

Negotiating a New EU-Africa Agenda: Playing the Migration and Chinese Cards?

by Luca Barana

Relations between Europe and Africa are entering a delicate new phase. With the Cotonou Partnership Agreement expiring in 2020 and the consequences of the so-called migration crisis still unfolding, the European Union must negotiate a new long-term deal with its African partners.

Contrary to a common narrative that depicts African countries as passive receivers of European policies and interests, these have actually accrued new leverage, exploiting European anxieties on migration and the promise of a stronger Chinese involvement in Africa in the context of ongoing negotiations for a post-Cotonou agenda.

Asymmetry of power has often been the norm in the relationship between Europe and African countries. The colonial past, stark economic inequalities and European political dominance have affected relations for decades. These are currently governed

through multiple channels, starting with the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES), launched in 2007.¹ The aforementioned Cotonou Partnership Agreement (CPA) was instead negotiated 20 years ago, and has since been revised in 2005 and 2010.²

An agreement that ties Europe to the grouping of African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries, the CPA devolves major resources to the African continent. It governs political dialogue, trade relations and development aid through the European Development Fund (EDF), notwithstanding the fact

¹ Council of the European Union, *The Africa-European Union Strategic Partnership. Investing in People, Prosperity and Peace*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.2860/55887>.

² European Commission, *The Cotonou Agreement, signed in Cotonou on 23 June 2000, revised in Luxembourg on 25 June 2005, revised in Ouagadougou on 22 June 2010, and Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-20*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.2841/43863>.

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that the political sphere has almost completely been absorbed by the Africa-focused Joint Strategy.

Back when the original CPA was negotiated, the international context was profoundly different and debates were dominated by trade liberalization. In the meantime, the African Union has gained political clout as the looming presence of new stakeholders, such as China, and the migration crisis has highlighted divisions on the European side. Will these developments constitute an opening for the African governments to increase their leverage in negotiations, enabling them to extract more concessions in the coming talks with the EU?

Contrarily to the common narrative, African governments have indeed developed a growing capacity to exploit European anxieties to gain influence and resources. It is not uncommon for African elites to pay lip service to Western dogmas on economic liberalization and political democratization. This pattern has been well described as a "donor-recipient mode of operation":³ the European donor expects recipients to follow its agenda, at least on a formal level, in return for transferring money to State and regional elites. Debates on African ownership of development processes and European conditionality are still strongly tainted by path-dependency. Inevitably, they will influence future negotiations as well.

³ Jean Bossuyt, "Can EU-Africa Relations Be Deepened? A Perspective on Power Relations, Interests and Incentives", in *ECDPM Briefing Notes*, No. 97 (November 2017), p. 5-6, <https://ecdpm.org/?p=29474>.

When European and ACP representatives started negotiating last September, their respective mandates seemed to converge on the broader framework for the future relationship and on the principles underpinning it. The Cotonou *acquis* would be maintained on many levels, from political dialogue on human rights, democracy, the rule of law and good governance, to the deepening of trade relations.

Nonetheless, a first bone of contention emerged when the EU proposed to sign an "umbrella agreement" (denominated "Foundation"⁴) and three separate regional partnerships, one for each region in the ACP group. Conversely, ACP states wish to keep a single legally binding agreement in place, especially as far as Caribbean and Pacific countries are concerned.⁵ In the meantime, within the African component, a debate has taken place regarding the role of the African Union in the negotiating process. The AU's extraordinary summit this November finally determined to support the original ACP negotiating team, at the same time preserving for the Union a certain degree of involvement in the

⁴ Council of the European Union, *Negotiating Directives for a Partnership Agreement between the European Union and its Member States of the one part, and with countries of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States of the other part*, 21 June 2018, p. 4, <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8094-2018-ADD-1/en/pdf>.

⁵ ACP Council of Ministers, *ACP Negotiating Mandate for a Post-Cotonou Partnership Agreement with the European Union*, Lomé, 30 May 2018, p. 6, http://www.acp.int/sites/acpsec.waw.be/files/acpdoc/public-documents/ACP0001118_%20ACP_Negotiating_Mandate_EN.pdf.

future EU-ACP framework.⁶

While this institutional disagreement may well be worked out, more substantial differences are present on the related issues of migration and the predictability of aid. Migration conditionality looms large over the future of EU-Africa policy, as EU member states are keen to expand funding on this matter in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) while internal political pressure tied to the migration phenomenon continues to mount.

The EU is not satisfied by the implementation of article 13 of the CPA, especially regarding the obligatory readmission of irregular migrants to their home countries. Furthermore, the CPA has a limited reach in comparison to recent developments tied to the European migration agenda. While the European side pushes on strengthening the legal obligation of origin countries to accept returns and readmissions of nationals,⁷ ACP countries insist that these should happen on a voluntary basis.⁸ This contrast exemplifies the growing complexity of managing irregular migration.

The key question revolves on the issue of leverage between the sides. The EU appears willing to use any relevant tool, including development, trade and

visa negotiations, in order to pursue its interest in stemming irregular migration and returning illegal migrants.⁹ African governments have started to realise they can use European fears of migration to extract more resources.

This, for example, happened with Niger and Mali whose leaders have repeatedly and publicly highlighted how fundamental their cooperation is in order to tackle irregular migration.¹⁰ The two countries figure among the top beneficiaries of the European Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, with EU states and other stakeholders pledging 247 million euro for Niger and 196 million euro for Mali.¹¹ It is still unclear if this new assertiveness will translate in more pressure and African leverage within EU-ACP talks.

Finally, there is the issue of aid. On this matter, ACP countries, and especially African ones, could exploit the growing Chinese presence in Africa to enhance their negotiating leverage vis-à-vis Europe. China has just promised 60 billion US dollars for the African continent, on top of the growing economic and financial stature it has developed there over the last decade.¹²

⁶ Liesl Louw-Vaudran, "Changing Mindsets' on AU Reform", in *ISS Today*, 11 December 2018, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/changing-mindsets-on-au-reform>.

⁷ Council of the European Union, *Negotiating Directives for a Partnership Agreement*, cit., p. 42.

⁸ ACP Council of Ministers, *ACP Negotiating Mandate*, cit., p. 38.

⁹ Council of the European Union, *Negotiating Directives for a Partnership Agreement*, cit., p. 22-23.

¹⁰ Andrew Lebovich, "Halting Ambition. EU Migration and Security Policy in the Sahel", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, September 2018, p. 8-9, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/halting_ambition_eu_migration_and_security_policy_in_the_sahel.

¹¹ For further information on the distribution of funding, see the EUTF projects webpage: https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region_en.

¹² Christian Shepherd and Ben Blanchard,

Notwithstanding growing concern that Chinese money may be fuelling a new debt crisis in Africa,¹³ ACP countries could view the pursuit of a new bond with an emerging world power as useful to balance its future partnership with Europe.

What ACP countries truly aspire to is a predictable flow of aid resources. Under the CPA, this goal was accomplished through the programming within the EDF. Today, Europe privileges a more flexible approach: this need emerged first in the migration field with the adoption of the Trust Funds and now is spreading in the broader development cooperation agenda.

African countries fear that internal political pressures could again derail European commitments, diminishing the predictability of funding. As intra-European negotiations on the new EU MFF are still unfolding – for the first time the EDF could well end up being included in the overall EU budget – African governments could be tempted to play the Chinese card to keep European aid flows stable.

Faced with these possible setbacks, the EU should react with long-term pragmatism. No matter how influential

China becomes (or maybe precisely because China is becoming so important), African countries cannot entirely renounce their privileged relationship with the European Union. The EU is still their first donor and their top trade and investments partner. Furthermore, both European and African countries cannot elude geography, which connects the two continents far more than it does with China or other external stakeholders.

At the same time, the EU's interest-driven cooperation should not be affected by short-termism and a perennial "emergency-mode", as shown by its negotiations on migration. The post-Cotonou framework could be severely damaged by today's crisis sentiment. If prolonged, such approaches would weaken the EU's negotiating position and taint the long-term bond with a strategic partner such as Africa. Furthermore, it would imperil the sustainable development of many African countries, hindering the foremost end goal of European development cooperation: the eradication of poverty.

The upcoming rounds of negotiations will demonstrate how African partners will seek to manage and balance this European sense of urgency with their own priorities and concerns. Time will be of the essence and both parties should redouble efforts to agree on a new and shared agenda as 2020 is fast approaching.

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"China Xi's Offers Another \$60 Billion to Africa, But Says No to 'Vanity' Projects", in *Reuters*, 3 September 2018, <https://reut.rs/2Ccwwva>.

¹³ Economist, "The Perils of China's 'Debt Trap Diplomacy'", in *The Economist*, 6 September 2018, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2018/09/06/the-perils-of-chinas-debt-trap-diplomacy>; and "Zambia's Looming Debt Crisis Is a Warning for the Rest of Africa", in *The Economist*, 15 September 2018, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2018/09/15/zambias-looming-debt-crisis-is-a-warning-for-the-rest-of-africa>.

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