

Africa–Europe: A relationship in need of change

Siphamandla Zondi

Think Piece

Introduction

EU–Africa relations have benefited from a consolidation of continental agendas and institutions on both sides. While the EU has been integrated for decades, it only recently adopted a common policy on foreign and security affairs, an area of public policy considered by many observers in Africa as critical for facilitating a cordial relationship with Africa. The view is that in order for Europe to enter into a new partnership with Africa, one that recognises geopolitical changes globally, it needs to make clear the fundamental principles, values and interests that underpin its view of the world today and in the future, in particular the role of the parts of the world that it once colonised and continues to control economically and culturally. In Africa, the wave of democratisation combined with the unshackling of Africa that followed the end of the Cold War produced a new kind of leadership and citizenship, committed to democratic values, peace and sustainable development. But this transition has also stalled in a number of cases, creating an ambiguity of 'African progress', with many leaders considered part of the ugly past still active in politics.

In this context, Africa evolved a development blueprint premised on a strategic partnership with other parts of the world, a partnership founded on the principles of equality of nations, justice, respect for international law, and progress. However, the continent still had many institutions of governance and leaders ill-suited for the implementation of these ideals. This think piece suggests that the Africa–Europe partnership remains fundamentally weak beyond the less-than-warm regular gathering of the top leaders on both sides. This is because of the different, and sometimes diametrically opposed, political trajectories that the two continents have taken in the past decades. For this reason, the difficulty to start a serious political dialogue between the two continents to support the technicalities of policy design and implementation is a real challenge.

EU–Africa and the burdens of history

It is a common view among African observers that the Berlin conference of 1884 defined the relationship between Europe and Africa well beyond the end of colonialism in the mid-1970s. The conference sought to define how Europe would access Africa's untapped natural resources for its expanding population and industries. Given the lack of a specific and coherent African agenda on Europe, beyond development aid and trade in primary commodities, it is very possible to see the Lisbon Summit as about Europe defining its access to African resources once again¹. After Berlin, colonialism was a political strategy in service of this hunger for resources. In Lisbon, Europe is able to impose its will in spite of the partnership, as is thought to be case – rightly or wrongly – with the manner in which the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) are being negotiated with arbitrary groups of African countries².

¹ 'Africa: From Berlin to Lisbon', at <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/pages/mawere107.17300.html> (3 November 2007).

² See 'Africa: Lobbies Want Talks On EU Trade Pacts Held Up for Three Years,' at http://www.bilaterals.org/article.php3?id_article=9392 (3 March 2008), and 'ESA countries must determine agenda of Economic Partnership Agreements Negotiations' at <http://www.seatini.org/bulletins/7.06.php> (5 June 2009).

Dubbed 'the Summit of Equals' by the Portuguese Prime Minister, Jose Socrates, the Lisbon Summit hoped to undo this burden of history and lead to a partnership founded on equality, common interests and mutual respect. Socrates recalled the fact that it was from Lisbon that Europe set out to discover Africa at the beginning of imperialism, and in 2007 the idea was for Lisbon to be 'the bridgehead between Europe and Africa'. However, this declaration had the opposite effect, as African observers argued that it was presumptuous of Europe to talk about a relationship of equals before reconciliation and atonement of past and current sins. This refusal, including among African leaders that attended Lisbon, to look beyond a past of unequals to a future of equals underpins Africa's failure to live up to its part of the bargain struck at Lisbon. On this basis, weak outcomes should not be reduced to weak implementation capacity alone, but also the lack of political will on the part of African leaders and governments to assume equality before the past of inequality is atoned, one way or the other.

In response to Socrates' optimistic declaration, the African Union (AU) chairperson, John Kuffour, a committed liberal, retorted that history divided the two continents. He thought that the Lisbon Summit needed only to lay the basis for redefining this relationship, which means he expected the Summit to begin a process of removing the burden of history that militated against a cordial relationship of equals. Several African leaders pointed to various elements in this divisive history, including some moderate (like the Prime Minister of Morocco) and more radical African leaders (like Muamar Qhadaffi). The history of colonialism remains important in understanding the ambiguity of Africa's perspective on its relations with Europe. There is no better illustration of the burden of history than the response of African countries to Europe's concerns about Robert Mugabe's presence at the Lisbon Summit in 2007³. In fact, clearly differences over this, and other matters, partly explain the long time it took for the two continents to convene the Lisbon Summit after the Cairo Summit of 2000.

Of course, Europe did not just express optimism in the future to be built, but turned the heat on Africa by suggesting the real problems were post-colonial. For instance, Chancellor Merkel implored European countries not to let the human rights abuse perpetrated by African governments like Zimbabwe go unchallenged. This helped force Africa not only to close ranks, but to resist a new partnership on Europe's terms. Some of these fundamental differences over history remain unresolved, but were swept under the carpet as the partnership moved to matters of action plans and implementation. However, this unresolved framework of relationship undermines the possibility of an optimistic future.

Does Africa not have to take responsibility for missed opportunities after the end of formal colonial rule? African countries are also responsible for the harm caused by misrule and oppression to the African economy and politics since colonial rule, although many destructive governments and leaders were protected by some European countries. The fact that coup leaders in Madagascar and Niger receive support from the likes of France, in defiance of the AU's principled decision on unconstitutional change of political power, simply undermines the idea of equals.

³ See 'The EU-Africa relationship post-colonialism', at <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/pages/mawere106.17269.html> (June 2008).

Africa: the global problem child

While average economic growth rates in Africa have improved and, in some cases, been excellent, Africa's economic condition has remained largely unchanged. The continent has not benefitted visibly from stronger economic relations with major economic centres of the world, both in the East and the West. In fact, it is generally agreed that the new economic partners remain an opportunity, yet to be translated into concrete economic benefit, partly due to Africa's weak policy engagement and because these actors are largely driven by a craving for Africa's natural resources just like the old partners. Under these conditions, poverty, under-development, the curse of resources and external dependency continue to define the African condition, in spite of the changes in the global economy. The current global economic crisis has had a devastating effect on human development, as development partners cut back on their spending, external trade declines and foreign direct investments weaken.

Conscious of this condition, African countries continue to present their case in strategic partnerships, begging for assistance, debt forgiveness and, to some extent, market access. This helps promote the view of Africa as a beggar in a relationship that is supposed to be one of equals. While the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) provides a framework for African countries to take responsibility for their destiny and to enter into partnerships based on comparative strengths, in practice African countries continue to bring a list of demands and wishes to negotiation tables. The continent has not taken full advantage of the external interest in its rich natural resources in order to bargain for a more equitable economic partnership.

While developed countries, and indeed the new actors from developing countries, speak the language of equality and justice on public platforms, in practice they continue to espouse a patronising attitude towards Africa, with African leaders expected to queue for a handshake with heads of states of China, Iran, Japan, the UK, and France. While the EU, under the Portuguese presidency, talked about a relationship of equals, it was plotting to divide Africa into groups that do not match Africa's own regional blocs for negotiations on the EPAs. Key EU role players like France continued to act in contravention of common African positions on the political situation in Niger and Madagascar in 2008–9.

No new African agenda for EU–Africa relations?

Africa lacks a coherent and thought-through agenda for an Africa–Europe partnership. While the NEPAD is a useful, all-embracing framework for key external relationships, Africa needed a specific common position or policy on Europe, given the potential for this relationship to benefit Africa immensely. African countries, of course, agree broadly on colonial sins to be atoned and want to be cautious not to be reduced into stooges of Europe. They also agree that Europe is significant for market access and trade, and recognise that Europe has evolved into a positive global player due to its commitment to multilateralism. However, they do not have a specific set of priorities on which to shape, rather than respond to, Europe's initiatives in the process of building the partnership.

Part of the challenge for Africa is the manner in which decision-making takes place. The first challenge is that decisions are taken in national capitals and harmonised at continental level through consultation and consensus building. As a result, common positions tend to bear strong hallmarks of national interests of member states, rather than enlightened common interests for the greater good of Africa. The second challenge is that, while regional economic communities (RECs) are expected to act as building blocks for the continental governance architecture, they are hardly involved in shaping continental policy positions on major issues facing Africa and its external relations. The third issue is the weak consultation of non-state actors in major decision making at the AU. Where the AU central organs innovates common policies, these are treated with suspicion by representatives of national capitals. As a result, the mandate of the AU Commission, for instance, is so restricted that it is unable to lead the development of a supranational agenda for Africa.

The new cold war: North-Atlantic versus Asian Interests

There has been a sort of an economic cold war between the West and the new economic actors in Africa, especially China and India. The global transformations that followed the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s led to the emergence of new global powers. These new global actors are driven by strong national consumption, large populations and industrialisation. As a result, their demand for natural resources and primary commodities have caused them to look to Africa, in much the same way that some sectors of the industrialised North continue to see Africa as a source of much-needed raw materials for its industries. This has led to a sort of competition between the old power in the North Atlantic zone and the emerging Asian giants, which is most visible in countries rich in natural resources such as oil, minerals, forestry, fishery and so forth; hence the intense scramble for access to economies of the DRC, Sudan, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Angola and so forth.

China, in particular, has attempted to change the terms of its partnership with Africa by emphasising this idea of mutual respect and mutually beneficial relations. It has invested heavily in areas of the African political economy that could help stimulate sustainable economies, the transport and communications infrastructure – albeit driven by its interests in natural resources. Its commitment not to intervene in the internal political affairs of countries has also endeared it to the resource-rich countries, which tend to have questionable governance records⁴.

Large sectors in several African countries generally see Europe's renewed interest in an enhanced partnership as an artifact of this scramble, much the same way they see China's intense use of the Forum on China-Africa Co-operation. In their view, neither party is motivated by common good or a real interest in the renaissance of Africa, but by strong interests on resources and markets, given Africa's growing population and slowly expanding middle class. For this reason, Africa looks to play one power block against the other. It is much more willing

⁴ See Samkange, SJTM (2002) African perspectives on intervention and state sovereignty. *African Security Review* 11(1): 73–84.

to resist forced partnership with the North because it knows that the North will not want to let China and the emerging powers completely control the region's economies. While it makes sense for Africa to drag its feet in order to extract as many concessions from partners as possible, the lack of a coherent continental policy means that the continent does not know how to behave once concessions are exhausted or if a partner simply refuses to budge. So, Africa tends to adopt whatever comes out with no regard to the capacity to implement or alignment with Africa's broader interests. This translates into what is called a lack of capacity to implement, when in fact it is a weak policy framework for Africa to implement commitments made in partnership agreements.

The future

Therefore, expectations of the 3rd Africa–Europe Summit in Libya in November 2010 should be moderate. The burden of history, in subtle or obvious form, will remain part of the undertones of the discussions. The idea of Africa as a blemish on the global progress, and a continent in need of help, will also perpetuate a sense of entitlement on the part of Africa and a patronising attitude on the part of Europe. The discussions will take place in a context where Europe's kindness will be seen by some African actors as a ploy to win the competition for natural resources against the new economic players. Africa's common position on Europe remains elusive, meaning that the continent will lack an organising framework to guide its input into building a relationship with Europe that seeks to benefit both continents equitably and redefine the terms of their relationship for good.

Given the fact that political relations will continue to experience some difficulties over the next years, the focus should be on developing functional co-operation on the basis of converging socio-economic interests, which should succeed without political will. In fact, the success of functional co-operation will lay the foundation for improved political understanding and will. A new cadre of leadership will emerge, for whom improved functional co-operation is more important than history. In that fashion, Europe would have indirectly atoned for its sins and Africa delivered itself from the burden of its ugly past.

While interfaces with the AU are critical for high-level political dialogue, it is my humble view that actually greater effect would be realised if the RECs were given space to work out specific co-operation programmes. As the building blocks for AU integration, they are well positioned to deepen Africa's strategic partnerships, not only just with Europe, but also with China, Japan, India, Brazil, and other emerging powers.

Attention should be paid to a small set of high-impact priorities rather than a laundry list of what is desirable. These priorities would include co-operation in agriculture, natural resources (including beneficiation), health and education, as well as innovation and technology. Regional secretariats would be tasked with the task of co-ordinating the implementation of cross-boundary co-operation programmes. The AU Commission would manage the political dialogue and keep the dialogue between the continents going.

