

# A Tale of Two Unions: Africa, Europe and a Pragmatic Investment in Multilateralism in Times of COVID-19

by Luca Barana

The European Commission's Joint-Communication "Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa", published on 9 March 2020, envisioned the beginnings of a new and more equal partnership with the African Union (AU).<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, COVID-19 has had an unprecedented disruptor effect on the world scene. Its impact dramatic and long-lasting, the crisis may also be an opportunity to move beyond policy principles and actually consolidate the EU–AU relationship.

The Commission aspires to structure this new course of EU–AU relations around five thematic partnerships and ten actions so as to concretely step up cooperation. A common thread emerging from the Communication is the need to strengthen multilateralism and the rules-based international system.

<sup>1</sup> European Commission, *Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa* (JOIN/2020/4), 9 March 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020JC0004>.

The EU is in peril of remaining one of the few international actors still adhering to multilateral principles.<sup>2</sup> In order to concretize the idea of a "geopolitical Union", the EU needs allies and partners that still invest in rules-based governance regimes. The Commission has identified the African Union as one of the last outspoken promoters of this multilateral agenda.

The current threat of COVID-19, and the disorderly response it has provoked within Europe and around the world, suggests that international coordination is the only viable way forward.<sup>3</sup> A revamped Europe–Africa relationship could thus come into fruition at the right time – just as the pandemic's health-related, economic

<sup>2</sup> Nathalie Tocci, "International Order and the European Project in Times of COVID19", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 20|09 (March 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/11408>.

<sup>3</sup> Nicoletta Pirozzi, "COVID-19 Emergency: Europe Needs a Vaccine", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 20|08 (March 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/11400>.

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and political effects continue spreading, requiring urgent and unprecedented responses.

Health may not be the policy domain where the EU – and even less the AU – have the needed competences to become decisive actors. Nonetheless, both Unions can still play a positive role in shaping the global reactions to the pandemic.

The EU and AU should pool voices at the highest levels and push for a coordinated effort to address the crisis, as COVID-19 does not recognize borders or national prerogatives. Such efforts will be even more crucial to mitigate the economic and political consequences of the pandemic.

The EU made a first step in that direction by adopting a “Team Europe” package for a global response to the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> Adding to the pledge of over 20 billion euro for the fight against COVID-19 – 15.6 billion coming from existing programmes – the European Commission reiterated that international solidarity with partners like the AU does not only uphold European core values, but is instrumental to its strategic interests as well.

The EU is also called to leverage its role as a top donor to spearhead such a concerted effort. Stronger support by both Unions to the World Health Organization (WHO) is also required, not least in light of China and the US’s crude politicization of the

Organization’s handling of the crisis and the US’s decision to withdraw funding to it.

Looking beyond the current emergency, enhanced cooperation within the United Nations system will be needed in any case to strengthen the goal of a strong EU–AU political alliance. The two Unions recognize the role of the UN in their statutory acts and treaties, and have enshrined this commitment in their major strategic frameworks. Both Unions are firm supporters of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and persist in identifying regional integration as a propeller for growth and stability, notwithstanding their mixed track record in implementing these ambitious commitments.

Within the UN system, Europe should avoid seeking African support only on a case-by-case basis, simply to take advantage of the numerical influence of African countries within the General Assembly. Rather, it should look out for and pursue shared interests on a wide range of issues, especially within the mandate of UN technical agencies.

In the field of security, the Joint UN–AU Enhanced Partnership in Peace and Security signed in April 2017 could provide a promising platform to deepen strategic engagement on a topic – peace and security – that has been prioritized again this year by the AU through the adoption of its 2020 “Silencing the Guns” initiative.<sup>5</sup> Cooperation with the

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, *Communication on the Global EU Response to COVID-19* (JOIN/2020/11), 8 April 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020JC0011>.

<sup>5</sup> African Union, *African Union Strives to Ensure a Conflict-Free Africa in Line with the Theme on “Silencing the Guns: Creating Conducive Conditions for Africa’s Development”*, 10 February 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/node/3516508>.

UN remains crucial to achieve this goal and fulfil the recent call for a global ceasefire during the pandemic.

The two sides met in Addis Ababa last February to discuss the most severe crises on the continent and emphasize the importance of fair electoral processes.<sup>6</sup> However, some well-known obstacles surfaced, among which the co-funding of peace operations stands out. Here, Europe is called to play a more influential role in helping to find a compromise. Due to its position as one of the main financial supporters of the African Peace and Security Architecture, the EU should keep pushing for a resolution of disagreements between the AU and the UN over the future deployment of jointly-funded peace missions.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, there is room for increased EU support within another main cooperation framework between the AU and the UN, the implementation of the AU's Agenda 2063. Through a joint AU–UN Framework agreement signed in January 2018, the UN explicitly endorsed the AU's Agenda 2063 roadmap as in line with the UN's 2030 SDGs. Being a major player in the development realm, the EU could use its experience to facilitate harmonization among different multilateral development actors, such as the United Nations Development

Programme (UNDP) or the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), despite the fact that policy coherence on development still often eludes European actions as well.

Multilateral cooperation in other policy areas, such as migration, appears more complex. Nonetheless, some examples exist. One is the AU–EU–UN Task Force on Libya: despite mixed results, the initiative stands out as a tentative blueprint for cooperation on migration among three outspoken champions of multilateral governance.

A Voluntary Humanitarian Return programme has been put in place, managed by the International Organization for Migration, dedicated to safely returning approximately 50,000 migrants to their home countries since November 2017. Meanwhile, the Emergency Evacuation Transit Mechanism guided by UNHCR target migrants in Libya who cannot safely return and are in need of international protection. Similar mechanisms have been deployed in Niger and Rwanda, with the support of the AU.<sup>8</sup>

Despite its humanitarian motives, the Task Force has not been immune from criticism due to the large number of migrants still stranded in the war-torn country and the politicization of these emergency corridors.<sup>9</sup> The initiative

<sup>6</sup> UN Office to the African Union website: *18th Consultative Meeting held by the UN-AU Joint Task Force on Peace and Security in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*, <https://unoau.unmissions.org/taxonomy/term/42>.

<sup>7</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), "Eight Priorities for the African Union in 2020", in *ICG Africa Briefings*, No. 151 (7 February 2020), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/13277>.

<sup>8</sup> African Union, *The AU-EU-UN Taskforce Meeting Renews Its Commitment to Rescue Stranded Migrants and Refugees in Libya*, 24 February 2020, <https://au.int/pt/node/38150>.

<sup>9</sup> Leonie Jegen and Franzisca Zanker, "Spirited Away: The Fading Importance of Resettlement in the Emergency Transit Mechanism in Rwanda", in *ECDPM Blog*, 28 October 2019, <https://ecdpm.org/?p=37968>.

has also been accused of serving not-so-subtle European interest of limiting migrant departures for Europe.<sup>10</sup>

The protection of the most vulnerable individuals, including migrants, refugees and internally displaced, will gain even more relevance as the pandemic sweeps through Africa. Pooling political and financial resources among international actors in different fields – being it development, migration or health – will become mandatory as the cross-sectorial consequences of COVID-19 become manifest. The “Team Europe” approach could be taken a step further by actively supporting the implementation of the AU’s measures to strengthen the public health capacity of African states during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Multilateralism can and should be turned into a more pragmatic course of action for the EU. Multilateral governance and a more explicit targeting of European interests do not have to be a contradiction in terms. It is in the European interest to have a concerted approach to climate change, peace, migration and, last but not least, transnational health threats. Multilateralism cannot remain an abstract value for Europe, as COVID-19 is bluntly showing.

Conversely, African countries should fully commit to and materialize their formal adhesion to multilateral governance by effectively implementing at home those collegial

decisions taken at the international level within bodies like the AU. Despite increasing leverage acquired by balancing and exploiting the priorities of external actors, a majority of African countries are simply not adequately equipped to withstand a resurgence of great power politics and global challenges, as the COVID-19 pandemic could dangerously prove.

Pooling resources could then be transformed from an abstract principle underpinning multilateral approaches to a matter of survival: for this and many other reasons, both the EU and Africa better start acting now.

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<sup>10</sup> Karen McVeigh, “‘Life-Saving’: Hundreds of Refugees to Be Evacuated from Libya to Rwanda”, in *The Guardian*, 10 September 2019, <https://gu.com/p/cafgg>.

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