

A Geopolitical Commission in Africa: Streamlining Strategic Thinking on Trade and Cooperation

by Luca Barana

The new European Commission led by Ursula von der Leyen has outlined ambitious goals for the future, highlighting her objective to make the Commission more “geopolitical” so as to boost the EU’s standing as a “global actor”.

Africa should feature as an important dimension of this goal. As traditional and emerging actors are stepping up their power ambitions in the continent, Europe requires a more focused and strategic engagement with Africa.¹

An encouraging signal was given by von der Leyen’s first foreign trip: Ethiopia. Coming days after the Commission formally took office on 1 December, the visit was loaded with symbolism and does reflect an effort by EU institutions to strengthen their engagement with the continent. In

Ethiopia, the European Commission President met with Prime Minister and Nobel Peace Laureate, Abiy Ahmed, as well as top representatives from the African Union (AU).

The trip was received by the AU as a signal of Europe’s renewed willingness to invest political capital in strengthening the interregional relationship, moving beyond a short-term focus on migration and aid.² The Commission’s new political guidelines already described Africa as Europe’s “most natural partner”,³ framing the relationship as a source of mutual economic opportunities while

¹ Chris Alden, “Emerging Powers and Africa: from Development to Geopolitics”, in *IAI Papers*, No. 19|23 (November 2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/11006>.

² David M. Herszenhorn, “Von der Leyen Ventures to the Heart of Africa”, in *Politico*, 8 December 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-commission-president-ursula-von-der-leyen-ventures-to-the-heart-of-africa-ethiopia-african-union>.

³ Ursula von der Leyen, *A Union That Strives for More. My Agenda for Europe. Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2019-2024*, 16 July 2019, p. 18-19, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en.pdf.

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reconfirming Europe's support for "African solutions to African problems" in the security field.

This focus constitutes a welcome first step, but von der Leyen and the College of commissioners will still have to struggle with the legacies of the previous institutional cycle and, overall, with the complex web of competing frameworks that still shape EU–Africa relations. Given the Juncker Commission's main – but not exclusive – focus on short-term interests in the migration sphere, quite a lot of unfinished business has been left in its wake.

Still on-going negotiations – both within the EU, on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and a single financing instrument for external action, and beyond the EU, with the group of African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries – will surely affect von der Leyen's manoeuvrability. At the same time, the plethora of institutional arrangements characterising EU–Africa relations at the continental, regional and bilateral levels will continue to complicate the picture.

Against this backdrop, von der Leyen has appointed Jutta Urpilainen as the new Commissioner for International Partnerships. Urpilainen will preside over the established Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development, but her appointment does not merely constitute a rebranding exercise. Urpilainen will work in close contact with the EU High Representative in order to streamline EU approaches in times when "different development models increasingly

compete".⁴

Von der Leyen clearly signalled the main priorities for the new Commissioner. Alongside cross-cutting issues, such as promoting UN Sustainable Development Goals, women empowerment and the involvement of civil society, the Commission President has stated that a comprehensive new strategy for Africa, a successful renegotiation with the ACP countries and renewed efforts in migration management will top Urpilainen's agenda.⁵

First of all comes the special relationship with the African Union. The links between the two Unions have been deepening since the adoption of the Joint Africa–Europe Strategy (JAES) in 2007. The last high-level summit in Abidjan (2017) finally saw the full representation of the African Union. Increased cooperation seems promising also within global multilateral bodies.

Von der Leyen set out a clear agenda in Addis Ababa, aimed at reinforcing institutional bonds with the AU: a college to college meeting between the Commissions in March has been announced, and possibly a new high-level summit in Brussels next October.⁶ Von der Leyen also reiterated her

⁴ Ursula von der Leyen, *Mission Letter to Jutta Urpilainen*, 1 December 2019, p. 4, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/sites/comm-cwt2019/files/commissioner_mission_letters/mission-letter-urpilainen-2019-2024_en.pdf.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4-5.

⁶ David M. Herszenhorn, "Von der Leyen Ventures to the Heart of Africa", *cit.*

commitment to draft a new strategy for Africa, but details are still vague, especially concerning the role of this strategic review of the JAES.

While at times described as weak in operational terms, the JAES constituted a first attempt at cooperation on equal footing between European and African partners. The new strategy currently being discussed, however, seems to be a mere European product – in the same fashion of the Africa–Europe Alliance on private investment announced by the previous Commission in September 2018.⁷

These developments unfold while a new balance is taking shape within the AU, which is facing its own reform process, starting with trade. The launch of the operational phase of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) by the AU in July 2019 marked a decisive step in the continental integration project. While the AfCFTA is still a work in progress, requiring sustained implementation efforts by African governments, it nonetheless constitutes a significant opportunity to step up dialogue on trade and investments with external actors, including the EU.

Europe “unambiguously supports AfCFTA”,⁸ as exemplified by increased funding it has granted to the negotiation process (7 million euro in

2014–2017, followed by an additional 50 million euro allocated for 2018–2020 in technical assistance and data analysis).⁹ The EU considers the establishment of AfCFTA as a chance to start working towards the long-term goal of a European-African free trade area – trade penetration being one of the main tools at the EU’s disposal to enhance its global standing. Nonetheless, in order to reach this ambitious objective, the EU will have to disentangle diverging trade arrangements still in place with various African regions.

Accordingly, the second priority spelled-out by the new Commission is a successful renegotiation of the Cotonou Partnership Agreement with the ACP group, expiring in February 2020. In line with the general ambition of reaching a single deal with the African continent, the Commission proposed a separated partnership with African states within the ACP grouping, at the same time endorsing a potential participation of North African states.

North African countries are currently excluded from the Cotonou framework, and display a somewhat privileged access to Europe through bilateral deals under the European Neighbourhood Policy. The proposal was first endorsed by the African Union, but then rejected by various African countries (Senegal, Burkina Faso, Uganda and Kenya, among others).

Negotiations are thus on-going with the goal of signing an umbrella agreement, covering relations with

⁷ European Commission, *A New Africa–Europe Alliance for Sustainable Investment and Jobs: Taking Our Partnership for Investment and Jobs to the Next Level* (COM/2018/643), 12 September 2018, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0643>.

⁸ Conversation with EU official, November 2019.

⁹ European Commission, *A New Africa–Europe Alliance...*, cit., p. 11.

all ACP members and three separate partnerships with the different regions included in the ACP group, one of them being Africa. General principles concerning political dialogue, free trade and development cooperation would still be broadly regulated by the umbrella agreement, thus hindering the pursuit of a specific interregional partnership with Africa. As a result of these institutional rifts, it is highly likely that the February deadline will be postponed.

Streamlining these key dimensions of Europe's action towards Africa is therefore crucial to develop a truly strategic approach. The first step should be to acknowledge that African actors have diverging interests, as divisions on the role of the AU in the post Cotonou negotiations have shown. Without understanding these diverging alignments and appreciating the policy goals on the other side, "being more geopolitical" risks becoming an empty statement. Compromises will be needed, as well as a clear understanding of where European interests lie.

The same goes for the migration domain, the third priority set out by von der Leyen. The President asked Urpilainen to pursue comprehensive agreements with countries of origin and transit, "bringing together all instruments, tools and leverage" and being ready to "adapt bilateral funding to achieve our objectives on migration management".¹⁰

Such pronouncements seem in line with the Commission's goal of acting

geopolitically. Yet, this approach will have to deal with resistance from African partners as well as intra-institutional rifts within the EU, where dialogue among different policy silos engaged in migration talks (Home, Development, Labour and Trade) has not been easy.

The major risk is that a prolonged European focus on migration could derail the political engagement that the new Commission is betting on to foster enhanced Europe–Africa cooperation. Short termism on the migration dossier is a factor burdening the post-Cotonou negotiations as well.

To truly be strategic, the EU will thus have to weigh its own interests against the policy processes unfolding on the ground in Africa. Consolidating and, whenever possible, relaunching support for African integration should therefore remain a key priority. Assuring policy coherence among different normative frameworks will also assume new relevance in light of the institutional innovations envisaged by the new Commission and the ongoing rounds of negotiations unfolding on multiple levels.

Overall, the EU will need to balance the continental and regional levels, as well as short-term and long-term objectives. Acting geopolitically will not be easy, but then again no one was under any illusion that this was indeed the case. Only time will tell if the European Commission and EU will be able to meet such ambitious targets and goals.

¹⁰ Ursula von der Leyen, *Mission Letter to Jutta Urpilainen*, cit., p. 5.

22 January 2020

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