible, joint positions are necessary to defend African interests in international fora has made significant progress. The adoption of Common Positions at the AU level and increasing efforts to coordinate between the AU and the bloc of three elected African members of the UN Security Council (A3) provide Africa with more international leverage.

¹³ Mboya, Cliff. "China's Belt and Road Initiative in the East African Community: Shaping a China-Centric Regional Order." *Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief 12*, Megatrends Afrika, 2023.

¹⁴ Handy, Paul-Simon, and Félicité Djilo, "Unpacking Africa's Divided Stance on the Ukraine War". ISS, 12/08/2022.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Edozie, Rita Kiki, and Moses Khisa. *Africa's New Global Politics: Regionalism in International Relations*. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2022.

¹⁷ On African agency at the COP27, see "Delegates Hagggle in Egypt as the Planet Burns." *Africa Confidential*, 17/11/2022. Accessed 09/02/2023; ÒGúnmódèdè, Chris Olaoluwa. "For Africa, 'Loss and Damage' Funding Is a Step Toward Climate Justice." *World Politics Review*, 23/11/2022. Accessed 09/02/2023.

Evolving AU-UN relations are also a manifestation of growing African agency, with the African Union, the Commission, and its agencies emerging as fundamental multilateral actors in global governance. Africa's growing troop contributions to UN peacekeeping and the emergence of "neighbourhood-based" collective security configurations to deal with transnational threats in Africa attest to the continent's contributions to addressing its most pressing peace and security challenges, albeit with varying degrees of success. The UN-AU partnership agreement provides a framework for fostering collaborative problem-solving that links regional and global spaces, even if tensions between sovereignty and non-indifference remain. It is no longer conceivable for the UN to respond to major global challenges in Africa – from peace and security to pandemic responses and food insecurity – without close coordination with the AU.

Finally, in the long run, demography will decisively shape Africa's agency, for better or worse. With 25% of the global population expected to be African by 2050¹⁸, demography alone will be sufficient to guarantee the continent's prominence on the world stage either by shaping the agenda or by being on the agenda. Expecting further agency gains in the next decades, this demographic outlook suggests that Africa will be front and centre in conversations about megatrends such as climate change, migration, digitalisation and urbanisation.¹⁹

As the youngest continent globally, Africa teems with human and material capacity to bridge gaps in aging societies. The appropriation of new technologies in Africa is shaping an emerging digital economy that is intrinsically embedded within the global economy. This has implications for the opportunities that ensue from the multiple transitions currently underway on the continent – political, social, technological, ecological and industrial.²⁰ Africa's demographic trend provides tremendous opportunities for both Western, traditional and new partners. The former will need to trade the current lenses of fear, through which Africa is perceived, for prisms of opportunity and partnership. Value-based and transactional engagements can be co-determined if Afro-Occidental relationships between Africa and the West are informed by a clear understanding of interests, endowments and expected outcomes.

Conclusion

Multipolarity in global politics is conducive to Africa's increasing assertiveness both on the level of countries and for the continent as a whole. Yet, partnerships remain key. Their multiplication and diversification provide African states and organisations with significant economic and political opportunities to advance their strategic interests. Traditional partners, including in Europe, are increasingly worried about losing political influence and markets at the expense of China and a wide range of actors from the so-called Global South. They are only slowly adjusting to a new landscape, in which competition between outside partners plays to the interests of African actors. At the same time, interpreting this new reality as

¹⁸ Suzuki, Emi. "World's Population Will Continue to Grow and Will Reach Nearly 10 Billion by 2050." *World Bank Data Blog*, 08/07/2019. Accessed 09/02/2023; Paice, Edward. *Youthquake: Why African Demography Should Matter to the World*. London: Apollo, 2021.

¹⁹ Haas, Astrid R. N. "African Cities: Unlocking Financing for Urbanisation." *Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief 11*, *Megatrends Afrika*, 2023; Schlimmer, Sina. "Building a City from Scratch? The Limits of Top-down Urban Policy Making in the Case of the 'New Urban Hub' of Diamniadio, Senegal." *Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief 6*, *Megatrends Afrika*, 2022; Gutheil, Lena. "Civil Society Participation in Urban Governance in Africa: Supporting CSOs' Political Voice for a Transformation of Citizen-state Relations." *Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief 5*, *Megatrends Afrika*, 2022.

²⁰ Daniels, Chux, Benedikt Erforth, and Chloe Teevan, eds. *Africa-Europe Cooperation and Digital Transformation*. London, New York: Routledge, 2023.

strategic competition, although sometimes appropriate (see Mali), may be indicative of how outside powers read the environment in Africa, rather than how African actors perceive it. African states have no interest in entering exclusive and zero-sum partnerships; they seek to derive advantages from competition among outsiders across a variety of domains.

Multipolarity in Africa is not a scenario, but a deeply entrenched reality that has come to stay. Bullying African states to prompt cooperative behaviour would be a futile exercise that misreads the changing international context and the agency of African actors. It would also be counterproductive inasmuch as it would echo past colonial and postcolonial European practices. History matters. The historical and geographical proximity of Africa and the West is steeped with hegemonic structuring driven by hard power. Meanwhile, engagement with rising powers enables African states to exercise influence by leveraging historical socio-economic and cultural empathy and commonalities, with support from private sector industries, in order to gain a comparative advantage. Aware of the importance of historical narratives as a tool of soft power, it becomes imperative for Africa and Europe to confront history as a prerequisite for trust-building.

Generating trust and credibility will require greater European transparency about their interests, minimizing policy incoherencies and narrowing the prevailing dissonances between European offerings and African needs. European hypocrisy and double standards are among the most frequent African grievances against Europe and examples supporting such allegations are admittedly not difficult to find. For example, the simultaneity of the European Green Deal, Europe urging Africa's embrace of decarbonisation and the hunt for energy resources in Africa is only the most recent example.²¹ The contradictions and diverging interests inherent in this climate-energy-development complex will have to be addressed if Europe wants to be seen as a credible partner. Another example is migration. Few policies have done greater damage to Europe's reputation in Africa than its increasingly restrictive policies towards migration from Africa.²² Over the past decade, Europe has turned its soft power advantages into a self-defeating posture. A significant portion of Africa's intelligentsia has been educated in Western capitals and dense political and social networks have been built over time that facilitate the circulation of values, ideas and expertise. However, that has balanced out over the last decade with new partners multiplying training opportunities for young Africans, as visa queues at Western embassies lengthen, partly due to growing intolerance of migration from Africa. In the long term, migration policies motivated by domestic politics not only undermine Europe's soft power and normative credibility, but also its influence as previously dense African-European political and social networks are eroded.

It is often argued that Africa is not a country. African agency is diffuse and national interests diverge. With that diversity, there is still a need for cohesion built on a clear understanding of comparative advantages, in order to forge strategic win-win engagements with partners. For example, there have been instances where African states enter agreements with outside powers that contravene regional frameworks. The coherence of African states as a group on the international level remains a permanent challenge, as do the workings of the AU as a donor-dependent institution, with two-thirds of its budget drawn from external sources.²³

²¹ Diaby, Karamba. "Germany-Senegal Gas Plans: New Potential for Modernisation." *IPS Journal*, 08/02/2023. Accessed 09/02/2023; Usman, Zainab, Olumide Abimbola, and Imeh Ituen. "What Does the European Green Deal Mean for Africa?" *Climate Change Notes*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 18/10/2021.

²² Tull, Denis M., and Claudia Zilla. "Putting Words into Action: Foreign Policy Towards Africa and Latin America." In Maihold, Günther et al. eds. *German Foreign Policy in Transition. Volatile Conditions, New Momentum*. SWP Research Paper 2021/RP 10. Accessed 09/02/2023.

²³ PSC Report. "Financial Independence Is Key to Stronger AU Partnerships." *ISS Today*, ISS, 13/02/2023.

Nevertheless, where Europeans and traditional partners should address Africa as a political collective is the realm of global challenges. Safeguarding global public goods should be an important objective of the European-African conversation. That should include climate change, energy, global health, trade and the reinvigoration and protection of a rules-based multilateral order. Recent proposals for including Africa in the G20 and the UN Security Council may be insufficient, but they are a start to give meaning and credibility to the notion of partnership of equals.²⁴ Structural imbalances have gravely undermined the rules-based international order. Larger and more solid African representation in bodies such as the UNSC is therefore not only a moral obligation. It is in the very interest of Europeans to reinvigorate a multilateral system that is in need of support and legitimacy, a legitimacy it can only acquire with better and fairer representation.

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²³ Misikir, Maya. "German, French Ministers Call for African Permanent Seats on UNSC." Voice of America, 13/01/2023. Accessed 09/02/2023.

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