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Facing a Globalised World: The New EU-Africa Partnership

The European Union's external relations over the past decade have been undergoing a process of adaptation to current trends in world affairs. We have not moved as fast as our ambitions would require, and we have quite rightly heard voices that suggest that we had better resolve our institutional fine-tuning rapidly if we wish to serve our citizens by having appropriate mechanisms for dealing with the rest of the world. But leaving aside the debates over the Lisbon Treaty, it is true to say that our European behemoth has been seeking to find ways of adapting to a changing world.

New actors, new or reformulated challenges, trends of integration and disintegration, as well as an enlarged Union have all played an important part in this process of rethinking Europe's role in the world. But as the EU devised ways to engage strategically with other major international actors, Africa was somehow treated according to the old post-colonial paradigm, no longer in tune with the global realities that both continents face today. The Lisbon EU-Africa Summit of December 2007 signalled a joint will to shift this state of affairs, and to build a mature and comprehensive partnership to deal with issues of concern for both sides. It is an ambitious programme, with a number of important challenges and difficulties that individual states, as well as the two regional bodies – the African Union and the European Union – must overcome.

This article starts with a general description of the major international changes, worldwide, in Europe, and in Africa, as a background and rationale for the new Europe-Africa partnership. It then moves on to focus on the specificity of this partnership, to conclude with a brief and preliminary assessment of the first months since the Lisbon Summit and the challenges of implementing a Joint Strategy.

Global Challenges in a Changing World

The fact that certain issues cannot be tackled efficiently at a purely national or even regional level is not new, but in the past decade a widespread awareness has emerged of the need to find common answers to challenges that produce effects at a truly global scale.

The regulation of markets, trade agreements, international security, energy and climate change, migration flows, or the more recent food price crisis fall clearly in the category of issues which are, by nature, transnational and therefore must be treated as so. This increased awareness does not mean that individual countries or regional organisations should not be responsible for putting into effect the necessary measures to address those challenges, but rather that concerted action between major international players is a pre-

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requisite for successful policies. In other words, when we speak of mechanisms of global governance, we are recognising that in the past few years we have moved from thinking about issues that are vaguely desirable, to thinking about our absolute need to find new responses to contemporary realities. And this means that we need to find appropriate partners.

The Portuguese Presidency of the EU held the first EU-Brazil Summit, as well as summits with China, Russia and India. With the French Presidency of 2008 organising the first EU-South Africa Summit, the EU has now Summit-level dialogues with all the emerging countries, together with longstanding partnerships with traditional partners (United States, Canada and Japan). Other mechanisms provide for dialogue with differing geometries of Asia and Latin America.

Until very recently, however, Africa was left outside of this process. If we look at the volume of development aid, it would be unfair to say that the EU has neglected the African continent. But it is certainly true that relations with Africa have remained hostage to a long-standing tradition of an approach focused on aid giving and receiving, an approach that was not conducive to the possibility of developing with Africa a strategic dialogue – in other words, a dialogue that is focused not only on solving outstanding bilateral issues, but rather one that sees Africa as a partner in addressing global themes. Dealing with individual countries does not answer such a need.

Major changes over the past decade both in Europe and in Africa have paved the way to a new approach to cooperation between the two continents. The enlarged EU, with twelve new members, is substantially different from earlier and smaller versions of the EU, as regards Africa. These twelve new countries have no African colonial heritage at all and, quite rightly, are only interested in a relationship with the African continent that is clearly aimed at developing new opportunities in the future rather than at enshrining the past. The institutional changes that are foreseen in the Lisbon Treaty open new possibilities for the EU to act as a more assertive player in the international arena.

Africa has changed as well. The transformation of the Organisation for African Unity to the African Union (AU), the launching of NEPAD and the emergence of regional and sub-regional crisis resolution capacities, show a clear political will to devise new mechanisms for collective responses to common challenges. The low level of cross-border trade and infrastructure, and indeed the strong attachment to recently achieved manifestations of political sovereignty, do not make an easy path for the African Union. But despite its shortcomings and difficulties, the current integration process in Africa shows a growing dynamism, and most importantly, it has established an interlocutor for the European Union for addressing issues of common concern.

Economically, growth rates in a number of African countries have had an important impact in the way the world looks at Africa today. Direct foreign investment has soared in the past 4 years. Record-high prices of commodities, namely oil, have triggered a boom of investment in the energy and extraction sectors, with spillovers to other sectors, such as banking and telecommunications. According to the 2007-2008 African Economic Outlook, the economic activity in the African continent has registered in 2007 a growth rate of 5.7% and should remain at similar levels in 2008 and 2009. Such numbers hide sharp contrasts among African countries, but they indicate a new energy in African economies, that is no longer in tune with the gloomy pictures of recent decades.

These figures are directly related to another major change of the past decade, namely the fact that Africa is now the object of an unprecedented level of international attention. China, the United States, Brazil or India, have all intensified enormously their presence in Africa, challenging the donor-recipient dynamics.

China, in particular, has a presence in Africa today that is substantially different from a decade ago, which also reflects the changes experienced in these past years in Chinese domestic reality and international engagement. Nowadays, the economic activity between China and Africa has reached an unprecedented volume, both as regards trade and as regards investment. The increase of this presence in Africa, as in other parts of the world, is a direct consequence of the new possibilities for developing a diplomacy based on economic capacities, which were previously not there. Chinese growth has produced a search for new markets, particularly in the field of energy, and Africa is an attractive partner in this area.

This in itself is not a negative development. Europe must accept China's involvement with Africa, and find ways to cooperate on issues of mutual interest. However, stronger engagement of other international actors should not stop Europe from developing and consolidating its own approach to Africa. This implies a comprehensive, multi-layered partnership, one that is able to treat political, development, trade and investment as inter-connected dimensions.

Building a Partnership of Equals

These dynamics played an important role as European and African diplomats negotiated and agreed on a Joint Strategy, approved at the Lisbon Summit of December 2007. Contrary to some rather naïve popular assumptions, the Summit was not a forum for finding solutions to specific current problems striking Africa or Europe. Its objective, and its achievement, was the launching of a new framework of relations – a mature partnership of equals, allowing the two continents to work together on issues of mutual concern. When we talk of equality in this context, of course we are not arguing that European and African countries have equal powers or resources or capacities. What we are acknowledging is the equality in our responsibilities towards our peoples, and towards the management of global and inter-regional challenges.

The Summit itself was the first example of this new framework, when all countries, in the great majority of cases represented at the highest level, were able to discuss issues such as democracy and human rights; peace and security; migrations; energy and climate change; trade and infrastructures. Heads of State and Government also approved the documents which are now the guiding instruments of Euro-African relations – the Joint Strategy and the Action Plan.

The approval of these two documents was crucial for ensuring the implementation of this new chapter of relations with Africa. Not only do they set the broad areas where the two continents wish to act as partners – hence the approval of eight partnerships, each one of them comprising a number of priority actions to be implemented until the next summit in 2010 – they also define the institutional arrangements for joint work. These arrangements place the two organisations representing the two continents – the EU and the AU and especially their respective Commissions – at the core of political relations. They also include regular meetings at various levels to ensure continuity; the possibility of partnerships evolving at a different pace, while ensuring coherence of the whole

process; and the encouragement to non-governmental actors to also be involved in the implementation of the different partnerships.

The past few months since the Summit have allowed the two organisations to make the necessary decisions and put in place their own mechanisms to deal with this new stage of relations. Even if it is too early to speak of deliveries, there were important developments which give us clear indications of where we are heading and the challenges ahead.

First, the election in January 2008 of the new African Union Commission and the choice of Jean Ping as President of the Commission. President Konaré certainly contributed greatly to raise the profile and the international credibility of the African Union, but the focus must now be on the Union's capacity to deliver. This has been presented as one of the priorities of the new President of the AU Commission, and it is certainly a crucial step for forging a true partnership. President Ping's references to the need to strengthen NEPAD in the AU framework also signals a willingness to focus more on concrete projects. And the indication by the AU Commission that new infrastructure initiatives in Africa should be selected taking into consideration the priorities of NEPAD, is very much in line with the spirit of the EU-Africa Partnership.

The second development that is worth emphasizing in the first semester of 2008, is the appointment of an EU Ambassador to the African Union, which is essentially the first joint Commission/Council external representation. Given the comprehensive nature of the issues that Europeans and Africans must work together on, as well as the need to engage different EU actors in a new set of bilateral links, this appointment is certainly a positive development. It reveals a pro-active attitude on the side of the EU and signals an understanding that concrete achievements in the various partnerships will depend to a large extent on the day-to-day joint work which will happen in Adis Abeba and Brussels.

As for the necessary internal adjustments that each organisation needs to undergo, we all know that this is never an easy process. For the EU, the Slovenian Presidency has successfully managed to find a compromise between Member States and the EU institutions on how to take the work forward. The EU has established implementation teams for each of the eight Partnerships of the Action Plan. These informal groups will bring together experts which will then meet with their African counterparts to monitor the implementation of priority actions.

This arrangement is flexible enough to allow Member States to be more involved in the issues that they are individually interested in, while the Presidency, together with the Commission and the Council Secretariat, ensures the coherence of the different partnerships. The meetings held so far confirm this approach, with the participation of a large number of Member States. For its part, Portugal has indicated its willingness to participate actively in five of these Partnerships – Peace and Security, Democracy and Human Rights, Millennium Development Goals, Science and Migrations.

On the African side, there was a longer period of reflection on the institutional arrangements that the AU must adopt to work jointly with the European Union on the implementation of the Action Plan. Some conclusions on how to handle the process emerged in June, as presented in the AU Commission report on the EU-Africa Joint Strategy presented to the AU Executive Council meeting in Sharm el-Sheikh (24-28 June 2008).

Two regional seminars were held in March, one in Burkina Faso and one in Lesotho, allowing AU Member states to express their views on the subject. Reflecting the opinion of the majority of Member States, the AU troika will remain the main interlocutor for the EU. A list of proposed activities for each priority action has been drawn up, and expert groups are currently being established.

Some Challenges Ahead

The establishment of properly functioning platforms for cooperation is perhaps the greatest challenge ahead. Without the gradual development of habits of working together at various levels there will not be a genuine ownership of the process by both sides. So these platforms must be more than just formal gatherings and should focus on implementing the priority actions defined in Lisbon. There will certainly be tensions between European and African priorities, but, as always, compromises must be reached and at this stage the “socialisation process” is vital, if we are to correspond to the ambitious framework that was approved in Lisbon. The work of the joint teams must also be organised in such a way as to allow for the regular assessment of results and the review of existing priorities.

Another challenge resides in the capacity of both sides to keep arrangements flexible and pragmatic. Partnerships must be seen as an open process, which allow for the contribution of non-official actors, such as NGOs and think-tanks. Their proposals will certainly often clash with official views, but they are essential to build a comprehensive dialogue. The AU Commission report on the implementation of the Joint Strategy already identifies a number of initiatives that could place non-governmental institutions as intervening actors of the partnership.

Finally, the EU-Africa Joint Strategy is a serious test to the capacity of the African Union as an international actor. There are a number of major African players – such as Senegal or South Africa – which are strongly committed to the implementation of this new Partnership. However, they occasionally reveal some scepticism about the ability of the African Union to steer the process, and to become the main interlocutor of the EU. A balance must be struck between the natural and welcome commitment of individual states and the responsibility of the organisation which represents the continent as a whole. Without such a balance it will be very difficult to put in place a partnership whose cornerstone is precisely continent-to-continent dialogue.

On the European side, I think that we have a strong vested interest in the success of the African Union in responding to this challenge. We have now moved to a stage where not only do we have to deepen our regional integration in order to respond to the pressures of globalisation, but we also have to help others to deepen their integration processes in order to function as partners for us. This is a pre-condition for the EU’s effective multilateralism and this is why we needed the Lisbon summit to happen and to leave a successful legacy for the future.