



Europe and Africa in 2035: Losing Alone or Winning Together?



Europe's climate transition is reshaping trade, security, and geopolitical relations beyond the EU's borders. Nowhere are the stakes higher than in Europe's relationship with Africa, where EU climate policies directly affect everything from livelihoods to resource governance. Set in 2035, these contrasting scenarios illustrate how Europe's choices today could either deepen climate cooperation between the two continents or doom them to conflict tomorrow.

Scenario 1: The Domino Effect

Fuelled by securitised and unilaterally applied policies, Europe and Africa leapt from one misunderstanding to another. In trying political and economic circumstances, events took on a logic of their own and soon mushroomed into a full-blown rupture that served no one's interests.

It's 2035. Most of the EU's landmark climate programming has been in place for the best part of a decade. Relations with Africa have never been worse. Furious with what they see as opportunistic policies designed to climate-proof Europe at others' expense, many African leaders are no longer on speaking terms with their European counterparts. As warming surges past 2.2°C, it has given rise to a series of cascading political events that threaten to leave everyone poorer, weaker, and, in their fragmentation even more exposed to the very climate impacts these actions were supposed to temper.

The difficulty began in 2029 when, after repeated delays, several key pieces of climate legislation were implemented almost at once. The Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which had previously been watered down under international pressure, was actually beefed up to remove all exemptions shortly before it came into force. It was unfair, German car manufacturers had insisted, that Chinese brands were held to less exacting standards, even as they'd come to consume over 60% of the European Electric Vehicle (EV) market. Although some EU and European government officials worried about what this uncompromising approach to CBAM might mean for Africa, they felt powerless to resist the clamour for more strategic autonomy, and a 'more competitive Europe', even if doing so undermined international partnerships.

EU officials were right to worry about the fragility of nascent industries in Africa. Many of these enterprises operated with such wafer-thin margins and Europe-focused export markets, that they soon collapsed. The subsequent uptick in trans-Mediterranean migration threw EU politics into an even more vicious tailspin.

The similarly delayed European Union Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) followed the implementation of CBAM. Intended to disincentivise further losses of tropical woodland, European Commission officials' refusal to simplify procedures for small businesses saddled many African enterprises with reporting requirements that they could not possibly satisfy. This led to devastating job losses. From an EU perspective, this muscular approach was necessary in light of prolific continued logging across the continent and limited local capacity to enforce anti-tree-cutting legislation. But that's not how it was seen among afflicted countries. By their reckoning, Europe, the world's biggest consumer of African coffee and chocolate, was simply using climate jargon to protect the economic interests of its own brands.

To cap it off, over the summer of 2035, the EU pushed through a series of dramatic agricultural policies devised to bolster the continent's food security in the face of intensifying global climate shocks. Fearing food price protests after consecutive years of weak harvests at home and shock grain export bans abroad following debilitating droughts in major producers, Brussels moved fast to snap up much of the Argentinian and Brazilian wheat that was still available on the international market. Having struck what they thought were legally binding import agreements with those South American producers, AU officials were aghast to find those deals were scarcely worth the paper they were written on. Top media figures from Cairo to Cape Town were not slow to voice their displeasure.

From there, like a deck of dominos, events took on a trajectory that nobody really wanted but that no leader felt able to resist. Outspoken African leaders, wrestling in most instances with the intensifying governance challenges that climate stresses bring – and keen to deflect from their own domestic failures in plenty of cases – were quick to invoke colonial-era grievances. The French, German, and several other European governments, all dominated by hard-right parties, responded in a manner that was widely perceived as eurocentric and even racist. As the angry rhetoric intensified and the EU-Africa dialogue soured, the dispute soon took on a life of its own, a matter of continental pride with no obvious off-ramp.

The European Union cancelled its programme of debt forgiveness, a well-regarded and previously mutually popular bid to direct climate finance to fragile and conflict-affected states. For their part, some African countries began to actively weaponise migration. The Egyptian, Moroccan, and Tunisian regimes dispatched boatloads of young men and women across the Mediterranean much as their peers in Turkey and Belarus had done in earlier years.

Years later, when the dust had fully settled and cooler heads had prevailed, European and African leaders acknowledged that they'd repeatedly and inadvertently tripped over one another's most acute sensitivities. Europe was feeling less powerful and bullied by brash US and Chinese governments. What's more, having been stuck in a costly and energy-draining cold war with Russia ever since its invasion of the Baltic States in 2030, it no longer felt wealthy enough to sponsor other parties' climate action. African nations felt much of that – and more. The fact that Europe was not only failing to assist but also actively impeding Africa's own efforts was a bridge too far.

In the end, all sides agreed on one thing: there was a grim inevitability to this crisis. In chaotic and confused times, relations between the two continents quickly collapsed into mutual distrust. In Africa, shrinking democratic space encouraged leaders to channel domestic frustrations outward. In Europe, where panicked and increasingly illiberal governments held sway, Brussels was consumed by efforts to hold the union together. The case for cooperation was obvious, commentators repeatedly pointed out. But by 2035, strategic vision was about as scarce a commodity as a glacier.

Scenario 2: A Messy Success

Amid shared climate challenges and a growing awareness of their darkening global prospects, Europe and Africa reluctantly came together to pool their expertise and assets. Cooperation was never easy, and 'victory' was deeply imperfect, but both continents emerged richer, stronger, and more climate-resilient from the experience.

It was difficult at the beginning. And when the EU introduced a raft of policies designed to further shield its own drought-battered farmers from external competition, it looked like Europe-Africa relations would be characterised much more by confrontation than cooperation over the coming years. But the horror summer of 2031 brought a dramatic change in political attitudes. With at least 450,000 excess deaths reported across Europe after its hottest months on record (52°C in Paris!) and many times the number of deaths from concurrent famines and extreme weather events in East and West Africa, their common cause could not have been clearer. When AU and EU officials met in September 2031 in Rome to trade knowledge and best practices on how to beat the heat, relations began to warm in a hurry.

Much of the early cooperation was centred on boosting African agriculture in the face of worsening climate-induced hunger. The idea was that European investments in more resilient seeds, more climate-appropriate growing practices, and better storage infrastructure would finally enable Africa to fully feed itself, while also providing more jobs for the continent's young population. In doing so, the hope was that aridifying Europe too would be able to grow many of the drought and heat-resistant crops that agronomists across the two continents were charged with jointly developing. Although these investments ultimately yielded uncertain results, with farmers' improved practices often more than balanced out by an A to Z of stark climate stresses, it created a momentum for action and a basis for trust that negotiators were to need for the tougher times to come.

Then the cooperation extended to improved and fairer investments in renewable energy. Struggling to construct sufficient clean energy infrastructure on their own continent, European Member States and the European Commission revisited old plans to build out solar capacity in the Sahara. This time, though, the plan came with several novel twists. While earlier EU-funded solar farms in Morocco and Tunisia had catered almost exclusively to European demand, new ones were built in a more equitable fashion. By the terms of the agreement, 50 percent of the electricity generated would be directed to African communities. And while previous projects were accused of depleting scarce water resources and immiserating local farmers, these ones were designed to be self-sufficient, a desalination unit purpose built to accompany each mega solar farm.

As the degree of trust strengthened and the mutual benefits came into clearer focus through 2033 and 2034, European and African officials even hit upon a scheme to jointly extract and process critical minerals. This aspect of the EU-Africa partnership required tremendous trade-offs from both parties, and all agreed that it never would have worked without earlier trust-building measures. But the imperative to seize control of their own electrification 'destiny' only strengthened as China and the US snapped up much of the rest of the world's resources and made access to them contingent on doing their bidding.

European countries agreed to fund training schemes and most of the weighty upfront costs, while also forgoing their businesses' desire to fully 'onshore' the new factories that would depend on the extracted materials. African states accepted that they would have to shoulder most of the pollution and other pitfalls that accompanied the mining and processing stages. By 2035, continental authorities and their private sector partners were already providing for 60 percent of their collective critical mineral requirements, with new mines and a new trans-Saharan railway to the port of Algiers slated to come online by 2040.

To be sure, there were setbacks along the way, and cooperation was seldom straightforward. Irregular migration remained a politically toxic topic in Europe. Amid consistently high numbers of undocumented crossings from North Africa, hyper-aggressive European naval pushbacks periodically damaged relations and even stalled talks, especially as the casualties mounted. Fiercer storms across the Mediterranean made the losses from the early 2020s look like rounding errors. A scheme to bring young, skilled Africans to work in EV and other factories for time-limited periods across aging Europe also fell apart after a concerted campaign by Germany's tabloid newspapers. During those months, it took officials' accumulated goodwill and a collective awareness of the stakes to keep the partnership intact.

'Success,' in a hotter, more complicated world, doesn't necessarily look like success in a traditional sense, as most people across the two continents learned. No manner of adaptation could shield Africa's urban population, which had almost doubled to more than one billion since 2025, from the very same flooding, drought, and heatwaves that had propelled many rural peoples into the cities in the first place. In Europe, not even a world-leading fall in emissions of about 80 percent from 1990 levels could spare its people from the trials of a less hospitable planet.

But with every passing year, circumstances both within the continents and elsewhere conspired to remind citizens that working together was a good deal better than the alternative after years of debilitating extreme weather events.

Increasingly aggressive posturing by Chinese state and private investors had soured most African governments on working with Beijing in any capacity. After a years-long estrangement, Europe and the US's relationship morphed into the most hostile of divorces, the final straw being further aggressive sabre-rattling against Iceland by a White House, which suddenly appeared as interested in that island's minerals as it had been in Greenland's a decade beforehand. Alert to its diminished global clout, Brussels finally well and truly accepted that its best prospects for peace and prosperity rested with renewed global multilateralism. Above all, the intensely interlinked nature of European and African geographies continued to impress itself upon many citizens.



ETTG | European Think Tanks Group

ecdpm

Nexus²⁵ is a joint project of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) in Rome and the Center for Climate and Security (CCS) in Washington, DC. The project, led by Dr. Nathalie Tocci at IAI, Erin Sikorsky at CCS and Dr. Michael Werz at the Munich Security Conference (MSC), is funded by Stiftung Mercator in Germany. This discussion paper was written as input for the Nexus²⁵ training for diplomats in Brussels, in cooperation with ECDPM and ETTG. The article was prepared by Peter Schwartzstein.

For additional information please visit <https://www.nexus25.org> or contact the Nexus²⁵ team at info@nexus25.org.

January 2026

