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EU–AU Interregional Relations and the Role of the UN

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The development of the European Union (EU) was a direct result of the Second World War. Within 60 years the EU has helped to establish and maintain peace amongst the nations of Western Europe. At the same time, the EU has emerged as the global pioneer of regional integration. In the 2000s, the EU started to implement policies based upon the concept of 'interregionalism'. Benefitting from roots in the colonial era, the EU began to establish and institutionalize relations with its continental neighbor Africa through intense dialogue and financial support. The historic summits in Cairo in 2000, in Lisbon in 2007, in Tripoli in 2010, and in Brussels in 2014 are merely the tip of the iceberg. The relationship between the EU and the African Union (AU) is complex and continually subject to development and change.¹

Inspired by the legacy of the EU, having established the longest period of peace and stability in Western European history, new African political elites draw upon the European experiences by facilitating regional integration to establish and maintain peace in Africa, and to address other challenges with which Africa is confronted. While cooperation between Addis Ababa and Brussels outstrips any of the other non-African relationships with the AU, the AU simultaneously wants to diversify its relations with the world and is therefore putting a great deal of emphasis on the phrases 'equal partnerships' and 'African solutions to African problems'.

Since it is smaller in geographical terms and because of its organizational structure as a confederation of sovereign states, the EU is heavily dependent on its Member States. Conversely, the AU is geographically larger, but less developed and more dependent on the eight Regional Economic Communities it recognizes than it is on its Member States.²

¹ Morocco remains the only African country that is not a member of the AU.

² CEN-SAD, COMESA, EAC, ECCAS, ECOWAS, IGAD, SADC and UMA.

While scholars should be as critical as they can possibly be, it is always important to consider the Organization of African Unity's and AU's difficult starting point, as well as Africa's obviously far more challenging circumstances.³ In general, two possible approaches about the status of EU–AU relations can be derived: The pessimistic one would concentrate on the rhetorical commitments of EU and AU leaders, i.e. in reality a lack of implementation, and the fact that the EU only acts as a 'bank' for the AU. Optimists would acknowledge that EU–AU relations suffer from obstacles and remain a work in progress, but are also pioneering a new era of global governance characterized by interregional relations.

The concept of 'interregionalism' plays an important role in understanding the emerging strategic partnership between the EU and the AU.⁴ Notwithstanding the colonial roots of certain EU Member States in Africa, formal EU–AU relations are part of a greater dynamic of renewed global interest in Africa. They emerged in the early 2000s, thus earlier than those of the other major actors, in particular those of China and the United States (US). While both Beijing and Washington DC have a predominant interest in Africa's rich and diverse commodities, China also strives for a new, non-Western dominated world order, and the US has an interest in combating terrorism in Africa. Nonetheless, the relationship between the EU and AU is not only far more complex and comprehensive than the ones of China or the US and the AU, it is to date, despite several constraints and a doubtless existing lack of implementation, the most comprehensive relationship the AU has with any other non-African actor.

The basis for EU–AU relations is the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES), a mechanism for the coordination of a political vision and a roadmap for future cooperation.⁵ In fact, with the emergence of the JAES in 2007, the EU for the first time treated Africa as one entity. Thus, the JAES can be described as a continent-to-continent partnership with the EU and the AU as its key stakeholders.

While it is true to argue that there is a direct relationship between the AU and the EU in the form of the JAES that is currently primarily facilitated by the Delegation of the EU to the AU in Addis Ababa, a lot of the issues addressed in the JAES are related to the United Nations (UN). Often, the UN even explicitly requested the EU's leadership on JAES issues. What is frequently

³ The AU replaced the Organization of African Unity in 2002.

⁴ Interregionalism refers to institutional relations between two world regions.

⁵ Currently the Roadmap 2014-2017, adopted at the 4th EU–Africa Summit in Brussels in 2014. It refocuses the implementation of the JAES on 5 priority areas: peace and security; democracy, good governance and human rights; human development; sustainable and inclusive development and growth and continental integration; as well as global and emerging issues.

overlooked is that the EU plays a vital role within the UN, for example as an observer with privileged rights. In addition, EU Member States hold two of the UN Security Council's five permanent seats and the EU represents the world's largest donor for development aid as well as the main provider of funding for the UN system. In addition, four EU Member States are members of the G7. Last but not least, several EU Member States, especially Austria, Germany and Italy, host important Africa-relevant UN agencies. Thus, it is inadequate to speak solely of a EU–AU relationship. The UN is without doubt an inseparable part of this partnership and it is therefore more appropriate to speak of the AU–EU–UN nexus.

Cooperation under the AU–EU–UN nexus is likely to expand in the future for various reasons. In terms of Africa, the AU has an apparent credibility gap because the regional hegemonies Algeria, Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa are primarily concerned with expanding their regional pre-eminence on a continental level. Cooperation with the UN fills this credibility gap since none of these four nations has an interest in denouncing the UN. This does not mean that they cannot criticize certain initiatives, but they are unlikely not to support anything that involves the UN under African (AU) leadership. On the other side, the UN has an interest to have one reliable partner it can work with in Africa.

The status of Brussels as the predominant financier for the AU, however, should not be characterized simply in terms of straightforward benevolence. The EU has an interest in keeping African problems in Africa. The EU, as the world's wealthiest global actor, also has a moral obligation to help Africa. Additionally, the EU pursues political and geostrategic objectives through its engagement with Africa. Despite the tendency of African political elites to downplay the EU's role, the EU engages with the AU (and the UN) in a wide array of areas. Characterizing the EU's behavior in terms of simple benevolence falls well short of the truth.

Regardless of the status of the EU as financier, as the AU's institutional solidity develops there will emerge a pressing need for the former to re-pivot away from a mindset reflective of a patron-client relationship as to encourage a peer-to-peer mentality. The present state of research appears to overlook that all three actors base their roles within the AU–EU–UN nexus on the principles of *realpolitik*.

Cooperation is indeed attractive for all three actors. Some of the benefits, namely credibility (relevant in the case of the UN), dialogue, and the striving for UN reform, are identical amongst all three. These domains also represent the emerging importance of interregionalism that is, without ambiguity, tantamount with the forthcoming new era of global governance. As

all three actors not only need each other, but also benefit from each other, it is likely that cooperation under the AU–EU–UN nexus will not only continue, but in fact increase. While the AU–EU–UN nexus is not a formal partnership per se, it can be described as a partnership of necessity. The AU needs the UN, and UN agendas of peace and development are played out more in Africa than anywhere else. The EU can support the AU and the UN by providing resources. This is not always a comfortable three-way relationship, but it is a reality. Increased interdepartmental synchronization of AU–EU–UN efforts will improve the outcome of African efforts related to peacekeeping, in tackling the silent water crisis, and in other areas.

While EU and AU rhetoric repeatedly refers to a ‘strategic’ EU–AU partnership, EU–AU cooperation is in fact limited and focuses mainly on EU financial support for AU peacekeeping and specific projects in Africa (e.g. in the water sector), as well as on a limited political dialogue. The term ‘strategic partnership’ is vague and problematic. While EU–AU cooperation covers a wide range of issues, the predominant focus is in the area of peacekeeping. Furthermore, although the EU and the AU have an interest to promote ‘African solutions to African problems’, the nature of that interest is slightly different: Whereas the EU does not want to become physically involved in Africa because military missions are unpopular amongst the EU electorate, the AU pursues an anti-colonial, independent policy. A third important criteria for a ‘strategic partnership’ is not fulfilled, that of substantive cooperation with actual cooperative activities and not just rhetoric. Too much of EU–AU relations is based on noble pledges rather than concrete actions. The monumental summits cannot hide this. In terms of the three categories of ‘strategic partnerships’ defined by Giovanni Grevi, EU–AU relations certainly contain reflexive, relational and structural elements⁶: The EU and the AU attempt to boost their international profile by engaging with each other. Both sides have economic interests, the EU with regard to investments in Africa, trade and supply of raw materials, and the AU in fair trade with the EU. Last but not least, both have an interest in enhancing global governance by fostering international cooperation.

To achieve this, the AU will continue to rely on support from the EU and the UN. Both actors are unlikely to halt cooperation with the AU. Quite the contrary, the emerging new world order under which developing and emerging nations, in particular the BRICS, will have significant influence in global affairs will make it de rigueur for them to cooperate with the AU. Their relationship with Addis Ababa is based on the principle of interdependence: The AU needs the UN to ensure credibility, trust and acceptance in Africa. The UN needs the AU to enhance cooperation with African nations representing more than a quarter of its Member

⁶ Giovanni Grevi, *Why EU Strategic Partnerships Matter*, (Brussels: European Strategic Partnerships Observatory, 2012).

States and to implement its policies because a large part of its work targets Africa. Brussels will continue to support the AU through dialogue and with significant funding to maintain its status of a global regional actor. In summary, interregional relations such as between the EU and the AU are likely to emerge as a new standard of global governance.

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