

A reset is needed

How Africa and Europe can work towards a different type of relationship

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Never before have so many high-level EU politicians shown such strong interest in Africa. Following the Commission President, European Council President Charles Michel recently undertook his first foreign trip to the African Union (AU) in Addis Ababa. Last week the European Commission and African Union Commission (AUC) leadership met in Addis Ababa, among other things to prepare for their joint summit in October 2020. Interest in cooperation with Africa has also increased markedly among EU member states in recent years, including in Germany.

Africa's role in relation to geostrategic challenges

There are several reasons why the need for close cooperation with African countries is more pressing than ever: Migration policy is and remains a sensitive and key topic. As their populations continue to rise and urbanisation proceeds apace, African nations are recognised as key partners and future markets not only by EU member states, but also by other nations including China, India, Turkey or Russia. Accordingly, the EU and its member states have for some time been significantly stepping up their efforts to promote economic relations and private investment with African states.

A more recent development concerns Europe's urgent need for new international partners with which to uphold, at least in part, the rule-based multilateral order. With the United States and the transatlantic alliance now less dependable and economic and geopolitical competition with China having intensified significantly, Europe is looking for new partners and a new role as a global actor. Ursula von der Leyen has thus announced a geopolitical Commission. Cooperation with Africa is becoming increasingly significant in this context. Like EU countries, many African states are keenly interested in multilateral institutions. At the same time, the EU needs to represent African stakeholders to a greater extent in its multilateral interests and agendas.

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Global challenges – Europe needs to rethink

Relations between Africa and the EU have so far been poorly equipped to tackle global challenges such as climate change, digitalisation and demographic change. There has been talk on both sides of a partnership of equals for a number of years, while the EU also emphasises that the donor-recipient relationship belongs to the past. However, in

reality, Brussels continues to focus on what needs to change in Africa and how the EU can support these changes. It has so far not been acknowledged that changes in the EU are needed too, and that our societal model is fundamentally challenged by digitalisation, ageing societies and the need for sustainable transformation.

Given these global challenges and the geopolitical competition, AU-EU relations need not so much updating as they do resetting. A good starting point is provided in this regard by the aspiration of a geopolitical Commission, the high level of political interest in cooperation with African states, the ambitious agenda of the European Green Deal and the AU's African Continental Free Trade Area.

A reset requires action on both sides

For the AU, implementing its reform agenda, which also envisages more strategic positioning in relation to external stakeholders, would be an important step in strengthening AU-EU relations. The articulation of African interest and goal conflicts, which is unavoidable for an organisation with 55 member states, is a key condition for a *reset* of relations. EU actors should in turn devise a *European* approach to Africa policy which defines common goals and strategies for the EU institutions as well as member states. The ambition of a geopolitical Commission gives rise to the expectation that the EU will be more transparent about its interests in the relations. At the same time, rather than step up competition with China, Russia and other stakeholders, the EU should strive to create opportunities for cooperation with them wherever possible.

Europeans must also change their mindset with regards to relations with Africa. In the EU itself, there is little clarity as to what innovative societal models could look like in an age of climate change, digitalisation and demographic change. AUC Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat last week stressed that one society should not impose a model onto another. Accordingly, AU-EU relations should prioritise joint learning and knowledge production. This also means that differences of opinion between the two partners will become more visible.

After the European Commission has outlined the key points of its comprehensive strategy with Africa, the ball will be in the court of the EU member states and the AU. Member states of both unions will then have the opportunity to take their partnership to a new level.