In EU-Africa Trade Relations: Africa is not Europe's "Twin Continent"

By:

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"We need to partner with Africa, our twin continent, to tackle together the challenges of the 21st century and to further our common interests and future."
- "Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa" (p.1)

"Africa could provide Europe with raw materials for its industry, nutrition for its population, land for its overpopulation, labor for its unemployed, and markets for its products."[1]

There is a new struggle for Africa's market. The contestants include the European Union (EU), United States (US), Russia, India and China. In this blog, I reflect on the new European Union -Africa Comprehensive Strategy proposals. The blog pushes against the Strategy's revision of the historical relationship between the two regions which is built on embedded inequality. This is because, to be a true partnership, the unequal nature of the relationship

between the EU and Africa must be centered. In the contest for its market, Africa has a unique opportunity to harness the competition tactically.

On March 9, 2020, the European Commission (EC) released a joint communication to the European Parliament and the Council released captioned "Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa." The Strategy proposes partnership across a broad subject area as the basis for a new strategy with Africa. It acknowledges that "the ties that bind Africa and the … (EU) are broad and deep as a result of history, proximity and shared interests" and that in Africa, "new prospects and challenges are emerging from economic, political, social, technological, demographic, climate and environmental changes" which necessitates a reengineering of the relationship between the two regions. (p. 1 - Strategy). As such, the EU proposes to tackle the challenges of the 21st century with its "partner" and "twin continent" with a view to furthering their common interests and the future. The Strategy responds to a future Africa where women and young people as important drivers of sustainable growth, development and peace can realise their aspirations.

Africa and the EU cooperate through multiple frameworks. Two of them must be highlighted in the context of this blog. The first of these frameworks that has generated significant debate recently is the Cotonou Agreement – the overarching framework for EU relations with African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries. It covers the EU's relations with 79 countries, including 48 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Cotonou Agreement which was due to expire in February 2020 has been extended until December 2020. The negotiation of the future agreement is expected to cover 6 priority areas: democracy and human rights; economic growth and investment; climate change; poverty eradication; peace and security; and migration and mobility. Clair Gammage's symposium on Afronomicslaw examines some challenges and opportunities for the post-2020 relationship.

The second is the Joint Africa-EU Strategy. The first Africa-EU Summit was held in Cairo in 2000 where the two regions strengthened their partnership through the institutionalisation of dialogue. Building on the common priorities set by the EU and the African Union at the 2017 Summit in Abidjan, the new Strategy seeks partnership that would build on five (5) core areas:

- green transition and energy access;
- digital transformation;
- sustainable growth and jobs;
- peace and governance; and
- migration and mobility.

Based on the identified areas, the following ten (10) Proposed Actions will be pursued:

- **Proposed Action 1** – Partner with Africa to maximise the benefits of the green transition and minimise threats to the environment in full compliance with the Paris Agreement.
- **Proposed Action 2** – Partner with Africa to boost the continent's digital transformation.
- **Proposed Action 3** – Partner with Africa to substantially increase environmentally socially and financially sustainable investments that are resilient to the impacts of climate change; to promote investment opportunities by scaling up the Use of innovative financing mechanisms; and to boost regional and continental economic integration, particularly through the AfCFTA
- **Proposed Action 4** – Partner with Africa to attract investors by supporting African states in adopting policies and regulatory reforms that improve the business environment and investment climate, including a level-playing field for business.
- **Proposed Action 5** – Partner with Africa to rapidly enhance learning, knowledge and skills, research and innovation capacities, particularly for women and youth, protecting and improving social rights, and eradicating child labour.
- **Proposed Action 6** – Partner with Africa to adapt and deepen the EU's support to African peace efforts through a more structured and strategic cooperation, with a particular focus on regions where tensions and vulnerabilities are the highest.
- **Proposed Action 7** – Partner with Africa on integrating good governance, democracy, human rights, the rule of law and gender equality in action and cooperation.
- **Proposed Action 8** – secure resilience by linking humanitarian, development, peace and security interventions at all stages of the cycle of

conflicts and crises.

- **Proposed Action 9** – Partner with Africa to ensure a balanced, coherent and comprehensive approach to migration and mobility.
- **Proposed Action 10** – Partner with Africa to strengthen the international rules-based order and the multilateral system, with the UN at its core.

As Africa re-engineers its international trade architecture pursuant to the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and attracts renewed interests from US, Russia, India and China, the Strategy acknowledges that the "EU and its Member States … must adapt the way it engages with Africa, ensuring the way it engages with Africa, ensuring its positioning is in line with our mutual interests, and giving more prominence to values, key principles, and good regulatory practices."

This is not the first joint strategy between Africa and the EU. Since 2005, both regions have cooperated or "partnered" on a variety of Africa-EU Strategies. The 2005 EU-Africa Joint Strategy set out the steps that the EU decided to take with Africa between then and 2015 to support African efforts to build its desired future. It was presented as a strategy of the whole of the EU for the whole of Africa. It took into account regional and country-specific needs and African countries' national strategies. Its primary aims were to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and promote sustainable development, security and good governance, in Africa. The strategy built on important progress made by the Africans themselves. Its core principles were partnership based on international law and human rights, equality and mutual accountability. Its underlying philosophy is African ownership and responsibility, including working through African institutions. The 2020 Strategy considered here rightly reflects topical issues in today's turbulent world. Yet, the question remains, as with any partnership, is this one of equals? Or is this a "partnership" whose goal is to keep Africa constantly looking to the EU for aid?

Africa is Not Europe's "Twin Continent"

That the Strategy is a wish-list of political aspirations does not absolve it of critique. The significance of this moment for African trade relations demand a serious scrutiny of the Strategy. First, the idea that Africa is Europe's "twin continent" is alarming to a critical scholar of EU-African relations. Stay with me

for a second. If we dare to believe that the two regions are a “twin continent” – what do we mean? Trade relations between Africa and the EU is steeped in a history of colonial and post-colonial power relations. A literal reading of this phrase means that the EU and the AU are equivalent. This is certainly untrue. Both regions came to be as a result of different histories.

Gary Marks’ Eurocentric analysis in “Europe and Its Empires: From Rome to the European Union” and Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson’s critical and historically response in “Imperial Origins of European Integration and the Case of EuraAfrica: A Reply to Gary Mark’s ‘Europe and Its Empires’”[2] are instructive here. In its origins – which has not changed in today’s world – the EU was established, *inter alia*, to “enable a rational, co-European colonial management of the African continent.” It was imagined that the EU was never going to be workable without the EuraAfrica project. For those interested in this fascinating historical account to understanding EU-Africa relations, Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson’s book Eurafrica – The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism sheds even more light on this.

In reality then, perhaps a better way to imagine the use of “twin continent” is as a metaphor. Once the “partnership” mantra and all its techniques of domination and subjugation are unveiled, it is clear that Africa is not Europe’s twin – rather, the continent is an offspring of European domination. One that remains intricately woven to the umbilical cord of the EU via aids and development assistance projects. A “twin” in an unequal relationship. A twin with divergent interests.

A further problem with this descriptive category is that it erodes the oppressive history of colonialism and colonial legacies between the EU and Africa. This obvious attempt to rewrite history in favour of a region that is intricately braided in Africa’s colonial past, yet, complexly weaved in its contemporary trade and development challenges should be resisted. Acknowledging the embedded inequality in the socio-economic relationship between both regions could be a positive move for Africa to weaponize in its negotiations.

Second, the Strategy builds on a partnership of unequals. Europe constructed Africa and its states for its own benefit. To suggest, as the Strategy does, that

the AU and EU are equal partners – perhaps in deference to Africa's renewed confidence to negotiate on its own terms – reifies the inherent historical and contemporary socio-economic relations between the both regions. An acknowledgement that the AU is the weaker party – and an on-going victim of changing imperialist strategies of domination – is likely to inform a much more sophisticated approach to negotiating trade agreements with its "partners". Such awareness will likely lead to a more purposive negotiation of the economic development aspirations of Africa beyond tradition trade exceptions that have not proven as successful in alleviating the poverty of many African states.

In other words, any serious effort to understand or characterize African-EU relations must go beyond very general characterizations of "Africa," and "Europe" as "twins". The historical and contemporary relation between the two regions as well as the heterogeneity and complexity of the EU and Africa, their people and their relations with each other must be foregrounded. These relations have clearly never been those of equals.

Third, the EU and the AU do not have mutual interests. If anything, their interests diverge. The current impasse surrounding the negotiation of the Cotonou Agreement provides a concrete example of this diversity of interests. While agriculture, intellectual property rights, investment and trade provide possible platforms for collaborations, the perspectives and positions of the EU and Africa differ. While the EU may be looking to build on its gains in multilateral trade and not lose the African market as an ally in the process, the interests of the African States differ because they are committed to promoting a single market economy. The AfCFTA is the primary instrument by which African States aim to restructure their trade relations. In the context of the AfCFTA, David Luke in "making the case for the African Continental Free Trade Area" asserts that as negotiations with the EU gather pace for the Cotonou Agreement, it is critical for African leaders to promote the strategies that will ensure and are aligned with the single market economy aspirations of the AfCFTA. In this regard, I recommend, Melaku Desta, Guillaume Gérout, and Jamie MacLeod's warning against "externally-imposed threats of fragmentation" and the need to safeguard the AfCFTA.

Fourth, the Strategy is ambitious. The proposed areas of partnership include

developing a green growth model; improving the business environment and investment climate; boosting education, research and innovation, the creation of decent jobs and value addition through sustainable investments; maximizing the benefits of regional economic integration and trade; ensuring food security and rural development; combatting climate change; ensuring access to sustainable energy and protecting biodiversity and natural resources; promoting peace and security; ensuring well-governed migration and mobility; engaging together on the global scene to strengthen the multilateral rules-based order, promoting universal values, human rights, democracy, rule of law and gender equality." (p. 1) While the Strategy is ambitious, it presents an opportunity for the AU to truly trade with the EU on its own terms.

2020 is a critical, and potentially auspicious year in the trade relations between Africa and other global players. China, as Africa's leading trading partner, is consolidating its position. To counter China and Russia's position in Africa, the (US) released its new strategy for engagement with Africa. US' vision for Africa is one of "independence, self-reliance, and growth—not dependency, domination, and debt." Despite this "big brother like" expression of the US Strategy, their position is clear: to challenge "the predatory practices pursued by China and Russia stunt economic growth in Africa; [which] threaten the financial independence of African nations; inhibit opportunities for U.S. investment; interfere with U.S. military operations; and pose a significant threat to U.S. national security interests." It is simply about the "America First" mantra of President Trump.

African leaders must be cautious and find the best way to maximize this moment and the wave of "partnerships" for its own benefit. Perhaps an example that African leaders can work with is "New Africa-Caribbean-Pacific/EU Partnership: moving forward towards a new partnership fit for the future." African leaders must be aware of a potential fragmentation of the continent on account of the divergent trade interests from EU, US, **India**, **Russia**, and **China**. They must resist the mistake of many years – which legitimized the aspirations of the EU in Africa much to the latter's detriment. African agency and the legacies of colonialism simultaneously connive in the contemporary subjugation of Africa and derailing of continental integration aspirations. To turn this potentially important moment in Africa's contemporary history to

meaningful opportunities, we must push against the divide and conquer strategies.

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[1] Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, “Afrika,” (1929) *Paneuropa*, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 3. (Richard Leader of the Pan-European movement)

[2] “Imperial Origins of European Integration and the Case of EuraAfrica: A Reply to Gary Mark’s ‘Europe and Its Empires’” Journal of Common Market Studies (2012) Vol. 50, Number 6, pp, 1028-1041.

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