

PARTNERSHIP MATTERS: EU-AU IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the evolving partnership between the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU) in the context of a multipolar world, where Africa's geopolitical significance is increasingly acknowledged. The aim of this study is to analyze the structural asymmetries and challenges that characterize the EU-AU relationship while proposing strategies for fostering a more equitable and mutually beneficial partnership. Utilizing a qualitative research method, the paper draws on a comprehensive literature review, case studies, and stakeholder interviews to examine the dynamics of cooperation and competition between the two unions. The main findings reveal that Africa's demographic growth and resource wealth position it as a key player in global governance; however, existing power imbalances hinder effective collaboration. The research highlights the necessity for the EU to transition from a traditional donor-recipient model to one that respects African agency and prioritizes co-produced partnerships. Additionally, the study identifies critical areas of tension, including climate policy, migration governance, and security dynamics, which require nuanced engagement. Overall, the conclusions emphasize that a genuine partnership between the EU and AU is essential for addressing shared challenges and achieving sustainable development. By recognizing Africa's agency and aligning interests, the EU can enhance its strategic leverage while supporting Africa's aspirations for industrialization and regional integration. The findings underscore the urgency for both parties to adapt their approaches to navigate the complexities of a rapidly changing global landscape effectively.

Keywords: EU-AU partnership, multipolar world, structural asymmetries, cooperation, competition, African agency, sustainable development, climate policy, migration governance, security dynamics.

Words: 107,813

Trade is the lifeblood of Africa's integration and prosperity. We must remove barriers and create an enabling environment so that African businesses, especially SMEs, women, and youth, can thrive across borders

-Paul Kagame

If there is to be support for trade globalization in the developed world, we must make sure that the benefits and costs are more evenly shared..." — this insight emphasizes that trade policy cannot be evaluated purely on efficiency or GDP growth but must pay attention to distributional impacts, governance, and equitable outcomes — a lesson that resonates deeply with African EU trade integration and the need for standards tied to development, jobs, and inclusion.

-Joseph Stiglitz

Less is more.

-Mies van der Rohe

Once you tried black, you never go back.

-Stefan Ilcus

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In *Africa: The Cradle of Human Diversity*, the authors Ftortes Lima & Mtetwa recounts Africa not merely as the geographical point of human origin, but as the primary laboratory of human variation. The argument is that the continent's immense ecological range—savannahs, forests, deserts, highlands, river systems—produced sustained evolutionary experimentation, giving rise to the widest genetic, linguistic, and cultural diversity found anywhere in the world. Human difference, in this account, is not an anomaly to be explained but the original condition of humanity, first forged in Africa.

The author stresses that mobility, adaptation, and interaction are central to this story. Early human populations did not evolve in isolation but through constant movement, contact, and differentiation, generating complex social and cognitive capacities long before dispersals beyond the continent. Africa thus appears not as a static origin point left behind by history, but as an enduring engine of innovation whose internal diversity predates and exceeds later global differentiation.

Crucially, the book reframes Africa's diversity as a source of resilience and creativity rather than fragmentation. The very traits often misread as disorder—plural identities, overlapping affiliations, and flexible social forms—are presented as deep historical inheritances rooted in humanity's earliest adaptive strategies. In this sense, to be African is to stand closest to the original human condition: shaped by diversity, comfortable with plurality, and historically attuned to change rather than uniformity.

In *Africa: The Cradle of Human Diversity*, the authors deepen the argument by showing how Africa's major ecological zones—savannahs, forests, deserts, highlands, and river systems—acted as long-term drivers of human differentiation and innovation rather than as constraints. Each environment demanded distinct adaptive strategies, producing a mosaic of lifeways, technologies, and social forms whose cumulative effect was unparalleled diversity.

The savannahs, with their seasonal rhythms and open landscapes, fostered mobility, long-distance interaction, and early technological experimentation. Hunting strategies, tool innovation, and cooperative social organisation emerged in response to fluctuating resources, encouraging cognitive flexibility and collective problem-solving. These open spaces were not empty frontiers but connective corridors through which peoples, ideas, and genes circulated.

Forested zones, particularly the equatorial rainforests, required radically different adaptations. Dense vegetation, limited visibility, and rich but dispersed resources favoured intimate

ecological knowledge, specialised subsistence practices, and finely tuned social coordination. The book highlights how forest societies developed sophisticated understandings of biodiversity, medicinal knowledge, and sustainable use of complex ecosystems—forms of innovation rooted in depth rather than expansion.

Deserts, especially the Sahara and the Horn's arid regions, are presented not as voids but as dynamic historical spaces. Periods of climatic fluctuation transformed deserts into habitable landscapes and back again, forcing repeated cycles of migration, retreat, and recombination. These pressures encouraged technological ingenuity in water management, pastoral mobility, and long-distance trade, while also shaping cultures skilled in negotiation, endurance, and transregional exchange.

Highland regions, such as the Ethiopian and East African highlands, offered ecological insulation and agricultural potential. Their cooler climates and fertile soils supported early domestication, dense settlement, and political centralisation. At the same time, relative isolation allowed linguistic and cultural lineages to persist and diversify, contributing to Africa's extraordinary depth of historical continuity.

River systems—the Nile, Niger, Congo, Zambezi, and others—functioned as arteries of interaction and accumulation. They enabled agriculture, urbanisation, and state formation while connecting distant ecological zones. Along these rivers, populations exchanged goods, technologies, and beliefs, creating zones of sustained innovation where surplus, governance, and symbolic systems could develop in tandem.

Across these environments emerged a vast variety of peoples, languages, and social orders, not as fragmented outcomes but as adaptive responses to ecological complexity. The book argues that this diversity generated a unique potential for innovation-driven growth: Africa's long history of managing plurality, mobility, and environmental uncertainty cultivated social and technological flexibility. In this sense, African diversity is not merely a record of the past but a latent asset—one that positions the continent as a reservoir of adaptive knowledge and creative capacity in a world increasingly shaped by ecological stress and systemic change.

David Hackett Fischer does not specifically write about Africa's ecological diversity in the sense of palaeo-environmental origins of human diversity. His main contributions relevant to Africa are about cultural diversity and historical influence, especially in *African Founders*, where he traces how varied African cultures shaped early American society.

Fischer's argument in *African Founders* rests on the idea that the Africans brought to the Americas via the trans-Atlantic slave trade came from multiple distinct regions of Africa — for example the Senegambia region, the Guinea coast, the Congo-Angola area, and East Africa/Mozambique — each with its own cultural heritage and practices. These varied cultural “germs” or folkways were transported into North America and infused with local European and Indigenous traditions, producing regional cultures that were deeply shaped by African contributions in language, social practices, labor skills, and community organisation.

Fischer emphasises that Africans did not arrive as a homogeneous group but as diverse peoples with different skills, languages, and worldviews. In his analysis he shows how these cultural differences influenced the character of different colonial regions — for example, how rice

cultivation expertise from West Africa helped shape agricultural economies, or how maritime skills influenced boatbuilding traditions.

Although Fischer's primary focus is on cultural and historical transmission rather than ecological zones per se, his work implicitly supports a broader insight compatible with ecological perspectives: diversity at the source (in this case Africa) produces variable and influential outcomes when transplanted into new contexts. In other words, just as environmental diversity (savannahs to forests) in Africa contributed to human adaptability and variation, cultural diversity among African peoples contributed to innovation and influence in the societies where they lived — reinforcing the idea that diversity is a driver of historical and social creativity.

Africa is Europe's closest geopolitical, demographic, and economic neighbour. The continent's population is projected to double by 2050, with urbanisation accelerating and a rapidly growing middle class demanding goods, services, and governance that match their ambitions. Africa's proximity, combined with its resource endowment, technological potential, and expanding markets, makes the EU–Africa relationship one of the most consequential of this century.

The stakes extend beyond economics. Competing external actors—including China, Gulf states, Russia, India, and the United States—are increasingly present in Africa, offering alternative models of investment, trade, and security engagement. For the EU, the risk is clear: failure to adapt its approach may consign it to the sidelines, while rivals consolidate influence through pragmatic partnerships that often bypass European conditionality and bureaucratic hurdles.

The relationship between the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU) is increasingly critical in the context of a multipolar world where Africa's geopolitical significance is on the rise. As demographic shifts, resource endowments, and strategic geography position Africa as a central player in global affairs, the dynamics of EU-AU partnerships must evolve. This document aims to explore the complexities of this relationship, focusing on the balance between cooperation and competition, the implications of Africa's rising influence, and the need for a more equitable partnership framework.

The AU–EU partnership unfolds within a global landscape marked by shifting power balances, contested multilateralism, and the steady rise of Africa as a geopolitical actor. As traditional hierarchies loosen and new centres of influence emerge, both unions present their relationship as a cornerstone of cooperative global governance, yet the partnership remains shaped by deep structural asymmetries. The EU continues to wield financial, institutional, and normative weight, while the AU navigates the dual task of asserting continental priorities and managing internal diversity. This dynamic creates a complex political theatre in which Africa is neither a passive recipient nor a fully equal partner, but an actor negotiating space, voice, and leverage in a crowded geopolitical marketplace. The proliferation of external partners—from China to the Gulf states, Turkey, and Russia—has expanded Africa's strategic options, enabling the AU to diversify alliances and recalibrate its engagement with Europe. In this sense, the AU–EU partnership becomes a revealing microcosm of contemporary global politics, where interregionalism is tested by multipolarity, and where narratives of mutuality coexist uneasily with enduring hierarchies.

Within this evolving context, African agency emerges as a critical analytical lens. It challenges the persistent Eurocentric framing that casts Africa as an object of policy rather than a producer of norms, strategies, and institutional innovations. African agency is not a singular phenomenon but a spectrum of practices ranging from agenda setting and norm entrepreneurship to subtle forms of resistance, reinterpretation, and selective implementation. These practices unfold in negotiation rooms, technical committees, and diplomatic corridors where AU officials, regional organizations, and member states navigate constraints while pursuing their own priorities. Yet much of this agency remains under documented, partly because research has tended to privilege European perspectives and formal policy outputs. The result is a set of empirical gaps that obscure how the partnership actually functions. We know relatively little about the micro level interactions that shape decisions, the variation in African influence across policy domains, or the internal contestations within the AU that condition its external positions. These gaps matter because they determine whether the partnership reproduces old patterns or opens space for more equitable forms of cooperation.

Against this backdrop, the research seeks to illuminate how the AU–EU partnership is evolving, how African actors exercise agency within it, and whether the relationship is moving beyond symbolic gestures toward substantive transformation. It aims to trace how global political shifts reshape the architecture and discourse of the partnership, paying particular attention to the tension between proclaimed mutuality and persistent asymmetry. It also seeks to identify the mechanisms through which African actors influence agenda setting, negotiation, and implementation, and to explain why agency varies across sectors such as peace and security, migration, climate governance, and digital policy. A further objective is to assess whether the partnership’s institutional arrangements enable meaningful redistribution of voice and decision making power or whether they primarily perform the language of equality without altering underlying structures. These questions guide an inquiry that is both empirical and conceptual, grounded in the lived practices of interregional cooperation and attentive to the broader transformations of global governance.

The study contributes to debates on African agency by offering a more granular account of how agency is enacted within a major interregional partnership, moving beyond abstract claims to empirically grounded analysis. It also advances scholarship on interregionalism by showing how partnerships operate under conditions of asymmetry and geopolitical flux, challenging assumptions derived from EU centric models. Empirically, the research fills gaps in our understanding of AU–EU interactions by generating new evidence on negotiation practices, institutional dynamics, and sectoral variation. Normatively, it provides a framework for distinguishing between the performance and the substance of partnership, offering insights that can inform future strategies and reforms. Through this combination of analytical depth and empirical richness, the study seeks to tell a more accurate and compelling story of how Africa and Europe engage one another at a moment when the global order itself is being rewritten.

The strategic challenges facing the African continent are multifaceted and deeply interconnected, encompassing political, security, economic, social, environmental, and geostrategic dimensions.

Politically, many African states contend with weak institutional capacity, pervasive corruption, and fragile governance structures, which constrain effective policy implementation and

regional coordination. Ethnic and regional divisions, as well as contested political transitions, further exacerbate internal instability and complicate state-building efforts.

From a security perspective, the continent is characterized by a prevalence of armed conflicts, insurgencies, and civil unrest. Non-state actors, including terrorist and extremist groups, exploit weak governance structures and porous borders, undermining both national and regional security. Maritime insecurity, including piracy, trafficking, and illegal exploitation of natural resources, represents an additional challenge to economic stability and regional governance.

Economically, many African states exhibit a high dependency on extractive industries, rendering them vulnerable to external price fluctuations and global market dynamics. Deficiencies in infrastructure—spanning transport, energy, and digital connectivity—impede trade and economic integration. Demographic pressures, particularly high youth unemployment, contribute to social discontent and exacerbate the risk of instability.

Social and human development challenges further complicate the strategic landscape. Limited access to quality healthcare and education constrains human capital development. Rapid urbanization strains housing, sanitation, and employment systems, while persistent inequalities between urban and rural populations, as well as across ethnic and social groups, heighten social tensions.

Environmental and climate-related factors constitute a significant source of vulnerability. Water scarcity, desertification, and climate-induced migration generate additional pressures on fragile states. The predominance of rain-fed agriculture in many regions increases susceptibility to food insecurity, while extreme weather events amplify humanitarian risks and political tensions.

Geostrategically, the African continent is shaped by the influence of external actors and the dynamics of regional power competition. Major powers, including China, the United States, Russia, and Gulf states, pursue strategic economic and security interests that may, at times, exacerbate local conflicts. Intra-continental disputes, such as those related to transboundary water resources and territorial disagreements, further complicate regional stability. African Union and regional institutions, while increasingly active, often face challenges in enforcing agreements and effectively mediating disputes.

The complexity of these challenges is amplified by their interactions. Weak governance structures magnify security vulnerabilities, environmental stressors induce migration and competition for resources, and external interventions may exploit local instabilities. Consequently, addressing Africa's strategic challenges necessitates integrated, multi-dimensional approaches that simultaneously consider political, economic, security, social, and environmental factors.

Effectively addressing the strategic challenges facing Africa requires, as a fundamental and preliminary step, the comprehensive identification, categorization, and analysis of these challenges. The African continent is characterized by a high degree of diversity and complexity, encompassing a wide array of political, security, economic, social, environmental, and geostrategic issues that are deeply interrelated. Political fragility, for instance, manifests in weak governance structures, limited institutional capacity, corruption, and contested political

transitions, all of which undermine the ability of states to implement coherent policies and respond effectively to emerging crises. Similarly, security challenges—including civil conflicts, insurgencies, terrorism, and maritime insecurity—cannot be considered in isolation from the broader political and socioeconomic environment, as they often emerge from, and are exacerbated by, weak state authority, social grievances, and economic deprivation.

Economic vulnerabilities further complicate the strategic landscape. Many African states exhibit a heavy dependence on extractive industries such as oil, gas, and minerals, rendering their economies highly susceptible to fluctuations in global commodity markets. Inadequate infrastructure—encompassing transport networks, energy supply, and digital connectivity—impedes both domestic development and regional integration, limiting trade and economic diversification. Demographic pressures, particularly rapid population growth and high youth unemployment, generate additional socioeconomic stress, which, if left unaddressed, can exacerbate political instability and social unrest.

Social and human development factors are equally critical. Access to quality healthcare and education remains uneven, constraining human capital development and reducing the long-term resilience of societies. Rapid urbanization presents further challenges, as cities struggle to provide adequate housing, sanitation, and employment opportunities, while persistent inequalities between urban and rural populations, as well as across ethnic and social groups, contribute to social tension and potential conflict. Environmental and climate-related pressures—including water scarcity, desertification, climate-induced migration, and the vulnerability of rain-fed agriculture—introduce additional layers of complexity, as these factors intersect with economic fragility and governance deficits to create multi-dimensional risks that are both immediate and long-term in nature.

Geostrategic considerations add yet another dimension to Africa's strategic challenges. The influence of external actors, including global powers and regional neighbors, often shapes domestic and regional dynamics, at times exacerbating existing vulnerabilities. Competing interests among foreign states, combined with the intricate web of regional power rivalries, influence political stability, resource management, and conflict resolution across the continent. African institutions, including the African Union and regional economic communities, have increasingly sought to coordinate responses to these challenges; however, limitations in enforcement capacity, resource availability, and institutional authority continue to hinder effective implementation.

Given this intricate landscape, the process of addressing Africa's challenges must begin with a rigorous and systematic identification of the underlying issues. It is only through a detailed understanding of the nature, scope, and interconnections of political, security, economic, social, environmental, and geostrategic challenges that policymakers can design interventions that are both coherent and sustainable. Identification involves not only cataloging problems but also analyzing their causes, trajectories, and potential interactions. For example, understanding how environmental stressors such as droughts or desertification interact with economic dependency on agriculture, or how political fragility amplifies security threats, is essential for developing holistic strategies.

Once challenges have been thoroughly identified, subsequent efforts can focus on their resolution through integrated and multi-dimensional strategies. Such strategies must strengthen governance institutions, enhance security and rule-of-law mechanisms, promote sustainable economic development, mitigate social inequalities, address environmental risks, and effectively navigate the influence of both regional and external actors. A piecemeal or narrowly focused approach is insufficient in the African context; the interdependence of these challenges demands coordinated interventions that account for both immediate needs and long-term systemic resilience.

Ultimately, the identification and resolution of Africa's strategic challenges constitute a continuous and iterative process. Challenges evolve over time, influenced by demographic shifts, climate change, regional dynamics, and global economic and political trends. Therefore, any strategic plan must incorporate mechanisms for ongoing assessment, monitoring, and adaptive management, allowing for adjustments in response to emerging risks or unforeseen developments. Only through this deliberate and comprehensive approach—beginning with systematic identification and proceeding through integrated, context-sensitive interventions—can strategic objectives be effectively realized and sustained across the continent.

Scientific Argument

The argument presented in this document posits that the EU must transition from a traditional donor-recipient model to a partnership that recognizes Africa's agency and strategic importance. This shift is essential for fostering sustainable development and addressing the structural asymmetries that currently characterize the relationship. By engaging in co-produced partnerships that prioritize mutual benefits, the EU can enhance its strategic leverage while supporting Africa's aspirations for industrialization, regional integration, and technological innovation.

Objectives

1. To analyze the current state of the EU-AU relationship and identify key challenges and opportunities.
2. To assess the implications of Africa's demographic and resource dynamics on global governance and economic stability.
3. To explore the trade-offs inherent in EU-AU partnerships, particularly in areas such as climate policy, migration, and security.
4. To propose strategies for fostering a more equitable and mutually beneficial partnership framework.

This research will focus on the geopolitical, economic, and social dimensions of the EU-AU relationship, examining historical contexts, current dynamics, and future trajectories. It will consider the perspectives of various stakeholders, including African states, EU institutions, and external actors, while emphasizing the importance of regional integration and cooperation.

Research Questions

1. How has Africa's rising geopolitical significance influenced the EU-AU partnership?

2. What are the key structural asymmetries in the EU-AU relationship, and how do they impact cooperation?
3. In what ways can the EU adapt its approach to foster genuine partnerships with African states?
4. What are the implications of competing global powers for the future of EU-AU relations?

Understanding the evolving dynamics of the EU-AU partnership is crucial for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners engaged in international relations and development. This research will contribute to the discourse on global governance, highlighting the need for equitable partnerships that respect African agency and priorities. By addressing the complexities of this relationship, the findings will inform strategies for enhancing cooperation and ensuring that both the EU and Africa can navigate the challenges of a multipolar world effectively.

Literature Review

The partnership between the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) has attracted extensive scholarly attention, analyzed through multiple theoretical and methodological lenses that explore institutional frameworks, policy convergence, and normative power dynamics. One dominant scholarly approach situates the AU–EU relationship within the framework of interregionalism, which conceptualizes interactions between regional organizations as formalized, structured, and strategic. This approach, emphasized by Haastrup, Mah, and Duggan (2021), allows researchers to examine the mechanisms of cooperation, compare institutional architectures, and evaluate the potential for mutual influence despite inherent asymmetries in governance and capacity. The contrast between the EU’s supranational governance structures and the AU’s primarily intergovernmental decision-making processes highlights how institutional design shapes the effectiveness and pace of partnership initiatives. Interregionalism provides a lens to assess formal agreements, including the Joint Africa EU Strategy (JAES), while simultaneously critiquing the limitations imposed by Eurocentric frameworks that may underestimate African agency (Rein, 2015).

Another prominent analytical lens treats the AU–EU relationship as a strategic partnership, focusing on whether formal agreements translate into joint policy-making across key domains, including peace and security, governance, trade, and development. Scholars such as Peen Rodt and Okeke (2013) and Plank (2022) examine the alignment of policy priorities and the operational coordination of initiatives such as peacekeeping operations, crisis mediation, and capacity-building programs. The JAES represents the institutional centerpiece of this strategic partnership, providing structured mechanisms for cooperation and promoting a narrative of mutual ownership. However, analyses reveal that the strategic partnership is often undermined by persistent asymmetries. The EU continues to dominate agenda-setting and resource allocation, and while formal frameworks exist, actual implementation frequently falls short, resulting in an operational gap between high-level strategy and practice (Van Hove et al., 2025).

Fredrik Söderbaum, Rahel W. Sebhatu, and Christian Rein each provide distinct but complementary analyses of the EU–AU partnership. Söderbaum frames the relationship through the lens of interregionalism, arguing that despite the rhetoric of equality, the

partnership remains structurally asymmetrical. He highlights how the EU dominates agenda-setting, with Africa often placed in a reactive position. Even initiatives such as the Joint Africa–EU Strategy of 2007, which sought to rebalance the relationship, have been limited in their success, reinforcing his view that equality is more rhetorical than real.

Sebhatu applies a postcolonial critique, emphasizing that the language of “partnership” conceals colonial continuities. She points to the Economic Partnership Agreements as examples of how dependency and inequality are reproduced within the framework of cooperation. For Sebhatu, the EU’s external relations are deeply shaped by colonial legacies, and while African actors demonstrate agency, they do so within constraints imposed by Eurocentric structures. Her analysis underscores the persistence of colonial difference in contemporary AU–EU relations.

Rein interrogates the notion of a “strategic partnership” between the AU and EU, questioning whether it is genuinely strategic or largely symbolic. He acknowledges cooperation in areas such as peace, security, and governance, but argues that these often reflect European priorities more than African-led initiatives. Rein suggests that the partnership risks being more rhetorical than substantive unless the EU commits to supporting AU-driven agendas and moves beyond Eurocentric tendencies.

Taken together, these perspectives highlight the tension between formal cooperation and underlying imbalances. Söderbaum emphasizes institutional asymmetry, Sebhatu exposes colonial legacies, and Rein critiques the ambivalence between rhetoric and reality. Their analyses converge on the conclusion that the AU–EU partnership, while formally cooperative, remains haunted by structural inequality, historical continuities, and Eurocentric dominance.

In parallel, recent scholarship has increasingly applied postcolonial and critical theory perspectives to examine normative and material asymmetries within the AU–EU relationship. Sebhatu (2021), for instance, emphasizes that while official rhetoric promotes equality and partnership, EU influence continues to shape the discourse, priorities, and operational mechanisms of cooperation. Financial dependence, technical support structures, and policy guidance provided predominantly by the EU reinforce patterns of dependency that constrain African strategic autonomy. This line of analysis also highlights how official narratives often frame Africa as a recipient rather than an equal partner, revealing subtle reproductions of hierarchical power relations within ostensibly cooperative frameworks. The literature consistently notes a relative underrepresentation of African scholarly perspectives, which limits understanding of the ways in which African states, institutions, and civil society actors interpret and shape the partnership (Astramowicz Leyk, Turchyn, & Ivasechko, 2024).

Several central themes emerge from the literature. Institutional and governance dynamics form a recurring focus, with scholars highlighting the formalized mechanisms of cooperation such as summit dialogues, sectoral working groups, and the JAES. While these structures provide a foundation for collaboration, institutional asymmetries—including disparities in financial, technical, and normative capacity—persistently influence partnership outcomes (Van Hove et al., 2025). Peace and security cooperation is another core analytical focus. Empirical studies reveal a mixed record: successful joint operations in certain conflict zones coexist with limited capacity-building and uneven operational outcomes elsewhere. Challenges arise from financial

dependency, restricted African command autonomy, and the complex regional political context that shapes intervention effectiveness (Plank, 2022; Peen Rodt & Okeke, 2013). Economic cooperation, particularly in the context of trade and industrial policy, has also received attention. Analyses indicate that EU priorities often emphasize trade liberalization and aid provision, while African developmental goals, such as industrialization and structural transformation, remain under-prioritized (Chitonge, 2024). Democratic governance and human rights initiatives similarly reveal gaps between policy rhetoric and on-the-ground implementation, with donor priorities influencing domestic governance agendas (Martinelli, 2010).

Critical evaluation of the AU–EU partnership in the literature identifies several persistent challenges. Structural asymmetries in financial and operational capacity limit genuine shared ownership, reinforcing EU dominance in agenda-setting and decision-making. Although policy documents emphasize equality, actual implementation often fails to reflect this principle, particularly in peace and security operations and in economic programs where African developmental priorities are underrepresented. The limited incorporation of African perspectives in both research and policy discussions constrains understanding of the partnership's dynamics and outcomes. Scholars also note that the focus on trade and aid, rather than on comprehensive industrial and economic development strategies, restricts the potential for long-term transformation and sustained African agency within the partnership framework (Chitonge, 2024).

Alex Stubb (2026) argues in *Triangle of Power* that China, the US and the EU compete and cooperate globally, and Africa is one of the key arenas where this competition is most visible. His scholarly approach is liberal-geopolitical. He emphasizes competition and cooperation. Africa has agency and can shape outcomes and warns Europe it will lose relevance if it relies only on aids and norms. China is described as especially active in Africa through infrastructure projects, loans and investment and resource extraction. The EU is shown as having strong historical ties, a focus on development aid, governance and norms but often slower and more fragmented influence. The US is framed as more security focused and less economically embedded than China. Given negotiations of global power very much is undertaken via the Africa desk, he stresses Africa's growing population, resources, and markets make it central to future global power balances. How Africa navigates relationships with these power will shape the next world order. Western actors risk losing influence if they treat Africa only as an aid recipient rather than a strategic and equal partner. ‘

Whereas Mearsheimer would zoom in on Africa's peripheral role and military rivalry, Nye examines normative space and soft power and Brautigam investigates economic partnership and development agency, Stubb stands out for different reasons. He treats Africa as central to the future world order, not just a side effect of great power rivalry. He blends realism – power competition – with liberalism – institutions and cooperation.

In synthesis, the AU–EU partnership represents a complex and multifaceted interregional relationship, characterized by formal institutional achievements but constrained by enduring asymmetries and operational limitations. The literature collectively underscores the need to integrate African perspectives more fully, evaluate long-term outcomes in industrial, economic, and security domains, and critically engage with normative power imbalances embedded

within official rhetoric. Comparative analyses with other interregional partnerships could further illuminate mechanisms for achieving greater strategic parity and mutual agency.

To sum-up, the literature on AU–EU relations is rich in conceptual framing, but several theoretical gaps remain. Interregionalism dominates as the primary framework, yet it tends to overemphasize formal institutional mechanisms and downplays the role of asymmetrical power relations outside formal structures (Haastrup, Mah, & Duggan, 2021). Postcolonial approaches highlight normative hierarchies and dependency, but these are often applied in a descriptive rather than predictive or explanatory manner (Sebhatu, 2021). Strategic partnership literature foregrounds alignment and policy convergence but assumes that formal agreements translate into genuine joint agency, which empirical evidence often contradicts (Plank, 2022; Peen Rodt & Okeke, 2013).

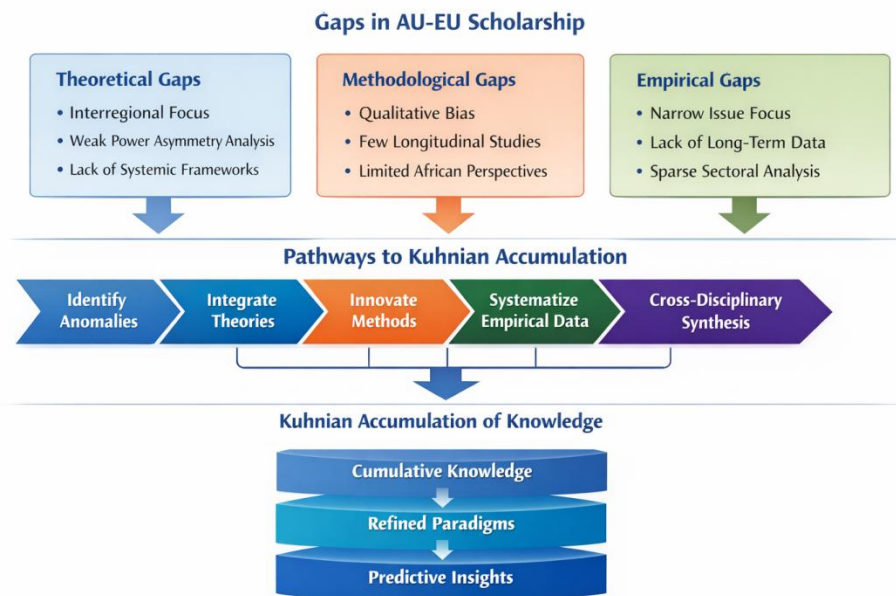
A key theoretical gap is the limited integration of multi-level, dynamic frameworks that can simultaneously account for institutional design, power asymmetry, normative influence, and adaptive behavior. There is also insufficient theorization of how global systemic pressures—from China, the US, and other actors—interact with AU–EU dynamics to shape strategic choices and outcomes.

Methodologically, the literature relies heavily on qualitative case studies, policy document analysis, and summit communiqués, often privileging European perspectives (Rein, 2015; Van Hove et al., 2025). While these methods provide insight into institutional rhetoric and formal mechanisms, they insufficiently capture African agency, on-the-ground outcomes, and longitudinal trends. Quantitative or mixed-method analyses that track policy implementation, resource flows, or operational effectiveness across multiple AU–EU sectors are rare. There is also a scarcity of comparative longitudinal studies that examine how the partnership evolves over time in response to changing global and regional pressures.

Empirical research has focused disproportionately on peace and security cooperation, often using high-profile cases such as Mali, Somalia, and the Central African Republic (Plank, 2022). Other substantive domains, including trade, industrial policy, democratic governance, and climate cooperation, are less empirically explored. Within economic and industrial domains, there is little empirical evaluation of the extent to which AU–EU programs support African-led development priorities, structural transformation, or capacity building (Chitonge, 2024). Additionally, there is limited evidence on long-term outcomes, making it difficult to assess the sustainability and real impact of the partnership beyond immediate interventions.

Research gaps arise from the intersection of theoretical, methodological, and empirical deficiencies. Despite recognition of power asymmetries, the literature seldom addresses how asymmetries evolve over time, how they interact with African agency, or how they shape the partnership under competing global influences. African voices remain underrepresented in scholarship, leading to biases in the interpretation of partnership dynamics. Comparative research across different interregional partnerships (e.g., EU–ASEAN, EU–Latin America) is sparse, limiting the ability to generalize findings and refine theoretical models. There is also a lack of integrated frameworks connecting peace, governance, economic, and normative domains, which constrains understanding of the partnership as a multidimensional system.

Figure



From a Kuhnian perspective, knowledge about the AU–EU partnership has progressed within a “normal science” paradigm, dominated by interregionalism and strategic partnership assumptions. To accumulate knowledge systematically and push the field toward new paradigms, research should follow several pathways:

1. Identify anomalies and contradictions: Empirical cases where policy rhetoric diverges from operational outcomes, or where African agency challenges EU dominance, represent anomalies that question prevailing assumptions.
2. Develop integrative theoretical frameworks: A Kuhnian accumulation would involve synthesizing interregionalism, postcolonial perspectives, and strategic partnership models into a multi-level framework that accommodates institutional, normative, and global systemic influences.
3. Adopt innovative methodological approaches: Mixed-methods research, longitudinal analyses, network analysis of institutional interactions, and incorporation of African primary sources (e.g., interviews, national policy documents) would systematically address methodological gaps.
4. Systematize empirical data: Building comprehensive datasets on AU–EU programs across sectors and time enables hypothesis testing, pattern recognition, and comparison across cases, fostering cumulative knowledge.
5. Integrate cross-disciplinary insights: Drawing from political science, international relations, development studies, and economics allows for cross-validation of findings and the gradual refinement of paradigms.
6. Create a cumulative, theory-informed research agenda: By combining anomaly-driven investigations, robust empirical work, and integrative theoretical development, future research can move from descriptive or case-focused studies to predictive, generalizable insights—thereby achieving cumulative knowledge in the Kuhnian sense.

This approach emphasizes systematic accumulation rather than isolated studies, framing the AU–EU partnership literature as a field ripe for paradigm refinement. It aligns conceptual, methodological, and empirical advances to generate progressively deeper understanding while remaining attentive to anomalies that challenge dominant assumptions.

Scholarly contribution

This study provides a theoretically grounded framework that addresses longstanding gaps in AU–EU scholarship. It integrates interregionalism, postcolonial critique, strategic partnership theory, and global systemic perspectives into a multi-level, dynamic analytical model. By doing so, it advances understanding of how institutional design, power asymmetries, normative influence, and global pressures jointly shape partnership outcomes. The framework foregrounds African agency, offering a corrective to Eurocentric biases that dominate existing literature. It operationalizes African participation, decision-making influence, and adaptive responses as measurable components of partnership effectiveness. Local outcomes are evaluated alongside EU-defined objectives, emphasizing contextually relevant metrics across multiple sectors. By incorporating longitudinal tracking, the framework captures evolving dynamics, partnership interactions, and systemic feedback loops. Comparative analysis across regions and sectors allows for pattern recognition and anomaly detection, thereby strengthening explanatory power. Methodologically, it proposes a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative metrics with qualitative insights from stakeholders and field observations. Network and systems analysis tools are employed to map inter-organizational dependencies and influence pathways. Cross-disciplinary triangulation draws on political science, international relations, development studies, and economics to enhance interpretive robustness. Empirical rigor is central, ensuring that observed phenomena inform theoretical understanding rather than being filtered solely through institutional documents. The framework converts empirical gaps into productive anomalies, enabling iterative refinement of theoretical models.

In line with Kuhnian scientific accumulation, these anomalies drive successive cycles of observation, theory adjustment, and validation. This process fosters cumulative knowledge, moving scholarship from descriptive accounts to predictive and explanatory models. The framework addresses underexplored domains, including industrial development, governance, climate adaptation, and trade, thereby broadening the empirical scope of AU–EU studies. It emphasizes outcome-oriented evaluation, assessing both short-term trends and long-term systemic patterns. By measuring African agency and local adaptation, the study contributes to understanding power dynamics and operational autonomy in multilateral partnerships. Longitudinal and comparative perspectives enhance the capacity to assess policy evolution under changing global pressures.

The framework provides a structured pathway to integrate empirical insights with theoretical refinement, strengthening conceptual coherence. It supports predictive modeling by linking observable outcomes to institutional, normative, and systemic variables. Policy relevance is enhanced, as evidence-based insights can inform strategic assessments and analytical approaches in AU–EU scholarship. The study also contributes methodologically by demonstrating how mixed-method, multi-level, and cross-sectoral analyses can be operationalized in interregional research. It encourages the incorporation of African perspectives as central, rather than peripheral, analytical inputs. Overall, the framework

represents a significant advance in both theory and practice, providing a roadmap for empirical research that systematically accumulates knowledge and strengthens the scholarly understanding of AU–EU partnerships.

Partnership matters is an approach that shares the concerns about power competition over Africa and agrees the EU need to become more of a strategic actor by addressing the coherence in the EU's partnership under a theoretically anchored parsimonious approach with a comparative twist in a forward looking manner. It builds on the liberal geopolitical approach by concentrating on the governance aspects of the AU-EU partnership and on how, when why governance could be strengthened. Given the Global South-card of China has evolved from an alternative to the US-Russian bipolar system, we also agree with Alex on the need for a strengthening of the EU's foreign policy profile and engagement of China.

Methodology

Methodologically, this study employs an empirically-driven AI analysis grounded in the scientific literature. It systematically retrieves information from online sources and converts it into structured knowledge, which is then used to generate human-like prompts that simulate a personalized context, potentially creating a deceptive sense of individual experience. The approach emphasizes rigor in source selection, data validation, and the translation of empirical findings into AI-driven reasoning.

This approach allows for efficient synthesis of complex material, creating a sense of personalized context where needed, and ultimately saves time for others by providing ready-to-use insights without extensive manual research to concentrate on human relationships and a better understanding of the essentials that matter in our lives.

Structure

1. Analytical Framework

This section prepares the ground for the analytical framework by clarifying the intellectual ambition of the study. It situates the AU–EU relationship within broader debates on interregionalism, strategic partnerships, and asymmetrical governance, while explaining why a structured analytical lens is necessary to capture both formal institutions and informal power dynamics. Rather than treating the AU–EU partnership as a static arrangement, the introduction underscores the need for a framework capable of tracing evolution, contestation, and adaptation over time.

2. The AU–EU Interregional Decision-Making System

The AU–EU relationship is anchored in a dense but often fragmented interregional decision-making architecture. This section introduces the institutional ecosystem that connects summits, ministerial meetings, joint task forces, financial instruments, and diplomatic channels. It highlights how decisions are shaped not only by formal mandates but also by capacity differentials, agenda-setting power, and sequencing effects between African and European institutions.

3. Historical Legacy and Structural Asymmetries

Any contemporary analysis of AU–EU relations must confront the weight of history and its institutional afterlives. This section introduces how colonial legacies, post-independence dependency structures, and divergent state-formation trajectories continue to shape expectations, trust, and bargaining positions. Structural asymmetries in finance, regulatory power, and global representation are framed not as residuals of the past, but as active variables influencing present cooperation.

4. The Evolving AU–EU Partnership

The AU–EU partnership has undergone repeated redefinitions, moving from development cooperation toward claims of political and geopolitical partnership. This section introduces the dynamics of that evolution, emphasizing moments of recalibration driven by crises, leadership changes, and shifting global power balances. It sets the stage for assessing whether recent reforms represent genuine transformation or adaptive continuity under new labels.

5. Building African–European Partnerships: Minerals, Migration and Security

Minerals, migration, and security have emerged as central pillars of the contemporary AU–EU agenda, reflecting both mutual dependencies and deep contestation. This section introduces these domains as interconnected rather than siloed policy areas, shaped by competing narratives of opportunity, risk, and control. It frames the challenge of partnership-building as one of aligning interests without reproducing extractive or securitized logics.

6. The Geopolitical Impact of EU Enlargement Amidst Dynamic Change

EU enlargement is not only a European integration process but a geopolitical event with external consequences, including for Africa. This section introduces how shifting EU borders, priorities, and internal coalitions affect the Union’s external posture, resource allocation, and strategic attention. It situates Africa within a wider geography of EU engagement increasingly shaped by Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean, and the global competition for influence.

7. Libya Is Africa, Africa Is Europe

Libya occupies a pivotal geopolitical position at the intersection of African and European security spaces. This section introduces Libya as both a symbol and a structural hinge linking migration routes, energy networks, and conflict dynamics across the Mediterranean. By framing Libya as simultaneously African and European, the introduction challenges compartmentalized policy approaches and underscores the indivisibility of the two regions’ security futures.

8. African Perspectives: Africa’s Geopolitical Position

African perspectives on the AU–EU relationship are shaped by a growing awareness of Africa’s strategic value in a multipolar world. This section introduces how African states and

institutions increasingly leverage demographic weight, resource endowments, and diplomatic agency to diversify partnerships. It foregrounds African strategic autonomy not as rhetoric, but as a guiding principle reshaping engagement with Europe.

9. Comparative Power Dynamics and Global Order

The AU–EU relationship unfolds within a competitive global order marked by the presence of China, the United States, Russia, Gulf states, and emerging middle powers. This section introduces a comparative perspective on power dynamics, examining how different external actors structure their engagement with Africa and how this reshapes Europe’s relative influence. It positions AU–EU relations within a wider contest over norms, infrastructure, security, and political alignment.

10. The EU–UN–AU Nexus

The triangular relationship between the EU, the UN, and the AU constitutes a critical but understudied layer of global governance. This section introduces the EU–UN–AU nexus as a space where peace operations, mediation, financing, and legitimacy intersect. It highlights how coordination challenges and institutional overlaps both constrain and enable collective action in African and global crises.

In-between, the analysis and the conclusions there is a renvoi on Africa’s contribution to world order and what it means to be an African.

In the conclusions, we summarise our answers to the research questions and evaluate how the proposed analytical set-up worked out and the lessons learned. We have space to consider the topics for further research, the counter-arguments against strengthening the AU-EU partnership, even as we ponder pertinent policy recommendations and take perspective on the Unions’ relationship with this long-suffering continent and Europe’s entanglement with Africa and meditate on why separation is not an option and why an exit door doesn’t exist, only a peace and security council.

2.0 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

To get a grip of the realities outthere, we depart from three conceptual handles: (1) Interregionalism (2) Post-colonial theory (3) Strategic Partnership-theory.

The first we use to study structure and institutions to understand the organisational backbone of the EU-AU Partnership. This is about how institutions matter and their layering in producing certain outcomes. Post-Colonial theory is a device of use to understand inequalities in the partnership and how African actors gain agency by navigating the power and norms. Third, we use strategic partnership theory to understand what the parties want and what they are trying to achieve , comparable to the Global Partnerships the EU’s ten Strategic Partnerships were originally meant to signal. This is the more empirical layer of analysis.

Interregionalism

In international relations, interregionalism refers to formalized engagement between two or more regional organizations or groupings, where these organized regional actors interact as entities in their own right. Mathew Doidge's work on the EU and interregionalism describes the phenomenon as formal engagement between groupings of states from different world regions and distinguishes forms like bilateral interregionalism (regional bloc to bloc) and transregionalism (broader dialogues involving multiple regions). This framing emphasizes that interregionalism is essentially about region to region relations rather than purely state to state ties. (Paradigm)

Mario Telò and colleagues' edited volume on Interregionalism and the European Union sketches how the EU's external policy has increasingly engaged other regional actors, arguing that the EU operates as a laboratory of interregional cooperation with partners across Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Their approach highlights empirical diversity in region to region engagement and situates interregionalism as part of the EU's evolving international role in a multipolar world. (Routledge Handbook)

Haastrup et al. (2021) contribute to the literature by examining the complex and sometimes unintended consequences of interregional cooperation. Their edited volume shows how interregionalism not only structures dialogue between regional actors, such as the EU and its partners, but also produces outcomes that reshape actors and governance structures in ways that may extend beyond original policy intentions. (Routledge)

Other scholarship reinforces this understanding of interregionalism as distinct from traditional diplomacy and multilateralism. Jürgen Rüland, Heiner Hänggi, and Ralf Roloff's work *Interregionalism and International Relations* positions interregionalism as a new phenomenon in international relations that reflects the proliferation of regional organizations and their external engagements in the post Cold War era. This perspective identifies interregionalism as part of an increasingly differentiated global order in which regional entities interact as autonomous political actors. (Routledge)

Research on interregionalism also builds on broader definitions such as the one provided by Aggarwal and Fogarty (2004), who describe interregionalism in the context of formalized, institutionalized interactions between regions, especially where regional organizations engage each other on trade, political, or security matters. Their work underscores how interregional ties can serve functional roles in addressing external challenges in a globalized environment, particularly through institutionalized cooperation frameworks. (SAGE Publishing)

In practice, interregionalism involves summitry, ministerial dialogues, joint declarations, and collaborative programs that bring together organizations like the European Union and the African Union. It is distinguished from bilateral state relations by its institutionalized, multi level character and by the fact that it reflects region wide interests and shared agendas rather than purely national interests.

Post-colonial Theory

Understanding EU–AU relations requires not only a focus on formal institutions, agreements, and financial flows but also a critical examination of the historical and structural factors that shape the partnership. Postcolonial theory offers such a lens, emphasizing how legacies of

colonialism continue to influence power dynamics, knowledge production, and decision-making in contemporary multilateral cooperation. By applying postcolonial insights, analysts can move beyond procedural descriptions to examine the deeper asymmetries, discursive hierarchies, and forms of agency that underpin EU–AU interactions, providing a richer and more nuanced understanding of how the partnership functions in practice.

Applied to the EU–AU context, postcolonial theory offers a critical lens to understand the persistent asymmetries in resources, norms, and decision-making power that shape the partnership. The EU, with its substantial economic, institutional, and diplomatic capacity, often occupies a structurally dominant position, influencing agendas, procedures, and priorities, while the AU operates within constraints shaped by historical legacies, member state diversity, and resource limitations. By highlighting these asymmetries, postcolonial theory makes it possible to analyze not only the formal structures of cooperation but also the power dynamics that underlie negotiations, policy formulation, and program implementation.

The theory further helps explain why EU narratives frequently dominate the discourse surrounding the partnership. Western norms, standards, and procedural logics have historically been framed as universal benchmarks for legitimacy, effectiveness, and rational governance. This framing often marginalizes African perspectives and priorities, even when African actors are central to regional peace, security, and development outcomes. Postcolonial theory clarifies how such discursive dominance is not merely technical but deeply rooted in historical power relations and epistemic hierarchies, making it essential to critically interrogate whose knowledge and priorities shape the partnership.

At the same time, postcolonial theory draws attention to African agency, even when it is subtle. AU member states and regional bodies, such as ECOWAS, SADC, and IGAD, actively negotiate terms, adapt programs, and influence implementation in ways that may not always be visible in formal EU–AU documentation but are consequential in practice. This agency manifests in strategic compromises, selective adoption of EU standards, and regional coordination that aligns international initiatives with local priorities. Recognizing such agency challenges the perception that the EU is the sole driver of cooperation and highlights the dynamic, negotiated, and interdependent nature of the partnership.

In sum, postcolonial theory provides a framework for understanding EU–AU relations as an asymmetric yet interactive partnership, shaped by historical legacies, structural power imbalances, and ongoing negotiation. It allows analysts to identify asymmetries in resources, norms, and decision-making, understand the reasons for EU narrative dominance, and make African agency visible, even when expressed subtly, thereby offering a more nuanced and realistic account of how the partnership operates in practice.

The AU–EU Partnership through the Lens of Strategic Partnership Theory

The partnership between the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) represents a prominent example of a contemporary strategic partnership in International Relations. Rather than constituting a formal alliance, the AU–EU relationship reflects a flexible and multidimensional framework for cooperation grounded in converging strategic interests, mutual interdependence, and long-term engagement. Strategic partnership theory helps explain

why both actors have chosen this form of cooperation and how it functions within the broader international system.

From a realist perspective, the AU–EU partnership is shaped by security and stability concerns that affect both regions. The EU views Africa’s stability as directly linked to its own security, particularly with regard to terrorism, irregular migration, maritime insecurity, and regional conflicts. Cooperation with the AU allows the EU to project influence and manage security challenges beyond its borders without direct military intervention or binding defense commitments. For the AU, partnership with the EU provides access to financial resources, training, and institutional support that enhance its capacity for peacekeeping and conflict management. This asymmetrical but reciprocal relationship aligns with strategic partnership theory’s emphasis on power management and interest-based cooperation.

The AU–EU partnership also reflects elements of soft balancing and hedging. While African states and institutions increasingly engage with emerging powers such as China, Russia, and Turkey, the AU continues to maintain strong strategic ties with the EU in order to diversify external relationships and avoid overdependence on any single partner. This hedging behavior allows the AU to preserve strategic autonomy while benefiting from European economic support, political cooperation, and normative influence. For the EU, sustained engagement with the AU helps maintain relevance and influence in a region of growing geopolitical competition.

Institutionally, the AU–EU partnership exemplifies the low level of formalization characteristic of strategic partnerships. Cooperation is structured through joint summits, action plans, and political dialogues rather than binding treaties. This flexible architecture enables both actors to adapt their cooperation to changing priorities, such as shifts from development assistance toward investment, climate governance, digital transformation, and health security. The absence of rigid commitments allows the partnership to endure despite periodic tensions over migration policy, governance standards, or trade arrangements.

Neoliberal institutionalist theory further illuminates the AU–EU partnership by highlighting issue-specific cooperation and mutual gains. The partnership spans multiple sectors, including peace and security, economic development, climate change, public health, and multilateral diplomacy. Repeated interaction through established forums reduces transaction costs and fosters coordination even in the absence of supranational enforcement mechanisms. This pattern underscores how strategic partnerships can facilitate cooperation under conditions of anarchy while remaining less institutionalized than formal alliances.

Constructivist approaches contribute additional insight by emphasizing the role of shared norms, identities, and discourse in the AU–EU relationship. The partnership is frequently framed in official rhetoric as one between “equal partners” committed to multilateralism, regional integration, and a rules-based international order. While power asymmetries persist in practice, these narratives play an important role in legitimizing cooperation and reshaping the partnership away from its historical roots in donor–recipient relations. Strategic partnership theory thus captures both the material and ideational dimensions of AU–EU relations.

Overall, the AU–EU partnership illustrates how strategic partnerships function as adaptive instruments in contemporary international politics. It balances asymmetry with reciprocity,

flexibility with continuity, and autonomy with cooperation. As global power shifts accelerate and geopolitical competition intensifies, the AU–EU partnership demonstrates why strategic partnerships have become a preferred mode of engagement between regional organizations in the twenty-first century.

Strategic Partnership Theory can be employed as an analytical tool to understand relationships between institutions, states, and regions in complex multilateral partnerships such as the EU–AU. The theory is built on the idea that partnerships develop through a process in which initial conditions, shared interests, and institutional capacities shape both the structure and functionality of cooperation. Drawing on Rein (2015), Mangala (2013), and the Egmont Institute (2015), this approach allows for a nuanced, literature-informed perspective without overloading the analysis with theoretical abstraction.

Applied to the EU–AU relationship, the theory first allows us to map the central institutions and meeting forums. The EU’s institutional framework includes the Commission, the Council, the Parliament, and external delegation offices, while the AU has the Commission, the Peace and Security Council, and a range of regional economic communities such as ECOWAS, SADC, and IGAD. Start-Partnership Theory explains how these institutions not only organize cooperation formally but also function as platforms where asymmetric capacities, priorities, and resources are negotiated and operationalized. Forums such as EU–AU summits, ministerial meetings, and technical committees thus appear not merely ceremonial but as dynamic arenas where the partnership is “initiated” and continuously reproduced in practice.

Financial mechanisms can also be understood through this lens. EU financing, including instruments such as NDICI, the Africa-European Development Fund, and thematic programs, functions both as an incentive and as a framework for cooperation. The AU’s capacity level, financial autonomy, and member states’ contributions influence how funds are allocated and how projects are prioritized. Start-Partnership Theory shows that financial structuring reflects not only resource availability but also normative expectations regarding governance, accountability, and long-term strategic alignment.

The theory also helps explain why cooperation looks the way it does. The EU–AU relationship is marked by asymmetry: the EU contributes economic and institutional capacity, while the AU provides geostrategic legitimacy and regional linkages. Start-Partnership Theory highlights that the partnership’s design often reflects a compromise between EU standards and AU priorities, creating incremental development rather than radical transformation. This explains why decisions often take time, why procedures are complex, and why cooperation is more project- and program-oriented than institutionally integrated.

Furthermore, the theory provides insight into how region-to-region logic shapes decisions. The AU consists of various subregional blocs, each with its own interests, capacities, and conflict dynamics. The EU must navigate these differences and tailor its strategies to regional needs, for example through coordination with ECOWAS in West Africa or IGAD in the Horn of Africa. Decisions between the EU and AU are therefore not only the result of bilateral negotiation but also of multilayered regional logics, which can accelerate or delay projects, influence priorities, and create space for both cooperation and rivalry.

Finally, Strategic Partnership Theory can be used to analyze specific sectoral areas such as trade, migration, security, and climate; to explain why cooperation sometimes appears symbolic and at other times substantive; and to understand how external actors, including China, the United States, and Gulf states, influence EU–AU dynamics. By integrating these perspectives, the theory provides an analytical framework for understanding EU–AU cooperation as a dynamic, asymmetric, yet mutually dependent partnership shaped through institutions, forums, financial mechanisms, and regional as well as global interactions.

Integrating the analytical handles

Understanding EU–AU relations requires more than mapping institutions and financial flows; it requires a multidimensional lens that captures historical legacies, institutional dynamics, and the interregional logic of partnership. Strategic Partnership Theory provides a foundation for analyzing how partnerships develop through initial conditions, shared interests, and institutional capacities, highlighting asymmetries in resources, norms, and decision-making power and showing how cooperation is operationalized through forums, summits, and financial mechanisms. Postcolonial theory complements this by critically examining why EU narratives often dominate and by revealing African agency, even when subtle, in shaping priorities, implementing programs, and negotiating standards.

Adding interregionalism theory further enriches this analysis. As Doidge (2011), Telò et al. (2015), and Haastrup et al. (2021) show, interregionalism emphasizes the interaction between two distinct regional organizations—here, the EU and the AU—and the ways these interactions are institutionalized, normatively structured, and strategically deployed. It highlights how region-to-region logics, rather than purely bilateral considerations, shape outcomes, project implementation, and the management of multilateral challenges such as trade, security, migration, and climate. Interregionalism theory thus helps explain both the constraints and opportunities embedded in EU–AU cooperation, including how external actors such as China, the United States, or Gulf states influence regional decision-making.

Applied to the EU–AU partnership, this integrated framework allows us to see the asymmetries in capacities, governance standards, and priorities that influence cooperation, as Strategic Partnership Theory emphasizes. Postcolonial insights explain the dominance of EU narratives and reveal African agency that might otherwise remain invisible. Interregionalism theory, in turn, situates these dynamics in a broader strategic and normative context, showing how the interaction between two regional organizations produces both collaboration and rivalry, and how subregional AU blocs like ECOWAS, SADC, and IGAD shape the negotiation space.

In practice, this integrated approach provides tools for analyzing sectoral areas—trade, migration, security, climate—as well as the variation between symbolic and substantive cooperation. It also clarifies how the EU–AU partnership is simultaneously asymmetric, interdependent, and embedded in global geopolitical competition. By combining postcolonial theory, Strategic Partnership Theory, and interregionalism, analysts can produce a nuanced, realistic, and actionable understanding of EU–AU relations, capturing both institutional processes and the subtler dynamics of power, agency, and regional interaction.

Thus the analytical architecture of this study is built around the idea that gaps generate processes, and processes generate knowledge. The AU–EU partnership is marked by theoretical blind spots, methodological limitations, and empirical silences that have accumulated across decades of scholarship. Interregionalism studies have mapped institutional patterns but often privilege European perspectives (Doidge 2011; Telò, Fawcett & Ponjaert 2015). Postcolonial critiques have exposed the epistemic hierarchies embedded in these mappings but have rarely been operationalized into systematic empirical frameworks (Seth 2012; Hobson 2011; Sebhatu 2020). Strategic partnership literature has interrogated the rhetoric of “mutuality,” yet it struggles to capture the everyday practices through which power and agency are negotiated (Rein 2015; Mangala 2013). These gaps are not obstacles but entry points: they set in motion the analytical processes through which this project seeks to build cumulative understanding of how the AU–EU relationship actually works.

To structure these processes, the study employs a layered analytical model, visualized as a set of interconnected boxes. The institutional layer draws on interregionalism to map the formal architecture of AU–EU cooperation—summits, joint strategies, funding mechanisms, and bureaucratic interfaces—while also recognizing, following Pirozzi and Litsegård (2017), that interregionalism extends beyond formal institutions into informal practices and hybrid governance spaces. The agency and power layer is shaped by postcolonial theory’s insistence that institutional structures cannot be understood without tracing the asymmetries and historical legacies that animate them. This layer examines how African actors—AU organs, regional economic communities, and member states—exercise agency through negotiation, reinterpretation, selective implementation, and strategic silence, even within structurally unequal settings. The normative layer integrates insights from all three literatures, showing how norms such as democracy, human rights, and sustainable development circulate through the partnership, how they are contested, and how they are strategically deployed by both sides.

These layers are embedded within a global systemic layer, which situates the AU–EU partnership in a multipolar environment shaped by China’s infrastructural diplomacy, US security interests, Gulf financial flows, and shifting multilateral norms. Interregionalism provides the conceptual scaffolding for understanding how region to region relations adapt under systemic pressure, while strategic partnership theory explains how actors recalibrate priorities in response to external competition. Postcolonial theory adds a deeper reading of how Africa’s diversification of partners represents both a break from and a continuation of historical patterns of dependency, resistance, and re articulation (Mbembe 2001).

Across these layers, the framework incorporates a longitudinal timeline, tracing how institutional forms, power relations, and normative commitments evolve over time. This temporal dimension is essential for capturing the iterative nature of AU–EU engagement, where each summit cycle, funding reform, or geopolitical shock produces new alignments and new tensions. It also allows the study to identify cross sectoral connections—arrows linking peace and security, governance, trade, climate adaptation, and industrial development—reflecting the multidimensional character of strategic partnerships as described in the broader IR literature (Egmont Institute 2015; Wikipedia entry on strategic partnerships).

Operationalising the analytical framework

This study operationalises the AU–EU partnership as a multi-layered, dynamic governance system in which institutions, power relations, norms, and global systemic pressures interact over time to shape empirical outcomes. Rather than treating the partnership as a static donor–recipient arrangement, the framework enables systematic observation of African agency, partnership asymmetries, and longitudinal adaptation.

Operationalisation proceeds in three steps: (i) layer specification, (ii) indicator selection, and (iii) iterative theory–evidence feedback.

Each analytical layer is translated into observable dimensions and empirical indicators.

Institutional Layer

This layer is operationalised through mapping the formal architecture of the AU–EU partnership, including joint summits, ministerial dialogues, and implementation mechanisms. Empirical observation focuses on institutional density, decision-making authority, and implementation capacity.

Indicators: frequency of meetings, legal status of joint declarations, budgetary allocations, and monitoring structures.

Power and Agency Layer

Power asymmetries and African agency are operationalised by tracing agenda-setting processes, negotiation dynamics, and adaptive strategies employed by African actors. Agency is treated as relational and situational, rather than purely structural.

Indicators: African-origin initiatives, coalition-building among African states, instances of resistance, reinterpretation, or strategic compliance.

Normative Layer

Normative dynamics are operationalised through systematic analysis of policy discourse and framing. This layer captures both norm diffusion and contestation within the partnership.

Indicators: convergence or divergence in AU and EU policy language, shifts in framing of democracy, sovereignty, and development, and the use of conditionality mechanisms.

Global Systemic Layer

External pressures are operationalised by examining how global power shifts, alternative partnerships, and systemic shocks reshape AU–EU interactions.

Indicators: diversification of African external partnerships, EU strategic recalibration, and crisis-induced changes in cooperation patterns.

Empirical Observation Layer

This layer captures concrete outcomes across policy sectors, allowing comparison between stated objectives and observed practice.

Indicators: project completion rates, sectoral performance variation, implementation gaps, and unintended consequences.

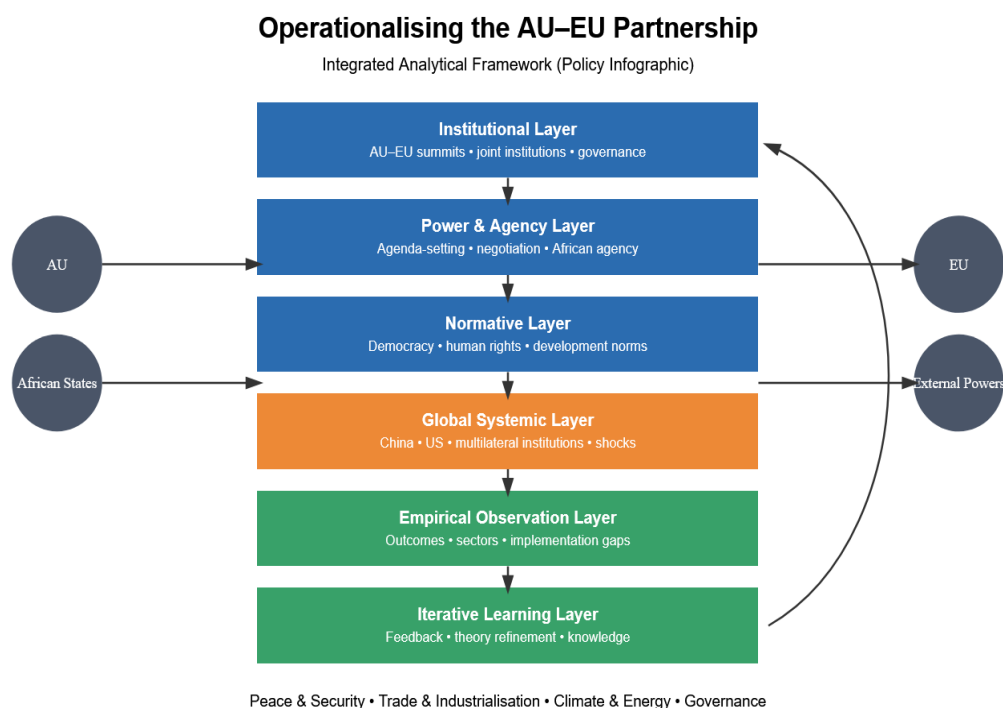
Iterative Learning Layer

The framework is operationalised as an iterative research process, in which empirical anomalies feed back into theoretical refinement. This allows cumulative knowledge production rather than one-off case description.

Indicators: recurring deviations from theoretical expectations, refinement of explanatory mechanisms, and improved explanatory coherence across cases.

The framework is applied across sectors—including peace and security, trade and industrial development, governance, and climate adaptation—using comparable indicators to identify sectoral divergence and convergence.

Figure



A longitudinal dimension is introduced by tracing changes across multiple AU–EU summit cycles, enabling analysis of adaptation over time rather than static assessment.

Empirical analysis combines:

- document and discourse analysis,

- elite interviews,
- sectoral case studies, and
- longitudinal comparison.

Findings are interpreted through feedback loops linking empirical outcomes to institutional structures, power relations, and normative assumptions.

By operationalising the AU–EU partnership through layered, feedback-driven analysis, this framework enables systematic assessment of African agency under conditions of asymmetry, explains variation across sectors, and captures evolution over time in response to global systemic pressures.

The framework is operationalised through a layered set of empirically observable indicators and iterative feedback loops that link institutional structures, power relations, normative dynamics, and global systemic pressures to longitudinal outcomes in the AU–EU partnership.

At the centre of the visual model are actors represented as nodes: the EU, the AU, African states, and external powers. Their interactions form the pathways through which influence, resources, norms, and expectations circulate. Interregionalism helps conceptualize these nodes as collective actors with internal complexity; postcolonial theory highlights the unequal historical and epistemic terrain on which they interact; strategic partnership theory explains the instrumental calculations that shape their behaviour. The empirical layer tracks how these nodes interact across sectors and over time, identifying patterns, divergences, and anomalies.

Crucially, the model incorporates feedback loops: arrows that run from empirical anomalies back to theoretical refinement. When observed practices do not align with interregionalist expectations, when African agency exceeds or contradicts postcolonial predictions, or when strategic partnership rhetoric diverges from material outcomes, these anomalies trigger cycles of conceptual adjustment. This iterative learning process mirrors Kuhnian accumulation, where knowledge advances not through linear confirmation but through the systematic integration of surprises, contradictions, and new empirical insights.

Taken together, this framework transforms the AU–EU partnership from a static institutional arrangement into a dynamic, multi layered system shaped by history, power, norms, strategy, and global pressures. It allows the study to move fluidly between structure and practice, between discourse and materiality, and between the *longue durée* of postcolonial relations and the immediate contingencies of contemporary geopolitics. By weaving together interregionalism, postcolonial critique, and strategic partnership theory, the model provides a comprehensive and reflexive lens through which cumulative knowledge about AU–EU relations can be generated.

Africa at the cross-currents

The AU–EU partnership sits at the intersection of shifting global power, contested multilateralism, and Africa’s growing geopolitical weight. Both organizations formally commit to multilateralism, international law, and the UN 2030 Agenda, and present their relationship as a pillar of “rules-based” global governance. At the same time, the partnership is embedded in asymmetries of power, finance, and norm setting, with the EU often acting as agenda setter

and principal funder, and the AU positioned as both partner and claimant of greater voice in global forums. europarl.europa.eu

In a context of intensifying great power competition, the AU–EU relationship is also a site where Africa navigates offers from multiple external actors (China, Gulf states, Turkey, Russia, etc.), using partnerships to diversify options and renegotiate hierarchies inherited from colonial and post Cold War orders. The EU’s search for a “new strategy with Africa” reflects both a desire to move beyond aid centric paradigms and a struggle to escape paternalistic frames that reproduce dependency and conditionality. This makes the AU–EU partnership a revealing case for studying how “strategic partnerships” work in practice, how norms travel, and how institutionalized interregionalism adapts to a more fragmented, multipolar world.

African agency

Focusing on African agency shifts the analytical lens from what Europe “does to” Africa to how African actors shape, resist, reinterpret, or instrumentalize the partnership. Recent work on the AU highlights that it is not merely a passive recipient of European policies but an actor that can exercise different forms of agency—such as shirking, slippage, and selective implementation—across its partnerships with the EU, UN, NATO, and others. This includes agenda setting in peace and security, norm entrepreneurship on issues like unconstitutional changes of government, and strategic use of external resources to bolster continental initiatives.

In the AU–EU framework, African agency also plays out in more subtle ways: negotiating language in joint declarations, reframing migration and mobility debates, or leveraging collective positions to influence EU internal bargaining. Yet, much of the policy and academic discourse still treats “Africa” as an object of European strategy rather than a heterogeneous set of actors with their own priorities, constraints, and intra African politics. Bringing African agency to the center is therefore essential for a more accurate and less Eurocentric understanding of how the partnership actually functions.

Empirical gaps

Despite a rich policy architecture—summits, joint strategies, action plans—there are striking empirical gaps:

- Micro level practice: Gap: Limited systematic research on how AU and EU officials, diplomats, and technocrats negotiate, bargain, and implement decisions in day to day interactions. Why it matters: This is where power asymmetries, informal norms, and African agency are most visible, yet often under documented.
- Issue area variation: Gap: We know more about peace and security cooperation than about other domains such as migration, digital governance, climate, or industrial policy. Why it matters: African agency and dependence may look very different across sectors, and generalizations from one area risk being misleading.
- Intra African politics and contestation: Gap: Insufficient empirical work on how internal AU dynamics, regional rivalries, and domestic politics of member states shape AU positions vis à vis the EU. Why it matters: “The AU” is often treated as a unitary actor, obscuring internal contestation that conditions what kind of agency is possible.

- Performance vs. substance of partnership: Gap: A lot of analysis focuses on official narratives of “mutual partnership” but less on whether and how these commitments translate into redistributions of voice, resources, or rule making power. Why it matters: Distinguishing symbolic from substantive change is crucial to assess whether the AU–EU relationship is moving beyond hierarchical patterns.

These gaps justify a research agenda that is empirically grounded, attentive to African perspectives, and sensitive to the multi level nature of the partnership.

This integrated analytical framework is designed to:

- Capture African agency beyond formal rhetoric
- Explain partnership dynamics under power asymmetries
- Track change over time under global systemic pressures
- Link theory ↔ empirical observation ↔ refinement

It treats the AU–EU partnership as a dynamic, multi-layered system, not a static institutional arrangement.

At its most simple, we use interregionalism to explain the structure of the EU-AU partnership, post colonial theory sheds light on power in the partnership, whereas strategic partnership theory focuses on the interests and global conte

3.0 THE AU-EU INTRERREGIONAL DECISION-MAKING SYSTEM

The AU–EU partnership is inter-regional, meaning it links two regional organizations rather than individual states alone. Institutionally, it is deliberately non-binding and non-hierarchical, which fits perfectly with strategic partnership theory.

At the top political level, the partnership is guided by AU–EU Summits, held periodically and attended by heads of state and government from both sides. These summits set broad political priorities, issue joint declarations, and endorse long-term frameworks such as joint strategies or partnership agendas. Importantly, these declarations are political commitments, not treaties, which preserves flexibility.

Between summits, strategic direction is maintained through the AU–EU Ministerial Meetings, usually involving foreign ministers. These meetings translate summit goals into more concrete policy guidance and maintain political dialogue on security, development, migration, and global governance.

The core coordinating body is the AU–EU Joint Task Force, which brings together officials from the African Union Commission and the European Commission (along with the EU External Action Service). This body ensures day-to-day coordination, monitors implementation, and aligns bureaucratic priorities. Its role is managerial rather than authoritative, reflecting the absence of supranational power in the partnership.

In the peace and security domain, cooperation is channeled through specific mechanisms linking the AU Peace and Security Council with EU institutions. EU support for AU-led peace

operations is coordinated through financial instruments and technical assistance rather than direct command structures, reinforcing African ownership while maintaining EU influence.

At the operational level, implementation relies on thematic partnerships covering areas such as peace and security, economic integration, climate change, migration, digital transformation, and health. These partnerships involve not only AU and EU institutions but also regional economic communities, member states, and non-state actors. This creates a dense but loose network rather than a centralized hierarchy.

Overall, the institutional architecture is multi-layered, decentralized, and lightly institutionalized, which is a defining feature rather than a weakness.

First, we argue that the absence of binding treaties and enforcement mechanisms is intentional. Strategic partnership theory predicts low institutionalization because both sides want to preserve autonomy. The AU avoids dependence and external control, while the EU avoids legal and military entanglements. The institutional set-up confirms this logic.

Second, we link institutional asymmetry to asymmetric power relations. The EU provides most funding, technical expertise, and global diplomatic leverage, while the AU provides legitimacy, local ownership, and access to African security and political processes. Strategic partnership theory explains this as asymmetry management rather than domination, and the joint institutions help stabilize this imbalance.

Third, we show how the institutional structure supports hedging and diversification. Because AU–EU cooperation is not exclusive or legally binding, the AU can simultaneously engage with China, Russia, and other partners. The loose institutional design allows this without formal contradiction, which aligns with hedging behavior predicted by strategic partnership theory.

Fourth, connect issue-specific institutions to neoliberal logic within strategic partnership theory. Cooperation is strongest where mutual gains are clearest—peace operations, development finance, climate policy—while remaining shallow or contested in areas such as migration governance and trade liberalization. The institutional set-up allows selective depth across sectors.

Finally, you can add a constructivist layer by noting how institutional rhetoric—joint summits, “partnership of equals,” shared multilateral forums—helps reframe the relationship away from its colonial and donor-recipient past. Even if material asymmetries persist, institutions play a role in shaping norms and expectations.

The EU–AU partnership operates as a formalized interregional structure, meaning that its decisions emerge not from a purely bilateral state-to-state logic, but from institutionalized, region-to-region mechanisms. The decision-making setup reflects the institutional architectures, asymmetries, and normative frameworks that shape EU–AU cooperation. At its core, the partnership is coordinated through summits, ministerial meetings, technical working groups, and joint programs, which function as interregional forums where both regional organizations exercise agency, negotiate shared objectives, and operationalize policy.

At the top level, EU–AU summits, typically held every two to three years, serve as the primary political forum where strategic decisions are articulated. Summits produce joint declarations and strategic agendas, which define long-term objectives across peace and security, economic development, trade, climate action, and governance. Although the EU often brings more financial and technical capacity to the table, these summits institutionalize consultation and co-decision-making, allowing the AU to assert continental priorities and ensure that regional perspectives guide partnership initiatives. Summits are complemented by ministerial meetings, organized by policy sector, where detailed negotiations and operational planning take place. These meetings provide a more granular level of decision-making, allowing both regions to align sector-specific strategies with overarching continental goals, such as Agenda 2063 or the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

Technical and expert working groups form another crucial layer in the EU–AU decision-making framework. These groups are tasked with implementation oversight, policy coordination, and monitoring of joint initiatives, translating high-level decisions into actionable programs. Their work is informed not only by the central institutions of the EU and AU but also by subregional organizations—for example, ECOWAS, SADC, EAC, and IGAD—which act as intermediaries, ensuring that decisions are sensitive to subregional dynamics and local realities. This multi-level engagement reflects the core interregional logic: decision-making is not confined to individual state interests but emerges from structured, institutional interaction between regional actors.

Decision-making within this structure must also account for asymmetries in power, capacity, and resources. The EU possesses significant financial, technological, and institutional resources, while the AU coordinates a diverse set of member states with varying capacities and strategic priorities. Interregionalism theory emphasizes that equitable participation and co-ownership of decisions are essential to sustaining the partnership. Consequently, EU support for AU-led initiatives, such as peacekeeping missions or continental infrastructure projects, is negotiated in a manner that respects AU leadership and ensures that outcomes reflect African regional priorities rather than a donor-driven agenda.

Figure Norte Dame de La Paix – Ivory Coast



Source: <https://basiliquenotredame-delapaix.com/>

In practice, this interregional decision-making framework has both formal and informal dimensions. Formally, decisions are codified in joint agreements, strategic frameworks, and funding arrangements. Informally, iterative consultations, political dialogue, and expert exchanges allow both regions to adjust strategies in response to changing geopolitical, economic, or security contexts. This adaptive capacity is a hallmark of interregional decision-making: it enables the partnership to respond to evolving challenges such as migration, climate change, or regional conflicts, while maintaining institutionalized structures for continuity and accountability.

From the perspective of interregionalism theory, the EU–AU partnership illustrates how decision-making authority is distributed across multiple levels, including the continental organizations, subregional bodies, and individual states, rather than being concentrated in any single actor. This distribution enhances legitimacy, ensures responsiveness to diverse regional interests, and allows the partnership to function as a co-designed governance structure where shared objectives are pursued through coordinated but flexible institutional processes.

In conclusion, the EU–AU partnership’s decision-making framework exemplifies interregionalism in practice. It combines high-level summits, sector-specific ministerial dialogues, and technical working groups to create a multi-layered, institutionalized mechanism for negotiating, implementing, and monitoring joint policies. By integrating AU leadership, subregional actors, and EU resources, this structure balances asymmetry with co-ownership and ensures that decisions reflect collective regional priorities. Interregionalism theory thus provides a useful lens to understand how the EU–AU partnership is not merely a network of bilateral relations, but a structured, adaptive, and collaborative interregional governance framework.

This partnership aims to promote sustainable development, strengthen institutional capacity, and support the AU’s Agenda 2063. It also aspires to deepen multilateral cooperation in areas such as peace and security, climate governance, migration management, and economic transformation. Through the AU–EU Joint Vision for 2030, both unions emphasize the creation of a more equitable and mutually beneficial framework of engagement, reflecting evolving geopolitical dynamics and the need for renewed forms of interregional collaboration. Among the shared priorities highlighted were peace and security, stabilization efforts, Africa-led peace support operations, trade expansion, and the development of sustainable infrastructure across the continent.

While goodwill and development rhetoric have sustained influence in the past, they are insufficient today. African leaders and populations increasingly demand partnerships that recognize their agency and provide tangible pathways to industrialisation, regional integration, and technological innovation. Without confronting structural asymmetries, the EU risks being perceived as a donor rather than a partner, limiting its strategic leverage.

The AU–EU partnership stands out within Europe’s wider family of interregional relationships—such as those with Latin America (EU–CELAC) or Asia (ASEM)—because it combines deep structural interdependence, asymmetry, and high political sensitivity in ways

that are far more pronounced than in Europe's other regional dialogues. Unlike Europe's partnerships with Latin America or Asia, which are largely diplomatic and economic, the AU–EU relationship is built around security cooperation, migration governance, development finance, and geopolitical coordination, making it both broader and more demanding.

At its core, the AU–EU partnership is characterised by a dense institutional architecture that links the two unions through summits, joint strategies, funding instruments, and sectoral dialogues. This institutional density reflects the fact that Africa and Europe share a geographical neighbourhood, intertwined histories, and overlapping security and economic interests. The partnership is also marked by asymmetry in resources and capabilities: the EU provides substantial financial and technical support, while the AU contributes political legitimacy, regional leadership, and proximity to crises. This asymmetry creates both cooperation and tension, as African actors seek greater autonomy and Europe seeks accountability and predictability.

Another defining feature is the politicisation of core dossiers, especially migration, security, and economic development. These issues carry domestic political weight in Europe and sovereignty implications in Africa, making negotiations more sensitive than in Europe's relations with Latin America or Asia. The AU–EU partnership is further shaped by competing external actors, including China, Russia, Turkey, and Gulf states, which influence African choices and reduce the EU's ability to act as the dominant external partner. This geopolitical competition gives the AU more bargaining power but also complicates coordination.

When comparing to of the eus interregionalism, something that is highly pertinent should DG intpa be merged into the EAAS following the demerger of the CSDP directorate into DG Defis, we discern the following commonalities and points for harmonization in the EU's approach:

Table

Dimension	AU–EU Partnership	EU–CELAC (Latin America)	ASEM (Asia–Europe)
Structural Interdependence	Very high; geography, security, migration, and economic ties create deep mutual exposure	Moderate; mostly diplomatic and economic, limited security interdependence	Low; large distance and diverse interests reduce structural dependence
Asymmetry of Power & Resources	Strong asymmetry; EU provides finance, AU provides legitimacy and proximity	Lower asymmetry; Latin America has stronger middle powers and diversified partners	Mixed; Asia includes both major powers and developing states
Political Sensitivity	Very high; migration, security, governance, and historical legacies make cooperation contentious	Moderate; political issues exist but are less existential	Low to moderate; dialogue-based, less politicised
Institutional Density	Dense architecture: summits, joint strategies, funding	Medium density; periodic summits,	Low density; ASEM is a loose dialogue forum

	instruments, sectoral dialogues	thematic cooperation	
Security Cooperation	Central pillar; peace operations, counter-terrorism, stabilisation	Limited; mostly crime, drugs, and policing	Minimal; security is not a core theme
Migration Governance	Highly contentious; returns, legal pathways, externalisation	Limited; migration not a major interregional issue	Minimal; mobility discussed but not negotiated
Normative Tensions	Strong; sovereignty vs conditionality, governance standards, human rights	Moderate; values matter but less confrontational	Low; norms are deliberately de-emphasised
Geopolitical Competition	Intense; Russia, China, Gulf states reshape African choices	Moderate; US and China influence region but not via EU–CELAC	High; Asia is a major geopolitical arena
Economic & Industrial Alignment	Heavy; colonial history shapes expectations and sensitivities	Present but less central	Minimal; no direct colonial legacy with Europe as a bloc
Climate & Environmental Diplomacy	Mixed; high ambition but frequent friction and asymmetry	Moderate; stable but limited impact	Low; useful for dialogue but weak on implementation

The implication is the EU-AU Partnership governance could be strengthened and the partnership at the administrative level be supported by either the Interregional Secretariat or the Strategic Partnerships Unit of the EEAS in order to ensure an orderly progression towards the realization of the objectives of the EU-AU Partnership:

The objectives of the African Union–European Union partnership are anchored in the ambition to move beyond a donor–recipient relationship and toward a structured, long-term political alliance between two regional organizations with shared global responsibilities. At its core, the partnership seeks to support Africa’s continental integration agenda while enabling the EU to engage Africa as a strategic actor in global governance rather than merely as a development space.

A first central objective is to promote peace, security, and stability across the African continent and its surrounding maritime spaces. This includes cooperation on conflict prevention, mediation, peace operations, counter-terrorism, and maritime security, with the AU positioned as the primary political authority and the EU acting as a partner providing financial, technical, and institutional support. The partnership aims to strengthen African ownership of security responses while aligning them with international norms and multilateral frameworks, including the United Nations system.

A second objective concerns sustainable development and economic transformation. The AU–EU partnership seeks to support Africa’s structural economic transformation through investment, trade, industrialization, and infrastructure development, with particular emphasis on the African Continental Free Trade Area, regional value chains, and job creation. For the

EU, this objective is increasingly linked to long-term economic interdependence, supply-chain resilience, and access to strategic resources, while for African partners it is framed around diversification, value addition, and reduced external dependency.

A third objective is cooperation on global challenges that transcend regional boundaries. Climate change mitigation and adaptation, biodiversity protection, energy transition, public health, and food security have become core pillars of the partnership. The AU–EU framework aims to align European climate and green transition policies with African development priorities, avoiding extractive or asymmetric outcomes and instead fostering technology transfer, financing mechanisms, and locally anchored green growth pathways.

A fourth objective is the strengthening of institutions, governance, and multilateral coordination. The partnership emphasizes capacity-building for AU institutions and African regional economic communities, support for democratic governance and rule-based systems, and closer coordination between the AU and EU in international fora. This includes aligning positions in global negotiations and reinforcing Africa's voice in multilateral institutions, reflecting a shared interest in a rules-based international order.

Finally, the AU–EU partnership seeks to reshape the political narrative of interregional relations by institutionalizing regular political dialogue at all levels and fostering mutual accountability. The long-term objective is to normalize region-to-region cooperation as a strategic choice rather than a development necessity, embedding EU–Africa relations within a broader framework of interregionalism, co-ownership, and negotiated priorities.

Now, the AU–EU relationship is characterised by a constant negotiation of norms, particularly around governance, democracy, and human rights. While the EU promotes conditionality and institutional reform, the AU emphasises ownership, sovereignty, and context specific approaches. This normative tension is far less pronounced in Europe's other interregional partnerships.

Taken together, these elements make the AU–EU partnership uniquely complex: it is simultaneously cooperative and contested, deeply institutionalised yet politically volatile, and shaped by both shared interests and structural inequalities.

African–EU interregionalism can be understood and conceived as a framework in which institutional design, normative alignment, and strategic agency converge to produce mutually beneficial outcomes. It operates most effectively when African actors are treated as structural participants rather than passive recipients, co-creating standards, shaping agendas, and negotiating terms across policy domains. By embedding empirical tracking, iterative learning, and sectoral engagement into the partnership, interregionalism becomes a dynamic process that not only facilitates cooperation but also enables cumulative knowledge building, strengthens local capacity, and fosters negotiated interdependence in a multipolar global order.

Summary

The AU–EU partnership's lightly institutionalized architecture, characterized by joint summits, ministerial dialogue, and a coordinating task force rather than binding treaties, reflects the logic

of strategic partnership theory, which prioritizes flexibility, autonomy, and interest-based cooperation over formal alliance commitments.

4.0 HISTORICAL LEGACY AND STRUCTURAL ASYMMETRIES

Long before modern states, Africa was crisscrossed by trade networks that shaped early political formations and cultural integration. In Northeast Africa, the Nile and Red Sea networks linked Egypt with Nubia and the Mediterranean world, while the Indian Ocean trade connected East African ports to Arabia, India, and beyond through monsoon wind sailing routes. These early connections enabled the exchange of luxury goods, agricultural products, and ideas, forming complex interregional systems that transcended local boundaries. (Science News Today)

Ancient Egypt (c. 3100 BCE – 332 BCE) – Centered along the Nile Valley, Ancient Egypt was one of the world's earliest and most enduring civilizations, characterized by a highly centralized state ruled by divine kingship under the pharaohs. Its control of the Nile's annual floods enabled intensive agriculture, population growth, and long-term political stability. Egypt developed a complex writing system of hieroglyphs, used for administration, religious texts, and monumental inscriptions, as well as hieratic and demotic scripts for daily governance. The civilization is renowned for its monumental architecture, including pyramids, temples, and tomb complexes that combined religious belief, engineering precision, and state power. Advances in mathematics, medicine, and astronomy underpinned architectural planning, medical practice, and calendar systems tied to agricultural cycles. Egypt sustained extensive trade and diplomatic relations with Nubia, the Levant, the Aegean, and beyond, integrating it into wider ancient networks. Its religious worldview, artistic conventions, and bureaucratic institutions shaped North African and Mediterranean history for millennia, leaving a legacy that endured well beyond its conquest by Alexander the Great.

Ancient Egypt emerged as one of humanity's earliest and most enduring civilizations, rising along the fertile banks of the Nile through the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt around 3100 BCE. Its ascendancy and eventual decline were shaped by a complex interplay of factors: the predictable yet delicate Nile flood cycles, dynastic consolidation and political centralization, technological innovation, social cohesion, foreign invasions, and periods of internal fragmentation. At the height of its power, particularly during the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms, Egypt established a highly centralized state governed by the pharaoh, supported by a sophisticated bureaucracy, a professional military, and a literate administrative class. Monumental architecture such as the pyramids, temples, and mortuary complexes exemplified engineering mastery and religious devotion, while developments in mathematics, medicine, astronomy, and irrigation reflected unparalleled practical and scientific ingenuity.

The Dendera Temple Complex, located on the west bank of the Nile near the modern city of Dendera in Upper Egypt, is one of the best-preserved and most artistically remarkable temple sites of ancient Egypt. Its centerpiece is the Temple of Hathor, constructed mainly during the Ptolemaic period (c. 305–30 BCE) with additions in the Roman era, though the site's sacred history extends back to the Old Kingdom. Hathor, the goddess of love, music, fertility, and motherhood, was the temple's principal deity, and the complex functioned as a religious, ceremonial, and astronomical center.

The temple is renowned for its exceptional bas-reliefs, painted ceilings, and symbolic carvings, including depictions of gods, pharaohs, and mythological scenes. The ceilings include the Dendera Zodiac, a unique circular depiction of the heavens integrating Egyptian cosmology with Greco-Roman influences, which has fascinated scholars for centuries for its astronomical and calendrical significance. Architectural features such as massive columns, hypostyle halls, and elaborately decorated sanctuaries reflect advanced knowledge of construction, alignment, and symbolic spatial design.

Figure Dendera Temple



Beyond its artistic and architectural value, Dendera served as a hub for ritual, pilgrimage, and learning, where priests performed daily cultic practices, celebrated seasonal festivals, and maintained astronomical observations critical to agriculture and ritual calendars. The temple inscriptions provide insight into religious thought, political legitimacy, and the interplay of Egyptian and Ptolemaic traditions, demonstrating how indigenous beliefs adapted under Hellenistic influence.

Dendera's temple complex also illustrates the continuity of Egyptian sacred architecture, connecting it to earlier dynastic forms while introducing innovations in decoration, astronomy, and ritual function. Today, it stands as a testament not only to ancient Egyptian religious life but also to the civilization's intersections of art, science, and spirituality, offering one of the clearest windows into the intellectual and ceremonial world of Pharaonic Egypt.

Egypt's cultural and intellectual contributions radiated far beyond its borders, producing a legacy that shaped multiple regions differently. In Africa, it served as a model for state formation, urban organization, and monumental artistry, influencing Nubia, the Kingdom of Kush, and other Nile Valley polities. In the Middle East, Egyptian religion, art, and political practices informed Mesopotamian, Levantine, and later Persian civilizations, creating channels of exchange that blended local and imported knowledge. In Europe, Egyptian science, architecture, and philosophical concepts reached Greek and Roman scholars, inspiring

advances in mathematics, medicine, architecture, and the visual arts that would echo through Western civilization for centuries. Across all regions, Egyptian achievements were both contextually unique and remarkably adaptive, combining local innovation with transregional interactions, making Ancient Egypt not only a powerhouse of its era but a differentiated and enduring cultural force whose influence can still be traced in the material, intellectual, and spiritual landscapes of Africa, the Middle East, and Europe.

Figure Nubian Statue



Kingdom of Kush / Nubia (c. 1070 BCE – 350 CE) – Located south of Egypt in what is now Sudan, the Kingdom of Kush emerged as a powerful and culturally distinct civilization closely linked to, yet independent from, Egypt. Kush developed its own political traditions, religious practices, and artistic styles while adopting and adapting Egyptian cultural elements. The kingdom is noted for its pyramids at sites such as Napata and Meroë, which differ in form from Egyptian pyramids and reflect local royal and religious traditions. Kush was a major center of iron production, particularly during the Meroitic period, giving it economic and military advantages in the region.

In the 8th century BCE, Kushite rulers conquered Egypt and established the 25th Dynasty, ruling as pharaohs and restoring monumental building and religious orthodoxy along the Nile. Kush controlled key trade routes linking sub-Saharan Africa with the Mediterranean world, facilitating the exchange of gold, ivory, animals, and luxury goods. Its longevity and regional influence underscore Nubia's role as a central actor in Nile Valley and African history rather than a peripheral one.

Carthaginian Empire (c. 9th century BCE – 146 BCE) – Founded by Phoenician settlers from Tyre in modern-day Tunisia, Carthage developed into one of the most powerful maritime and

commercial empires of the ancient Mediterranean. Its strategic coastal location enabled it to dominate sea routes across North Africa, the western Mediterranean, and parts of Iberia, linking African resources to broader trading networks. Carthage possessed a highly sophisticated economy, based on trade, agriculture, and tribute, supported by advanced financial practices and commercial law. The empire was renowned for its naval technology and seafaring expertise, maintaining large fleets and fortified ports that ensured maritime supremacy for centuries.

Politically, Carthage combined oligarchic governance with powerful merchant elites, allowing economic interests to shape imperial expansion. Its long rivalry with Rome, culminating in the Punic Wars, reflects its status as a peer competitor to the Roman Republic. The destruction of Carthage in 146 BCE marked the end of its political independence, but its commercial networks, urban traditions, and African-centered Mediterranean identity left a lasting imprint on regional history.

Figure Carthago Habour



The topographical position of the Carthaginian harbor was exceptionally well suited to maritime trade and access to the interior, combining a protected natural anchorage with direct links to inland commercial routes. This geographical advantage underpinned Carthage's rise as a dominant Mediterranean trading power and shaped its historical significance. Carthaginian society was predominantly aristocratic and mercantile, governed by elite families whose wealth derived from commerce, shipping, and overseas possessions, rather than territorial conquest alone. At the same time, the state fostered strong civic institutions, naval discipline, and urban organization, allowing commercial interests to translate into sustained political power.

Despite the city's destruction by Rome, Carthaginian cultural patterns—visible in settlement structures, agricultural practices, and regional identities—continued to echo in North Africa, leaving discernible traces in the historical landscapes of modern-day Tunisia and Libya and even in the population. Good question—and it's worth answering carefully, because Carthage was a cosmopolitan society, not a single "type."

A Carthaginian of the classical period would appear unmistakably Mediterranean, shaped by Phoenician ancestry and centuries of interaction with North African populations. Skin tones likely ranged from light olive to warm brown, with dark, wavy or straight hair most common and brown or hazel eyes prevailing. Facial features would not have been uniform but blended—Levantine sharpness mixed with North African softness—reflecting Carthage's role as a crossroads rather than an isolated ethnic enclave.

In dress, an urban Carthaginian—especially from the mercantile or aristocratic class—would wear linen or fine wool garments, often well tailored and sometimes dyed, with purple accents signaling status. Jewelry in gold, silver, or carnelian was common, particularly among women, while men favored restrained elegance over martial display. Grooming mattered: trimmed beards or clean-shaven faces, carefully arranged hair, and an overall appearance conveying discipline and prosperity rather than warrior austerity.

In demeanor, the Carthaginian was likely measured, calculating, and commercially alert, shaped by a society that valued contracts, negotiation, and long-term advantage. He or she belonged to a world of harbors, warehouses, councils, and temples—less heroic in the Homeric sense, but intensely urban, maritime, and pragmatic. The overall impression would be of a people confident in trade, institutions, and continuity, projecting quiet power rather than flamboyance.

In terms of traits rather than looks, ancient sources consistently describe Carthaginians as commercially astute, disciplined, pragmatic, and maritime-oriented. Their society prized calculation, contractual thinking, long-term planning, and family-based mercantile networks. Religion and ritual were deeply embedded in public life, but politics was largely oligarchic, led by merchant-aristocratic clans rather than warrior kings. They were less expansionist by land and more focused on trade dominance, naval power, and strategic ports.

Greek and Roman authors often portrayed Carthaginians as secretive, greedy, or ruthless—these accounts are politically biased, written by rivals and enemies. Archaeology and comparative evidence suggest a far more complex, urban, and institutionally sophisticated society than hostile sources admit.

Any perceived "remnants" today in Tunisia or Libya would not be biological survivals in a strict sense, but cultural continuities: coastal orientation, mercantile pragmatism, urban-commercial social patterns, proud of his refined Mediterranean hybridity. These are historical resonances, not racial inheritance.

Kingdom of Aksum (c. 100 CE – 940 CE) – Situated in the highlands of modern Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Kingdom of Aksum was one of Africa's most influential early civilizations, serving as a major hub of commerce and culture. Its strategic location allowed it to control trade routes connecting the Red Sea, the Nile Valley, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Indian Ocean,

facilitating the exchange of ivory, gold, frankincense, and exotic goods. Aksum developed its own written language, Ge'ez, which became the medium for administrative, religious, and literary texts and remains a liturgical language in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church today.

Figure Aksum Plinth



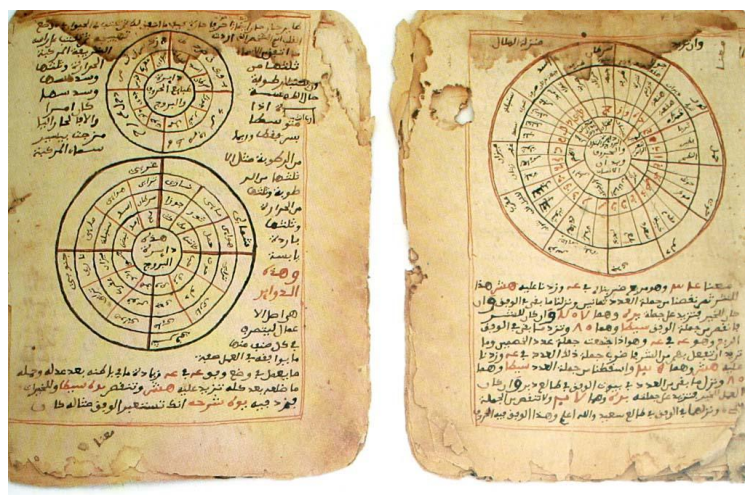
The kingdom is renowned for its monumental stelae, intricately carved obelisks that marked royal tombs and demonstrated sophisticated engineering and artistic skill. Aksum was among the first African states to adopt Christianity in the 4th century CE, integrating it deeply into its political and social life and leaving a lasting religious legacy. Its urban centers, palaces, and churches reveal a high degree of architectural innovation, while coins minted by Aksum attest to a complex monetary economy and connections with the Mediterranean world.

The kingdom's political organization combined centralized authority with regional administration, allowing it to maintain stability over a vast territory. Overall, Aksum's wealth, cultural achievements, and strategic influence make it a cornerstone of African and global history, illustrating the continent's early sophistication in trade, religion, and governance.

On the West African interior and Sahel, early states such as the Ghana Empire (c. 6th–13th century CE) controlled the trans Saharan gold and salt routes, facilitating exchange between sub Saharan and North African economies. These routes did more than circulate commodities; they also encouraged cross cultural engagement and institutional innovations — legal frameworks like Maliki jurisprudence that helped regulate trade and social order. The later Mali and Songhai Empires expanded these networks, with trading cities such as Timbuktu becoming centers of learning and economic exchange that attracted merchants from across the Islamic world.

Renowned for its immense wealth, thriving gold and salt trade, and vibrant centers of learning such as Timbuktu, Mali under Mansa Musa exemplified the height of West African prosperity, intellectual achievement, and cultural sophistication.

Figure A looted Timbuktu Manuscript by religious fundamentalists



Jean Djian's book on the Timbuktu manuscripts recounts the history and cultural significance of one of Africa's most remarkable written heritages. He traces the manuscripts' origins from the 13th to 17th centuries, highlighting their diversity in subjects such as law, religion, science, and history. The book emphasizes the intellectual vitality of medieval Mali and the Sahel, challenging common misconceptions about African scholarship. Djian explains how families preserved these texts through centuries, often hiding them from destruction or environmental threats. He contrasts the myths of Timbuktu as a legendary "lost city" with the tangible reality of extensive literary production. The author examines how the manuscripts reflect the social, economic, and religious life of the region. He also discusses the threats they faced, including colonial neglect, political instability, and recent conflicts. Djian situates the manuscripts within broader African and Islamic intellectual traditions, showing their global importance (Djian, 2019). The book interweaves storytelling with historical analysis to bring the manuscripts to life. Ultimately, it highlights the resilience of knowledge and the enduring value of cultural preservation.

Songhai Empire (c. 1430 – 1591 CE) – As the successor to the Mali Empire, the Songhai Empire emerged as one of West Africa's largest and most powerful states, stretching across the middle Niger River and encompassing key trading cities such as Gao, Djenné, and Timbuktu. The empire thrived on extensive trade networks that connected the interior with North Africa and the Mediterranean, facilitating the exchange of gold, salt, kola nuts, slaves, and other valuable commodities. Songhai's rulers, most notably Askia Muhammad I, implemented centralized governance, legal reforms, and administrative divisions that strengthened political cohesion and facilitated efficient tax collection. The empire also became a renowned center of Islamic scholarship and education, with Timbuktu hosting prestigious madrasas, libraries, and scholars whose works spanned theology, law, mathematics, and astronomy. Military organization and strategic riverine control allowed Songhai to expand territorially while protecting trade routes and sustaining economic prosperity. Cultural life flourished alongside commerce, with artisans, poets, and scholars contributing to a vibrant intellectual and artistic landscape. Despite its eventual decline following Moroccan invasions in 1591, the Songhai

Empire's legacy endured in West African governance, trade practices, and educational traditions. The empire exemplifies the integration of political power, economic wealth, and intellectual achievement in pre-colonial African civilization.

Benin Kingdom (c. 1180 – 1897 CE) – Located in what is now southern Nigeria, the Benin Kingdom was renowned for its sophisticated urban planning, impressive defensive walls, and highly organized administration under the Oba, the divine king. Its artistic legacy, particularly the intricately cast bronze plaques, sculptures, and ivory carvings, reflects both royal authority and religious practice, and influenced West African art more broadly. The kingdom maintained complex trade networks with neighboring states and, later, European merchants, exchanging ivory, pepper, and slaves for European goods. Benin's governance combined central authority with a network of chiefs and guilds, allowing it to maintain political stability for centuries.

Figure Benin Statues



The Benin statuettes are among the most celebrated examples of pre-colonial African art, originating from the Kingdom of Benin in modern-day Nigeria. They were primarily crafted in bronze, brass, and sometimes ivory, using the sophisticated lost-wax casting technique that allowed for remarkable detail. Many statuettes depict Obas (kings), royal figures, and court officials, symbolizing authority, lineage, and the kingdom's hierarchical structure. Others portray ancestors, deities, and mythological scenes, reflecting the spiritual and religious beliefs of the Edo people. The figures are often richly ornamented with regalia, intricate hairstyles, and symbolic motifs that convey rank, power, and cultural identity.

Benin statuettes served both ritual and commemorative purposes, placed on altars, in shrines, or at palace courtyards to honor ancestors and legitimize royal authority. European contact in the late 19th century led to the looting of many artworks, dispersing them to museums worldwide, which brought global attention to their artistry but also sparked ongoing debates about cultural restitution. Today, Benin statuettes are celebrated for their technical mastery,

historical significance, and the insight they provide into the social, political, and spiritual life of the Benin Kingdom.

Hausa City-States (c. 10th – 19th century CE) – In the northern region of modern Nigeria, the Hausa developed a series of interconnected city-states such as Kano, Katsina, and Zaria, each with its own ruler but linked through shared language, culture, and commerce. These city-states became thriving centers of Islamic scholarship, commerce, and craftsmanship, attracting scholars, merchants, and artisans from across the Sahel and the wider Islamic world. They cultivated extensive trade networks in salt, leather, textiles, and kola nuts, connecting the savannahs of West Africa with the trans-Saharan trade routes. Despite their autonomy, the Hausa states shared political institutions, judicial systems, and religious traditions, creating a resilient cultural and economic region that influenced the surrounding areas for centuries.

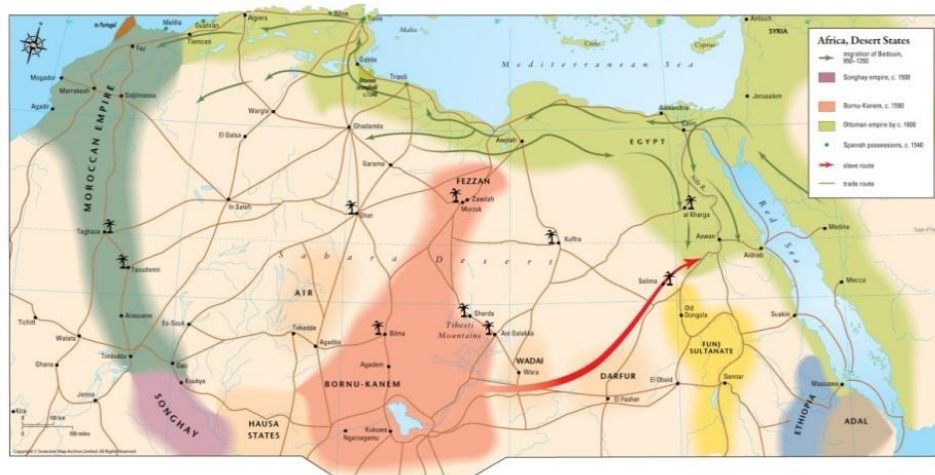
Historically, Hausa traders, known as fatake, established extensive trade networks that reached across the Sahel, Sahara Desert, and into North Africa. These traders traveled in caravans using camels or donkeys, transporting goods across vast distances. Common trade items included kola nuts from the forest zones, salt from the Sahara (especially from Taghaza and Bilma), textiles, leather products, grains like millet and sorghum, and, in earlier times, gold, slaves, and horses.

Key commercial centers such as Kano, Katsina, Zaria, and Daura served as major trading hubs. Markets like Kurmi Market in Kano became renowned centers of commerce, drawing merchants from across West and North Africa. The success of fatauci helped elevate the social and political status of many Hausa merchants, some of whom became wealthy and influential figures. These merchants often supported Islamic scholarship, built mosques, and played major roles in community leadership by Establishing many Zangos while traveling. The tradition of fatauci continues in modern times, with Hausa traders remaining prominent in business activities across Nigeria and beyond. Many operate in countries such as Ghana, Cameroon, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia. The legacy of fatauci reflects the historical depth of Hausa entrepreneurship and its contribution to regional and trans-Saharan commerce.

An ancient cultural and linguistic arc stretches from Chad in the Sahel to Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa. Many of the languages in this region belong to the Afroasiatic family, including Chadic, Cushitic, and Semitic branches, which share a common ancestor known as Proto Afroasiatic, spoken perhaps 12,000–18,000 years ago.

Ancestors of Chadic speakers migrated westward into the Lake Chad Basin, while Cushitic ancestors moved southward and eastward into the Horn. During the early Holocene, humid corridors across the Sahara enabled these migrations and interactions, connecting distant regions.

Figure Hausa Trading Area



Archaeological evidence shows shared pastoral and technological practices along this broad corridor. Linguistic structures in Chadic and Cushitic languages retain common roots and grammatical features, reflecting ancient contact and shared heritage. This arc represents not a short-term trade route but a millennia-long network of population movements and cultural diffusion.

Later historical developments, such as Hausa emerging as a trading lingua franca, built upon these deep connections. The region therefore forms a continuous tapestry of prehistoric migration, shared language, and cultural affinity linking central and eastern Africa. Altogether, it illustrates how linguistic, cultural, and technological threads have woven a persistent connection across this vast landscape.

This axis could be recreated and reinforced by fostering multilayered cultural, linguistic, and economic connections that echo its historical foundations. Initiatives could include supporting regional language revitalization and Afroasiatic studies, creating interregional academic and cultural exchanges, and establishing transnational heritage and archaeology programs that highlight shared histories. Trade corridors and infrastructure projects linking central Sahelian states to the Horn of Africa could physically reconnect the regions, while digital platforms and media networks could strengthen contemporary communication and collaboration. Encouraging cross-border pastoral and agricultural knowledge exchanges, as well as joint festivals or cultural events, would revive the social and technological interactions that historically bound the arc. Strategic investment in education, research, and museums that emphasize common linguistic and cultural heritage could cultivate a shared identity. Regional economic initiatives, such as markets, craft cooperatives, and renewable energy networks, could reinforce practical interdependence. Political and security frameworks that facilitate safe mobility would enable sustained people-to-people contact. Collaborative projects in art, music, and literature could highlight enduring cultural affinities. Finally, institutional partnerships among universities, think tanks, and regional organizations could ensure this axis is recognized, studied, and continuously strengthened over time.

This is a detailed historical map of the Kingdom of Congo and its surrounding regions. The map is color-coded: green for the Kingdom of Congo, yellow for the Kingdom of Loango, orange for the Kingdom of Benguela, and purple for the Kingdom of Matamba. Other regions shown include the Kingdom of Angola, the Kingdom of Namibia, and the Kingdom of the Congo. The map includes numerous place names, rivers, and geographical features. A scale bar at the bottom indicates distances in miles and kilometers. A compass rose is located in the top right corner.

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Kingdom of Kongo at the time of Portuguese contact (late 15th century) – By the late 1400s, the Kingdom of Kongo had emerged as a highly organized and prosperous Central African state, spanning parts of modern Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Republic of Congo.

Its political system was centralized under the Manikongo, who was supported by provincial governors and local chiefs, allowing effective governance over a vast territory. The kingdom excelled in metallurgy, producing iron weapons, tools, and ceremonial art, while its economy thrived on trade in copper, ivory, raffia cloth, and other commodities. Portuguese explorers arrived in 1483, initiating diplomatic, commercial, and religious exchanges; the Manikongo Nzinga a Nkuwu adopted Christianity, marking the beginning of a deep cultural and political engagement with Europe. Kongo leveraged these interactions to strengthen its trade networks and political influence, while selectively integrating European technology, religion, and material culture. Cities such as M'banza-Kongo became important hubs of administration, religion, and commerce, reflecting a blend of indigenous and Portuguese influences. Despite the eventual pressures of the transatlantic slave trade, at the time of initial contact, the kingdom was stable, culturally vibrant, and strategically adept at navigating cross-cultural relations. Its legacy during this period illustrates the sophistication, adaptability, and political acumen of Central African states prior to large-scale European colonization.

Figure



Great Zimbabwe (c. 1100 – 1450 CE) – Celebrated for its monumental dry-stone architecture, including soaring walls, massive enclosures, and the iconic conical tower, Great Zimbabwe was the political, economic, and spiritual heart of a sophisticated southern African kingdom. It

functioned as a central hub in an extensive trade network, channeling gold, ivory, copper, and other valuable commodities from the interior to coastal ports along the Indian Ocean, connecting the region to traders from Arabia, India, and beyond. The city's impressive stone constructions, built without mortar, demonstrate advanced engineering, organizational skill, and aesthetic sensibility, reflecting a society capable of complex urban planning. Beyond commerce, Great Zimbabwe was a cultural and ceremonial center, supporting an elite ruling class, artisan communities, and religious rituals that reinforced social hierarchies and spiritual life.

Archaeological evidence of pottery, ornaments, and tools reveals a vibrant material culture, while the sheer scale of the structures attests to the kingdom's political power and regional influence. Great Zimbabwe's legacy shaped the development of southern African polities for centuries, inspiring architectural, artistic, and social practices across the region. It stands today not only as a symbol of pre-colonial African ingenuity and wealth but also as a testament to the enduring sophistication of indigenous African civilizations. Great Zimbabwe (c. 1100 – 1450 CE) – Celebrated for its monumental dry-stone architecture, including soaring walls, massive enclosures, and the iconic conical tower, Great Zimbabwe was the political, economic, and spiritual heart of a sophisticated southern African kingdom.

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We recommend examining the major highways and rail networks in coordination with the African Union to identify opportunities for regional integration and connectivity. In parallel, a comprehensive environmental impact assessment of the Zambezi River should be conducted to evaluate ecological, social, and economic effects of proposed infrastructure projects. This assessment would ensure that development along the river balances sustainable use of water resources, biodiversity protection, and community livelihoods. By integrating transport planning with environmental oversight, the initiative can reinforce the historical axis of connectivity across central and eastern Africa while safeguarding natural and human ecosystems. Collaborative engagement with the AU and local stakeholders will be essential to align infrastructure development with regional strategies and long-term sustainability goals.

Across the Swahili Coast of East Africa, city states like Kilwa, Mombasa, and Mogadishu emerged as powerful maritime hubs due to Indian Ocean commerce. Their trade networks extended to Arabia, Persia, India, and even China, fusing diverse cultural influences into local

polities that were both African and cosmopolitan. Further south, Great Zimbabwe became a center for gold, ivory, and cattle trade that linked inland Africa with coastal commerce long before European contact.

These long duration commercial systems thus contributed to the rise of political entities that were not simply territorial states but nodes in wide trade networks, fostering economic interdependence and cross regional linkages that anticipated later integration efforts.

The arrival of European colonial powers in the late 19th century fundamentally reorganized Africa's economic geography. Colonial borders were drawn with little regard for existing trade circuits, and infrastructure—railways, ports, and roads—was developed primarily for extractive export purposes rather than inter African exchange. This fragmented pre existing trade ties that had bound regions together for centuries and redirected economic activity toward European metropolises.

Colonial rule deliberately undermined horizontal economic relations that had linked disparate African territories, replacing them with export oriented systems that discouraged internal regional connectivity. Even where indirect rule allowed some local structures to persist, the overarching logic of colonial economies isolated communities rather than integrating them across the continent.

With independence in the mid 20th century, many African states inherited colonial economic structures oriented outward. Regional economic communities (RECs) such as ECOWAS, SADC, EAC, and others emerged in the post colonial era to rebuild regional economic ties fractured by colonialism.

In recent decades, scholars using complex network and panel regression analysis have shown that modern African economic integration (2002–2019, and beyond) depends on factors like institutional quality, trade agreements, infrastructure, and human capital to enhance intra continental connectivity. Increased connectivity in trading networks correlates with better economic outcomes and boosts countries' positions in broader African networks. (arXiv)

This historical sweep—from ancient trade routes to modern economic networks—has profound implications for continental unity planning, such as the African Union's agenda.

First, the legacy of historical trade networks reveals that African unity is not an abstract ideal but a recurring pattern: political entities emerged where commerce flowed, and cohesion grew where economic exchange was dense. Ancient trans Saharan, Nile, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean networks functioned as integration mechanisms, binding culturally and economically distinct regions into broader systems long before colonial borders. Reviving and adapting these integrative mechanisms—through infrastructure, policy harmonization, and shared markets—can reinforce unity.

Second, the disruption under colonial rule underscores the need to reimagine borders and economic policies so that they facilitate inter African exchange rather than constrain it. Continental institutions like the AU and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) are strategic attempts to rebuild and surpass older regional linkages, embedding them in contemporary governance frameworks. The historical entanglement of trade and polity

suggests that unity planning should focus on connecting markets, standardizing regulations, and fostering shared commercial spaces that echo the integrative function of historical networks.

Finally, modern economic analyses confirm that trade infrastructure, institutional cooperation, and regional agreements significantly shape countries' connectivity in continental networks. This means that strategic unity planning must invest not only in political symbolism but also in economic architectures that mirror the connectivity of African polities' long history of exchange.

Over centuries, African trade networks helped shape state formation, cultural syncretism, and economic interdependence across regions. Ancient empires such as Ghana, Mali, Songhai, and the Swahili city states illustrate how commerce catalyzed political cohesion and cross regional linkages. Colonial disruption fractured these systems, but contemporary efforts at economic integration and continental unity echo historical patterns of exchange. Recognizing these deep temporal linkages enriches unity planning, suggesting that connectivity—economic, infrastructural, and institutional—must be at the heart of achieving a more integrated Africa today. (Science News Today).

The African state system has evolved through multiple historical phases that together shape its contemporary form, characteristics, and interaction with the global international system. Prior to colonial conquest, Africa contained a wide variety of political systems, including centralized empires, kingdoms, city-states, and decentralized societies. These political formations exercised authority through kinship structures, religious legitimacy, military power, and control over trade networks. Sovereignty during this period was often overlapping and fluid rather than territorially fixed, and diplomatic practices such as alliance formation, warfare, tribute, and negotiation were well established. Although these systems did not conform to the Westphalian model of the modern nation-state, they nevertheless constituted functional international and regional political orders.

The imposition of colonial rule in the late nineteenth century fundamentally altered Africa's political landscape. Following the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, European powers established colonial states characterized by artificial borders, centralized administration, and extractive economic systems. These colonial entities were designed primarily to serve imperial interests rather than to generate domestic legitimacy or inclusive governance. Political authority was oriented outward toward metropolitan capitals, and indigenous institutions were marginalized or distorted. The colonial state thus created enduring structural weaknesses, including fragmented societies, limited institutional capacity, and legitimacy deficits that would continue into the post-independence era.

With the wave of decolonization beginning in the late 1950s and accelerating through the 1960s, African states entered the international system as formally sovereign entities. These newly independent states retained colonial borders under the principle of *uti possidetis* in order to avoid territorial conflict, thereby prioritizing stability over historical or ethnic claims. While African states possessed juridical sovereignty and international recognition, they often lacked empirical sovereignty in terms of effective territorial control, administrative capacity, and economic autonomy. Governance during this period was frequently characterized by one-party

systems, military coups, and neo-patrimonial rule, as political leaders relied on patronage networks to maintain power. Internationally, African states became embedded in Cold War rivalries, with external powers supporting regimes based on strategic alignment rather than domestic governance quality.

The end of the Cold War marked a significant transformation in the African state system. The collapse of bipolar global competition reduced Africa's strategic importance to major powers and introduced new forms of external engagement centered on democratization, economic liberalization, and human rights. This period witnessed both political liberalization and, in some cases, state collapse, as seen in countries such as Somalia and Liberia. International intervention expanded through peacekeeping, humanitarian action, and post-conflict reconstruction, leading to the emergence of conditional sovereignty. Institutional change was also evident in the transformation of the Organization of African Unity into the African Union, reflecting a normative shift toward collective security, constitutional governance, and non-indifference to mass atrocities.

In the contemporary period, the African state system is shaped by globalization, regional integration, and the rise of a multipolar international order. African states increasingly engage with a diverse set of external partners, including China, Russia, Gulf states, and emerging middle powers, alongside traditional Western actors. Regional organizations such as the African Union and sub-regional economic communities have become more assertive in peace and security affairs, while initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area aim to enhance economic integration. Despite these developments, many African states continue to exhibit hybrid political characteristics, combining formal democratic institutions with authoritarian practices, and remain constrained by structural economic dependency.

Across this historical evolution, African states share several defining characteristics, values, and objectives. Structurally, most states retain colonial boundaries, exhibit limited state penetration beyond urban centers, and concentrate power in strong executive institutions. Normatively, African states have emphasized principles such as sovereign equality, territorial integrity, and non-secession, particularly through continental institutions. At the same time, there has been a gradual shift toward norms of constitutional order, human security, and collective intervention against unconstitutional changes of government. The primary objectives of African states include regime survival, internal stability, economic development, international legitimacy, and regional cooperation without the loss of sovereignty.

The question of whether an African International Relations theory exists has generated significant scholarly debate. Mainstream IR theories, particularly realism and liberalism, often assume strong, cohesive states with clear internal legitimacy, assumptions that do not always align with African political realities. In response, African and postcolonial scholars have developed alternative analytical frameworks that emphasize historical inequality, external dependency, informal power structures, and the strategies through which African elites engage the international system. Concepts such as subaltern realism, neo-patrimonialism, and the politics of extraversion have become central to understanding how African states pursue security and survival within a structurally unequal global order. African International Relations therefore exists not as a completely separate theory, but as a critical revision of mainstream IR grounded in African experiences.

Power dynamics within Africa and between Africa and the global system are deeply interconnected. Internally, power is shaped by disparities among states, the presence of regional hegemons, and competition for influence within continental and sub-regional institutions. Externally, Africa's position has shifted in response to global power transformations. During the Cold War, African states were often drawn into proxy conflicts and supported by rival superpowers. In the post-Cold War era, donor conditionality and governance agendas became more prominent. In the current multipolar context, African states have gained greater diplomatic flexibility by engaging multiple external actors, thereby increasing their bargaining power while also exposing themselves to new forms of dependency and strategic competition.

The long-term survival of certain African states illustrates how historical continuity, diplomatic orientation, and normative commitments contribute to state resilience. Ethiopia represents one of Africa's oldest continuous states and has historically emphasized sovereignty, centralized authority, and regional leadership, exemplified by its role as host of the African Union. Morocco's enduring monarchy has relied on dynastic legitimacy and pragmatic diplomacy, balancing relations with Europe, the Gulf states, and African partners to maintain regime stability. Botswana's post-independence success demonstrates how institutional strength, rule of law, and cautious foreign policy can function as survival strategies in a challenging regional environment. Egypt's long-standing state tradition and strategic location have shaped a diplomatic orientation centered on security, regional influence, and the protection of vital resources such as the Nile. Rwanda's post-genocide reconstruction highlights a model of strong centralized authority combined with strategic international engagement, prioritizing regime security and developmental objectives over liberal democratic norms.

In conclusion, the African state system is best understood as a historically layered and hybrid political order shaped by pre-colonial legacies, colonial disruption, post-independence challenges, and ongoing global transformations. While African states operate within a state system inherited from European imperialism, they have adapted its norms and practices to local realities and survival imperatives. African International Relations scholarship provides essential tools for analyzing these dynamics by foregrounding historical inequality, state survival strategies, and Africa's evolving role in a changing global order.

Pan Africanism originated within the African diaspora in Europe and the Americas, where intellectuals, activists, and political leaders articulated early critiques of colonial domination and racial oppression. In the contemporary era, this intellectual tradition intersects with institutional cooperation between Africa and Europe. The African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) have established a comprehensive global partnership that seeks to advance shared strategic objectives.

Table

Policy Domain	African Agency (Structural Actions)	EU Engagement (Facilitation / Collaboration)	Operational Metrics / Outcomes	Strategic Goal / Expected Result
Digital Governance	Co-design standards for data protection, cybersecurity, digital trade; leverage AfCFTA Digital Trade Protocol;	Technical support, knowledge transfer, harmonization of	Number of co-designed regulations; African participation in	Shift from hierarchical regulatory adoption to co-created, mutually

	selectively implement/adapt EU frameworks	standards; joint regulatory bodies	standards-setting; adoption of joint digital protocols	recognized digital governance frameworks
Climate Cooperation	Lead in joint green technology development; coordinate African positions on climate finance; leverage critical minerals and renewable energy potential; demand tech transfer	Provide funding, technical expertise, capacity-building support; co-develop renewable energy projects	Volume of joint green investments; local processing of minerals; participation in joint renewable projects	Transform Africa from a “vulnerable recipient” into a strategic green actor shaping global climate outcomes
Industrial Policy	Articulate sectoral priorities (pharma, electric mobility, agro-processing); embed African firms and institutions in projects; negotiate conditionalities favoring local value addition; align with AfCFTA frameworks	Co-investment, infrastructure support, market access facilitation; skills and technology transfer	Number of co-investment projects; value-added locally; African-led industrial initiatives; alignment with regional industrial strategies	Move from donor-recipient dynamics to strategic co-production of industrial capacity and diversified supply chains
Cross-Cutting	Assert normative influence; negotiate equitable resource allocation; monitor partnership outcomes; identify anomalies	Provide structured interregional forums; support capacity-building; ensure feedback loops	African participation metrics; policy adjustments; observed vs. intended outcomes	Build negotiated interdependence , strengthen AU–EU partnership, enable iterative learning and cumulative knowledge

The AU–EU partnership can advance meaningfully in digital governance, climate cooperation, and industrial policy when African agency is embedded as a structural component rather than a rhetorical aspiration.

Digital Governance: Progress requires moving beyond one-directional regulatory transfer from Europe to Africa. Following Doidge’s insights on interregionalism, cooperation becomes effective when both sides actively shape institutional outcomes, avoiding the reproduction of hierarchical patterns. Actionable steps include: co-designing digital standards on data protection, cybersecurity, and digital trade; establishing joint regulatory bodies to oversee implementation; and leveraging Africa’s growing digital market and the AfCFTA Digital Trade Protocol to assert negotiating influence. As Sebhatu highlights, African agency often emerges through reinterpretation and selective implementation, which can be leveraged strategically to influence norms and technical standards rather than merely adopting EU frameworks like GDPR.

Climate Cooperation: Africa should be recognized not only as a vulnerable region but as a strategic actor in the global green transition. Interregionalism in a multipolar environment, as Telò et al. emphasize, requires attention to material capabilities that shape bargaining power. African states can operationalize their leverage by prioritizing: joint green technology

development, local processing of critical minerals, and the design of co-financed renewable energy projects. Rein's critique of the AU–EU “strategic partnership” underscores that rhetoric must be matched with substantive co-production, including joint value chains rather than extractive arrangements. Coordinated positions within forums such as the African Group of Negotiators can be used to demand technology transfer, climate finance aligned with African development priorities, and capacity-building for local industries.

Industrial Policy: Here, the opportunity for a genuinely strategic partnership is most tangible. Mangala notes that industrial upgrading requires institutional alignment and shared long-term interests rather than donor-recipient dynamics. Actionable interventions include: identifying sectors for co-investment (e.g., pharmaceuticals, electric mobility, agro-processing, green technologies); embedding African firms and institutions at the center of industrial projects; and ensuring AfCFTA frameworks guide cross-border production and value addition. Postcolonial critiques, including Hobson's work, warn that industrial cooperation must avoid reproducing dependency. African actors can shift from policy takers to co-producers by articulating clear industrial priorities and negotiating conditionalities that favor local value creation.

Across these domains, the partnership progresses when it moves from asymmetry to negotiated interdependence. Interregionalism provides a blueprint for redesigning institutional structures to support co-creation. Postcolonial theory identifies persistent power imbalances and highlights strategies African actors use to navigate them. Strategic partnership theory clarifies alignment of mutual interests in a multipolar system. Together, these lenses show that digital governance, climate cooperation, and industrial policy are precisely the arenas where African agency can transform the AU–EU relationship into a balanced, mutually beneficial, and genuinely strategic partnership.

Summary

To make interregionalism effective in Africa, policy design must focus on concrete African actions paired with EU engagement opportunities, translating strategic objectives into operational steps. Empirical outcomes should be tracked using both quantitative indicators, such as co-designed regulations and joint investments, and qualitative measures, including the influence of African actors in negotiations. An iterative learning approach ensures that observed anomalies inform adjustments to partnership structures and processes, fostering cumulative knowledge in the Kuhnian sense. Finally, a sectoral focus allows for detailed analysis within domains such as digital governance, climate cooperation, and industrial policy, while reinforcing cross-cutting principles like co-production, local value addition, and negotiated interdependence. Together, these elements provide a practical roadmap for achieving a genuinely balanced and effective AU–EU interregional partnership.

5.0 THE EVOLVING AU-EU PARTNERSHIP

Pan-Africanism in Europe emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as African and diasporic intellectuals, activists, and students began to organize in European metropolises, particularly London, Paris, and Brussels. These cities served as hubs for political debate, education, and anti-colonial activism, providing spaces where African ideas could intersect with European political currents and the broader African diaspora. W.E.B. Du Bois, who spent

significant periods in Europe, emphasized the centrality of African self-determination within a global struggle for racial equality, writing that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line” (Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903). In European Pan-African congresses, Du Bois consistently argued for African agency, political unity, and the dismantling of colonial oppression, signaling the intellectual grounding of the movement beyond the African continent itself.

The European Pan-African context also facilitated transnational dialogue between African intellectuals and Caribbean activists, bridging diasporic networks that were critical for the interwar and postwar anti-colonial agenda. Marcus Garvey’s Black Star Line and the Universal Negro Improvement Association, although originating in the Americas, found sympathetic audiences in European cities, where the diaspora debated strategies for self-reliance, economic independence, and eventual continental unity. Kwame Nkrumah, reflecting on these movements, emphasized the necessity of African unity for political liberation, asserting in *Africa Must Unite* (1963) that “the forces that unite Africa are greater than the forces that keep her apart.” European Pan-Africanism thus served both as a crucible for ideological formation and as a strategic platform to challenge colonial powers through petitions, congresses, and political lobbying.

Post-World War II, the European Pan-African milieu evolved as colonial structures weakened, and independence movements accelerated. Many future African leaders—Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, Sekou Touré, and Julius Nyerere—were educated or politically active in Europe, learning to navigate both European political institutions and African nationalist aspirations. Nyerere, in reflecting on the role of unity for newly independent nations, wrote that “Africa’s strength lies in her unity; her weakness in her divisions” (*Freedom and Unity*, 1967), underscoring a principle that was nurtured within European Pan-African circles but applied to continental policy after independence.

In essence, Europe acted as both a laboratory and a launchpad for Pan-African thought. Intellectual debate, diasporic networking, and engagement with colonial authorities in European capitals shaped the ideas that would eventually underpin independence movements and continental integration efforts. From Du Bois’s early advocacy for African representation and education, through Nkrumah’s calls for political and economic unification, to Nyerere’s insistence on unity as the foundation of sustainable development, Pan-Africanism in Europe evolved as a dynamic synthesis of diasporic intellectualism, political strategy, and African-led activism.



No social movement has survived without strong leadership and good governance. The initiative to build an African Union (AU) Headquarters in Addis Ababa, however, came from Beijing, which pledged financial and technical support for the construction. While the AU leadership retained ownership of the project and the vision of a pan-African institutional hub, China's involvement highlighted the emerging influence of external actors in African continental affairs. This act of diplomacy, framed by Beijing as a gesture of solidarity with African integration, also reflected strategic interests in strengthening economic and political ties with the continent. The AU headquarters stands not only as a symbol of African unity but also as a marker of how external powers, when providing infrastructure and institutional support, can shape the political and operational environment of pan-African initiatives.

Evolution of EU Africa Policy

The EU's engagement with Africa began in the post-colonial era through the Yaoundé Conventions (1963, 1969) and later the Lomé Conventions (1975–2000), establishing frameworks for trade, aid, and development cooperation with African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) states. These agreements focused primarily on economic development, preferential trade access, and aid flows, reflecting the EU's role as a donor rather than a strategic partner. Over time, the EU began incorporating political dialogue and human rights norms, particularly in response to apartheid in Southern Africa and governance crises.

The turn of the millennium marked a shift with the Cotonou Agreement (2000) and the Joint Africa–EU Strategy (JAES, 2007). These frameworks emphasized political dialogue, governance, peace and security, and regional integration, moving beyond donor-recipient relations toward a partnership model. Security issues, including the rise of terrorism in the Sahel and instability in the Horn of Africa, increasingly framed EU policy, leading to initiatives supporting the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and the African Union Peace and Security Council (AUPSC).

Parallel to security concerns, the EU strengthened its focus on sustainable development, trade, and investment, notably through the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with African regions and the EU Green Deal, which includes Africa in climate adaptation, renewable energy, and green growth strategies. These policies aim to promote mutual economic benefit, private sector development, and inclusive growth, integrating Africa into global value chains.

Since the 2010s, migration management has become a central component of EU–Africa policy. Initiatives such as the EU–Africa Migration and Mobility Dialogue link development aid, border management, and labor mobility. Policies reflect a dual approach: addressing root causes of irregular migration while supporting legal migration pathways and humanitarian protection.

The EU increasingly prioritizes African-led security solutions, supporting APSA and regional organizations such as ECOWAS, SADC, and IGAD. Programs include capacity-building for peacekeeping, counter-terrorism, and conflict mediation, often implemented through EU missions and financial support for AU operations. This reflects an evolution from reactive assistance to strategic, preventive engagement.

Today, the EU frames Africa policy within a broader geopolitical, multipolar context, balancing China, Russia, and US influence on the continent. The 2020 EU Strategy with Africa emphasizes six priority areas: peace and security, governance and human rights, resilient economies, green transition, digital transformation, and migration partnerships. The EU increasingly seeks long-term partnerships rather than purely transactional relations, aligning development, trade, and security with continental priorities.

EU-AU SUMMITRY

The social dynamics of EU–AU summits reflect people-centered concerns, development objectives, and engagement with civil society. Migration and mobility have been central to these discussions. In the early 2000s, the focus was largely on migration management as a security concern for the EU. Over time, summit declarations increasingly emphasized safe and legal migration, human rights, and youth mobility programs. Youth, education, and skills development have gained prominence, reflecting Africa’s demographic growth and the EU’s interest in a stable, skilled partner region. Health and pandemics, particularly during and after COVID-19, became central themes, highlighting vaccine distribution, pandemic preparedness, and health system strengthening. Civil society engagement and inclusivity, which were not always explicit in early summit declarations, have grown in importance, with recent statements emphasizing gender equality, human rights, and social inclusion.

Political dynamics of the EU–AU summits reflect strategic, governance, and policy interactions between the two unions. Early summits were often bilateral and instrumental, focusing on trade, aid, and cooperation frameworks. Over time, the African Union’s voice became more institutionally assertive, especially after establishing the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). The negotiation dynamics often involve balancing the EU’s agenda-setting power with Africa’s growing capacity to assert priorities, including industrialization, digital sovereignty, and climate adaptation. Declarations evolved from emphasizing conflict prevention and security sector support to broader peacebuilding, counterterrorism, and

maritime security cooperation, reflecting African leadership in addressing its own security issues. African actors have increasingly sought to diversify partnerships, signaling to the EU the need to address political priorities beyond traditional aid, such as intra-African trade under the AfCFTA and continental digital policy.

Diplomatic dynamics at EU–AU summits focus on mutual recognition, strategic signaling, and international positioning. The summit itself serves as a symbolic instrument to portray partnership equality, with the EU emphasizing its role as a strategic partner and the AU asserting sovereignty and agency. Summit declarations function as instruments of soft power; the EU projects norms such as democracy, human rights, and rule of law, while the AU asserts priorities such as industrialization, infrastructure, and technology transfer. Declarations increasingly integrate global frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement, and AU Agenda 2063, signaling alignment with broader international governance norms. Rhetoric has evolved from EU-driven aid and cooperation language in the early 2000s, to recognition of African priorities in the 2010s, and to co-ownership, industrialization, green transition, and youth-focused language by the 2020s.

Analyzing the evolution of summit declarations over time reveals a clear trajectory. The 2000 Cairo summit focused on partnership and development aid in a largely EU-driven framework. By the 2007 Lisbon summit, migration, security, and trade issues began reflecting African political priorities. The 2014 Brussels summit emphasized peace, security, and governance, structured around APSA. In 2017, the Abidjan summit highlighted youth, migration, and resilience, giving stronger attention to social development. The 2022 Brussels summit further emphasized green transition, industrialization, digital economy, and pandemic recovery, using language that acknowledged Africa’s strategic autonomy and emphasized joint ownership of the agenda.

The key trends across declarations show a shift from donor–recipient framing to mutual strategic interests. Security discussions have broadened to include human security concerns such as migration, health, and youth. Global frameworks like the Paris Agreement, SDGs, and AU Agenda 2063 are increasingly referenced, and the language of co-ownership in recent declarations emphasizes joint strategy design and implementation rather than mere financial transfers.

In synthesis, social pressures such as youth employment, migration, and health influence political priorities, while political dynamics regarding sovereignty, governance, and trade shape negotiation outcomes and language. Diplomatic signaling ensures that summit declarations communicate mutual respect, co-ownership, and alignment with international norms. Overall, EU–AU summitry has evolved from EU-led aid discussions toward genuine strategic partnership, reflecting Africa’s rising political agency and social priorities.

Table

Summit Year	Diplomatic / Partnership	Economic	Social / Human Development	Political / Governance	Cultural / Civil Society
2000 Cairo	EU-led, Africa as aid recipient: “Partnership	Aid-focused: “Africa’s development requires	Implicit focus on poverty reduction and basic education:	Governance and stability stressed: “Peace, democracy, and	Minimal; cooperation framed in technical terms

	and development cooperation in a spirit of solidarity”	sustained financial and technical support from Europe”	“Enhancing human development and social well-being”	respect for human rights are essential for sustainable partnership”	rather than cultural exchange
2007 Lisbon	Move toward negotiation; African priorities emerging: “Partnership must address shared responsibilities, particularly in managing migration flows”	Trade and investment included: “Support African economic integration and equitable trade relations”	Migration highlighted as a social issue; education and health recognized	Security and governance emphasized: “Supporting African-led initiatives for peace and security”	Some symbolic acknowledgment of diversity and intercultural cooperation
2014 Brussels	African-led initiatives recognized: “The EU and AU commit to strengthen the African Peace and Security Architecture”	Infrastructure and regional integration: “Investment in infrastructure and regional integration is key for sustainable growth”	Human security and resilience emphasized: “Strengthening communities’ capacity to cope with conflicts is essential”	African ownership in peace and security; governance frameworks highlighted	Civil society engagement and inclusivity acknowledged
2017 Abidjan	Equal partnership; co-design emphasized: “Investing in youth, education, and skills development is essential for sustainable growth and stability”	Youth employment, entrepreneurship, and private sector development: “Promoting economic opportunities for young people is vital for growth”	Migration reframed positively: “Safe, regular, and orderly migration benefits both continents socially and economically”; health and education emphasized	African-led strategies for regional integration and governance emphasized	Gender equality, social inclusion, and civil society participation increasingly embedded
2022 Brussels	Full strategic partnership; AU strategic autonomy recognized: “Our partnership should be based on co-ownership, mutual respect, and the recognition of Africa’s sovereignty”	Industrialization, digital transformation, green economy: “Africa’s priorities for industrialization, digital transformation, and green transition must be at the heart of our cooperation”	Pandemic recovery, youth, social inclusion integrated; human-centered development	Symmetrical power dynamics; African agency fully recognized	Education, skills development, and intercultural exchange highlighted; cultural cohesion emphasized

Over two decades, EU–AU summit declarations show a clear evolution across all dimensions. Diplomatically, the relationship shifted from EU-dominated aid frameworks toward full co-ownership and strategic partnership, as seen in the repeated use of terms like co-ownership, mutual respect, and sovereignty. Economically, focus moved from aid and technical support to trade, industrialization, digital transformation, and green economy. Socially, the agenda expanded from implicit poverty reduction to youth, migration, health, and inclusion, reflecting Africa’s demographic and social realities. Politically, African leadership and governance became increasingly central, culminating in mutual recognition of strategic autonomy in 2022. Culturally, the summit discourse evolved from minimal acknowledgment to embedding civil society, gender equality, education, and intercultural exchange.

This table demonstrates how EU–AU summitry is now a multidimensional, strategically co-owned partnership, with diplomatic language, social priorities, economic goals, political agency, and cultural recognition all integrated into a unified framework.

The AU–EU partnership has evolved from a post-colonial development relationship into one of the most complex interregional frameworks in global politics. Its origins lie in the Lomé and Cotonou agreements, which framed Africa primarily as a development and trade partner. The creation of the African Union in 2002 marked a turning point, as Europe now engaged a continental institution with political and security ambitions. The first AU–EU Summit in Cairo in 2000 laid the groundwork for a more political partnership, even before the AU formally existed. By 2007, the Joint Africa–EU Strategy signalled a shift toward a comprehensive, long term framework that went beyond aid. This strategy introduced structured cooperation on peace and security, governance, migration, climate, and economic integration. Over time, security cooperation became the backbone of the relationship, especially through EU support for AU led peace operations.

The African Peace Facility institutionalised this support and made the EU the AU’s most significant external security funder. Migration emerged as a politically charged dossier, reshaping the partnership after the 2015–2016 European migration crisis. The Valletta Summit and subsequent compacts reflected Europe’s growing focus on border control and returns. Meanwhile, African states increasingly demanded recognition of their agency and development priorities. The rise of new external actors, including China, Russia, Turkey, and Gulf states, altered the geopolitical landscape and reduced Europe’s dominance. These shifts pushed the EU to reframe the partnership as one of equals, at least rhetorically. The 2020s brought renewed emphasis on investment, green transitions, and digital cooperation. The COVID 19 pandemic exposed structural inequalities but also highlighted the need for coordinated responses.

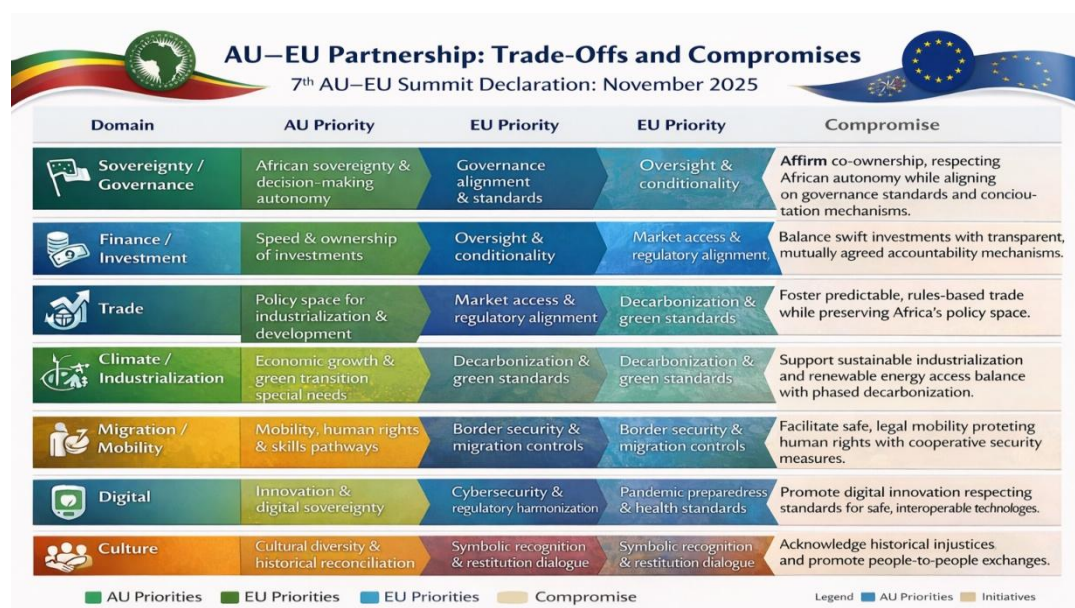
The 2022 Brussels Summit attempted to reset the relationship with a focus on infrastructure and sustainable growth. Despite these efforts, tensions persist around conditionality, sovereignty, and the balance between security and development. The AU continues to seek greater autonomy in peace operations and economic policy. The EU continues to prioritise accountability, governance reforms, and migration management. As both continents confront global instability, the partnership remains essential but contested. Its evolution reflects a gradual move from donor–recipient dynamics toward a more political, strategic, and interdependent relationship.

According to the 7th EU-AU Joint Summit Declaration, the contemporary partnership between the African Union and the European Union is structured around a series of strategic objectives that inevitably generate significant policy tradeoffs. The Joint Declaration frames the relationship as one of equality, yet asymmetries in economic and political power shape the practical dynamics of cooperation. A central trade off emerges between African aspirations for sovereignty and European preferences for governance conditionality. While the AU emphasizes “African led solutions,” the EU often links support to institutional reforms that reflect European norms. This tension illustrates the broader dilemma of balancing autonomy with external influence. A second trade off concerns development financing, where African states seek large scale investment and debt relief, whereas the EU prioritizes fiscal discipline and transparency. As a result, rapid development ambitions frequently collide with the slower pace of rules based financial instruments.

The 7th AU–EU Summit, held in Luanda in November 2025, reaffirmed the partnership’s foundation in shared principles of international law, multilateralism, and respect for sovereignty. The declaration emphasizes that the relationship must support peace and prosperity through cooperation, stating that both continents “commit to strengthen their partnership in accordance with the principles of mutual respect, co-ownership, and shared responsibility.” This reflects a deliberate shift from a donor-recipient framework to one grounded in strategic equality and African agency.

Economic integration and development feature prominently, with leaders noting the importance of industrialization, value-chain diversification, and trade facilitation. The declaration underscores the role of the African Continental Free Trade Area and the Global Gateway investment program, highlighting the need for “predictable, rules-based trade relations that support inclusive growth, decent jobs, and resilient supply chains.” Finance and investment are framed in terms of mutual accountability, balancing rapid deployment with transparent oversight, while also recognizing the importance of sustainable debt management.

Figure



Connectivity, energy, and climate cooperation are central to the partnership, including digital infrastructure and clean energy systems. The declaration affirms support for renewable energy access and industrial development, ensuring that growth proceeds alongside decarbonization. Digital transformation is identified as a key driver of innovation and inclusive development, with an emphasis on safe, interoperable, and ethically guided technology adoption.

Social development and human capital are highlighted, particularly in health, education, and youth engagement. The declaration stresses collaboration on universal health coverage, pandemic preparedness, and regional health systems, alongside initiatives to strengthen skills, research, and science and technology capacities. Migration is framed through human rights and mobility, supported by joint measures for safe and orderly movement, reflecting a balance between individual rights and security concerns.

Peace, security, governance, and human rights remain pillars of the partnership. The declaration reinforces African-led peace structures and the African Peace and Security Architecture, underlining the commitment to conflict prevention, mediation, and capacity-building. Democracy, rule of law, and gender equality are integrated into these efforts, reflecting the link between stability and development.

Culture and people-to-people exchanges receive particular attention, acknowledging the importance of social cohesion, cultural diversity, and historical recognition. The declaration notes initiatives to promote cultural industries, education, and symbolic recognition of historical injustices, emphasizing that durable cooperation is grounded in mutual understanding and societal bonds.

To strengthen this partnership, the declaration suggests operationalizing co-ownership through joint implementation frameworks, innovative financing mechanisms, regional trade facilitation, digital ecosystem support, and youth and civil society engagement. Aligning implementation with Agenda 2063, the SDGs, and climate commitments provides both strategic coherence and measurable impact, ensuring the AU–EU relationship remains a model of multilateral cooperation that balances sovereignty, development, and global responsibilities.

Table The trade offs revolve around:

Domain	AU Priority	EU Priority	Core Trade-Off
Sovereignty	Autonomy	Governance alignment	Influence vs. independence
Finance	Investment	Conditionality	Speed vs. oversight
Climate	Industrialisation	Decarbonisation	Growth vs. green standards
Migration	Mobility	Control	Rights vs. security
Security	Flexibility	Accountability	Autonomy vs. compliance

Trade	Protection	Liberalisation	Policy space vs. access
Digital	Innovation	Regulation	Flexibility vs. standards
History	Reparative justice	Symbolic recognition	Redress vs. diplomacy

EU–AU Compromise Formulations: Narrative

Achieving compromise between the EU and AU requires careful attention to both the language used in summit declarations and the practical initiatives that operationalize agreements. In terms of language, phrasing must be neutral, inclusive, and co-owned, allowing each party to maintain core priorities while signaling commitment to collaboration. For sovereignty and governance, declarations can stress that both sides recognize the importance of African decision-making autonomy while agreeing to cooperate on governance standards in areas of shared interest. Financial cooperation can be framed by emphasizing transparent oversight mechanisms that balance rapid deployment with accountability, ensuring conditionality is mutually agreed and proportionate to objectives. Climate and industrialization require language that promotes economic growth alongside phased decarbonization, supporting green standards while respecting developmental priorities. Migration can be expressed as promoting mobility and human rights, paired with joint risk management and border security cooperation. Security diplomacy may highlight operational flexibility and autonomy, complemented by accountability mechanisms. Trade agreements can preserve Africa’s policy space for industrial and development objectives while providing predictable access to EU markets. Digital cooperation should foster innovation with gradual regulatory alignment to maintain interoperability without stifling experimentation. Historical issues can be addressed through symbolic recognition and dialogue, balancing reparative justice with the need for constructive diplomatic relations.

Initiatives operationalize these linguistic compromises. In governance, African-led advisory platforms can allow decision-making autonomy while benefiting from EU technical support. Financial compromise can be implemented through co-managed investment funds with shared oversight. Climate and industrialization can take the form of EU-supported green industrialization hubs under African leadership. Migration initiatives might include joint mobility and skills programs that protect rights while strengthening security. Security compromise can be enacted through African-led operations with EU technical assistance and reporting mechanisms. Trade initiatives could involve flexible frameworks that protect African policy space while granting EU market access. Digital cooperation could be operationalized via shared innovation labs with voluntary regulatory pilots. Historical reparative efforts might include joint commissions, educational programs, or public acknowledgments that satisfy recognition while maintaining partnership. The combination of careful language and concrete initiatives provides a pathway to balanced compromise, allowing EU and AU to navigate trade-offs in a mutually beneficial, iterative, and flexible manner.

Table EU–AU Compromise Matrix: Language and Initiatives

Domain	Compromise Language	Initiative / Operationalization
Sovereignty / Governance	“The EU and AU recognize African sovereignty and decision-making autonomy, while cooperating on governance standards in areas of shared interest.”	African-led advisory platforms with EU technical support for governance capacity-building.
Finance / Investment	“Financial support will include transparent oversight mechanisms, balancing rapid deployment with accountability, and proportionate conditionality.”	Co-managed investment funds with jointly agreed oversight boards and phased disbursement schedules.
Climate / Industrialization	“Industrialization and growth will proceed alongside phased decarbonization, supporting green standards while respecting developmental priorities.”	EU–AU green industrialization hubs led by African authorities, with EU technical support and environmental performance metrics.
Migration / Mobility	“Mobility shall be promoted in ways that respect human rights, complemented by joint risk management and border security cooperation.”	Joint mobility and skills programs integrating safe legal migration channels and cooperative security frameworks.
Security / Flexibility	“Security cooperation allows AU operational autonomy while embedding accountability and reporting mechanisms to ensure compliance with jointly agreed standards.”	African-led operations supported by EU technical assistance, monitoring, and reporting systems.
Trade / Protection	“Trade arrangements preserve Africa’s policy space while providing predictable market access to facilitate mutual benefits.”	Flexible trade frameworks permitting industrial policy, local content rules, and preferential EU market access.
Digital / Innovation	“Digital cooperation promotes innovation while gradually aligning regulatory frameworks to ensure interoperability without limiting experimentation.”	Shared innovation labs with African leadership and pilot regulatory harmonization programs.

History / Reparative Justice	“Historical injustices will be addressed through symbolic recognition and dialogue, balancing redress with constructive diplomacy.”	Joint commissions, educational programs, and public acknowledgment initiatives respecting both recognition and partnership needs.
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This matrix provides a clear, operational roadmap: each domain shows a neutral, compromise-oriented language formulation and a concrete initiative that makes the compromise actionable. Together, they form a toolkit for EU–AU negotiations, balancing trade-offs across sovereignty, finance, climate, migration, security, trade, digital policy, and historical justice.

Climate cooperation introduces another structural trade off, as African industrialisation strategies depend on diversified energy sources that do not always align with the EU’s decarbonisation agenda. The EU’s regulatory measures, including carbon border adjustments, risk constraining Africa’s industrial policy space. Conversely, African demands for climate justice challenge the EU to reconcile environmental ambition with developmental equity. Migration governance constitutes a further area of competing priorities, with Europe emphasizing border control and Africa advocating for mobility and diaspora engagement. This divergence produces a persistent tension between security driven approaches and rights based mobility frameworks.

Security cooperation also reflects competing imperatives, as the EU seeks accountability and oversight while the AU prioritizes operational flexibility in conflict settings.

These differences complicate efforts to establish predictable and jointly financed peace operations.

Trade relations reveal another trade off, as African states aim to consolidate the African Continental Free Trade Area while the EU promotes liberalisation and regulatory harmonisation.

The coexistence of these agendas raises questions about policy space for African industrial development. Digital cooperation similarly exposes tensions between European regulatory standards and African aspirations for digital sovereignty. Strict data and cybersecurity requirements may inhibit innovation in emerging African technology ecosystems.

Finally, the partnership must navigate the historical legacy of colonialism, which the declaration acknowledges but does not fully address in material terms. Together, these trade offs demonstrate that the AU–EU partnership is both ambitious and constrained, requiring continuous negotiation to balance divergent priorities.

AU & EU Member States

Under the AU–EU Partnership, EU Member State development ministries can take on thematic leadership roles based on comparative advantage, operating within the Team Europe framework and co-led with AU institutions. Leadership is sectoral, non-exclusive, and

coordination-oriented, ensuring AU ownership while reinforcing EU coherence under the Joint Vision 2030.

In the health and social systems sector, France and Belgium lead on health systems strengthening, pandemic preparedness, pharmaceutical manufacturing, and health workforce development. Their institutional expertise and long-standing cooperation with Africa CDC are reinforced through AU–EU Health Partnership co-chairing and Team Europe health initiatives. Energy and green transition is led by Germany and Denmark, focusing on renewable energy, green hydrogen, grid connectivity, and climate mitigation. Their technical leadership and experience in energy transition finance are reflected in the Africa–Europe Green Energy Initiative under Global Gateway. Estonia leads digital transformation, supporting e-governance, digital public services, interoperability, and cybersecurity, leveraging its recognized global expertise in digital state systems and existing cooperation with African public administrations.

The agriculture, food systems, and nutrition portfolio is led by the Netherlands, Italy, and Ireland, covering climate-smart agriculture, agri-food value chains, nutrition, and food security, building on strong expertise in sustainable agriculture and water management. Education, skills, and youth employment is led by Germany and Ireland, focusing on vocational training, higher education cooperation, and preparing youth for green and digital jobs, with Horizon Europe Africa cooperation and Team Europe skills initiatives as practical examples. Sweden leads gender equality, governance, and human rights, promoting inclusive governance, civil society support, and feminist development approaches, mainstreamed across AU–EU programmes. Spain leads the migration–development nexus and local governance, integrating youth employment, local governance, and mobility partnerships, drawing on Sahel and North Africa experience. Climate adaptation, water, and resilience is led by the Netherlands and Denmark, focusing on water governance, climate adaptation, and resilience in fragile contexts, supported by climate-focused Team Europe initiatives.

Governance principles underpinning this model ensure that leadership is thematic and time-bound rather than political, all dossiers operate under Team Europe joint programming, AU institutions co-lead agenda-setting and monitoring, and the European Commission ensures overall coherence. Member States contribute expertise, finance, and delivery capacity, while shared financing and pooled implementation remain the default.

This merged approach strengthens division of labour, AU ownership, and delivery capacity, making the AU–EU Partnership more operational, credible, and aligned with strategic objectives across health, energy, digital transformation, agriculture, education, gender, migration, and climate resilience.

Strengthening governance at the African Union

To make the African Union more effective and meaningful for citizens, the article argues that the AU must address deep institutional weaknesses and follow through on pending reform proposals.

The AU's legislative, judicial, and technical organs remain weak compared with the dominant Assembly of Heads of State and Government, undermining the organization's ability to act

independently and with authority. For example, the Pan-African Parliament and the Economic, Social and Cultural Council were intended to provide citizen voices and broader representation, but in practice they are only consultative and lack real decision-making power. The African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights also remains limited in reach and enforcement capacity, with only a small number of member states accepting its jurisdiction. These limitations weaken the AU's legitimacy and reduce the extent to which African citizens feel connected to the Union's work. (Africa Center).

A consistent challenge is the lack of political will among member states to empower AU institutions. While the AU's Constitutive Act envisioned stronger supranational bodies, member states have not supported proposals that would shift authority from national leaders to independent AU bodies. Attempts to strengthen the AU Commission's independence, grant full legislative authority to the Pan-African Parliament, or create a unified African Court of Justice and Human Rights have stalled because they are seen by some leaders as eroding national sovereignty.

Reform efforts initiated in 2016 under Rwandan President Paul Kagame identified several structural bottlenecks: the AU's overextension across too many functions, its fragmented structure and limited managerial capacity, its dependence on external funding, and poor coordination with Regional Economic Communities (RECs). Proposed solutions included refocusing priorities, reorganizing institutions for clearer roles, expanding citizen participation, improving operational effectiveness, and enhancing financial independence. Some organizational changes were approved, such as mergers of departments and streamlining staff, but deeper governance reforms remain unresolved.

Financial autonomy also remains a critical issue. The AU's budget is constrained, with member state contributions still covering a large share of operational costs and external donors influencing the agenda. Without sustainable and independent financing mechanisms, the AU's ability to implement policies and respond to crises is limited.

To strengthen the institution, the AU must overcome resistance among member state leaders to share authority with supranational bodies and empower technocratic institutions, ensuring that technical expertise and managerial capacity are central to decision-making. Revitalizing the Pan-African Parliament with legislative power and universal suffrage, fully operationalizing a unified continental court with enforcement power, and increasing citizen engagement through bodies like ECOSOCC would help bridge the gap between leadership and citizens. This also includes clearer, enforceable mechanisms to uphold democratic norms such as term-limit rules and protocols on unconstitutional changes in government.

In summary, strengthening the AU requires a combination of institutional empowerment, financial independence, structural reform, and member state commitment to shared authority — moving beyond the current model where Heads of State dominate and institutional organs lack real power.

Africa's Islam–Christianity Development Belt: From Structural Fault Line to Shared Growth Space

Just as the United States' rustbelt and Europe's growth banana describe spatial concentrations of economic decline and dynamism, Africa is marked by a less discussed but more consequential configuration: a transcontinental Islam–Christianity development belt stretching across the Sahel and into coastal West Africa. This belt cuts through Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Sudan, intersecting with some of the continent's poorest regions, its fastest demographic growth, and its most persistent conflict systems. The significance of this belt does not lie in theology, but in the way religious demography has become entangled with uneven development, fragile state capacity, climate stress, and external geopolitical projection.

Over time, these overlapping pressures have transformed what was once a fluid socio-cultural gradient into a politicised and securitised fault line, increasingly framed as a civilisational divide rather than a development challenge. This misdiagnosis has produced fragmented international responses: security-heavy EU engagement, normatively isolated OIC interventions, and overstretched AU mediation efforts that lack economic leverage. The result has been persistent instability, elite instrumentalisation of identity, and the erosion of state legitimacy in precisely those regions where demographic pressure is greatest.

A recalibration is therefore required, not through interfaith symbolism or counter-terrorism escalation, but through a structural partnership that treats the belt as a shared development and cohesion challenge. An AU–OIC–EU Partnership for Peace and Prosperity offers a uniquely credible configuration, combining African political legitimacy, Islamic social reach, and European systems integration capacity. The strategic aim is to de-securitise religious identity by re-anchoring it within inclusive economic transformation, civic institutions, and regional connectivity.

At the root of the belt's instability lies a historically produced political economy. Colonial governance layered administrative neglect onto northern and inland regions while integrating southern and coastal zones into export-oriented economies. Post-independence states inherited these asymmetries and often reinforced them through centralised fiscal systems that failed to penetrate peripheral regions. Religion filled the resulting governance vacuum, providing education, welfare, justice, and moral authority where the state was absent. In this context, religious identity became a proxy for access to opportunity, security, and recognition, rendering it susceptible to political mobilisation and external manipulation.

Climate change and demography have intensified these dynamics. The belt coincides with zones of desertification, pastoral–agrarian competition, and rapid youth population growth. Livelihood stress is increasingly interpreted through identity frames, even when the underlying drivers are land tenure systems, market exclusion, or infrastructural neglect. International engagement has too often reinforced this distortion by privileging counter-terrorism logics over long-term institutional and economic integration.

The proposed partnership responds by reframing the belt as a continental growth and cohesion space, comparable in ambition to the EU's treatment of the Western Balkans. It rests on a deliberate division of strategic labour. The African Union provides the political frame, embedding the belt within continental peace and security architecture and regional integration strategies. The OIC contributes normative and social leverage, redirecting religious solidarity

toward education quality, youth employment, and civic governance in Muslim-majority belt regions while actively countering extremist appropriation of Islamic discourse. The European Union acts as economic and systems integrator, aligning infrastructure, trade, energy, and regulatory support to create tangible development dividends that cut across religious demography.

The interaction between these roles can be summarised in the following analytical cross-tabulation, which maps institutional contribution against structural drivers of instability and intended transformation pathways:

Table

Structural Driver	AU Contribution	OIC Contribution	EU Contribution	Integrated Outcome
Uneven state penetration	Political legitimacy, mediation mandates, regional coordination	Support to local governance via religious networks	Fiscal systems, public administration reform	Restored state–society trust
Youth Unemployment	Continental youth frameworks	Faith-linked vocational pathways	Market access, value-chain integration	Reduced grievance mobilisation
Identity Politicisation	Norm-setting, conflict prevention	Counter-narratives, interreligious platforms	Strategic communication, civic education	De-securitised identity
Climate-Livelihood stress	Regional adaptation coordination	Community-level resilience financing	Green infrastructure, agri-tech	Conflict-resilient growth
External fragmentation	Diplomatic convening	Normative alignment	Financial scale and coherence	Unified international posture

To operationalise this framework, an indicative seven-year budget envelope of €12–15 billion is proposed, aligning with existing AU, OIC, and EU financial instruments rather than creating parallel structures. Approximately €6–7 billion would be dedicated to economic corridors and infrastructure linking belt regions to national and regional markets, including energy, transport, and agri-processing. €3–4 billion would support education, vocational training, and youth employment schemes co-designed with religious institutions but embedded in national systems. €1.5–2 billion would be allocated to governance, mediation, and civic institutions, including hybrid courts, local administration, and early warning mechanisms. The remaining €1–2 billion would finance coordination, monitoring, and strategic communication, ensuring coherence across partners and regions.

Funding would draw primarily on the EU’s Global Gateway, NDICI–Global Europe, and European Peace Facility, complemented by OIC development banks and AU trust funds. Crucially, financing would be corridor- and outcome-based, incentivising cross-border cooperation and measurable institutional gains rather than isolated projects.

Success must be assessed through criteria that link intended objectives to realised outcomes, avoiding both symbolic benchmarks and purely security-driven metrics. Intended objectives include reducing the salience of religious identity in political mobilisation, increasing economic inclusion in belt regions, strengthening state legitimacy, and lowering conflict spillovers. These would be measured through a combination of quantitative and qualitative indicators: sustained increases in non-coastal employment rates, convergence of education outcomes across religious demography, declining reliance on non-state justice systems, reduced frequency and geographic spread of communal violence, and improved trust indicators in state institutions.

At the regional and international level, success would be reflected in reduced forced displacement, lower irregular migration pressure toward Europe, fewer externally sponsored armed groups, and the emergence of belt regions as contributors to continental growth rather than sources of instability. Most importantly, success would mean that religious diversity ceases to function as a fault line and instead becomes embedded within a shared development trajectory.

The strategic choice facing the AU, OIC, and EU is therefore not whether to engage, but whether to continue managing the symptoms of Africa's most consequential structural divide, or to jointly transform it. An AU–OIC–EU Partnership for Peace and Prosperity offers a rare opportunity to do the latter, aligning legitimacy, norms, and economic power behind a single, coherent vision for Africa's demographic heartland.

Two pilot corridors would anchor the partnership in practice, with Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire selected for their demographic weight, religious diversity, and regional spillover effects. In Nigeria, a north–south integration corridor linking Kano–Kaduna–Abuja–Lokoja–Onitsha would connect Muslim-majority northern states to southern manufacturing and port economies, directly addressing the structural economic divide that underpins identity mobilisation. This corridor would prioritise agro-processing, logistics, renewable energy, and vocational training tied to labour-intensive value chains. OIC-backed education and social programmes would operate in parallel with AU-supported mediation and EU-financed infrastructure and regulatory reform. The objective would be to convert Nigeria's religious diversity from a political fault line into a functional economic gradient.

In Côte d'Ivoire, an inland–coastal corridor linking Korhogo–Bouaké–Yamoussoukro–Abidjan would stabilise historic north–south cleavages by integrating agricultural heartlands with export and industrial hubs. Investments would focus on cocoa value-addition, secondary city development, and youth employment in mixed religious regions. The AU would frame the corridor as a regional stabilisation asset for ECOWAS, while the OIC would strengthen community institutions and the EU would anchor market access and standards. Together, these pilots would demonstrate that economic connectivity can neutralise identity-based mobilisation at scale.

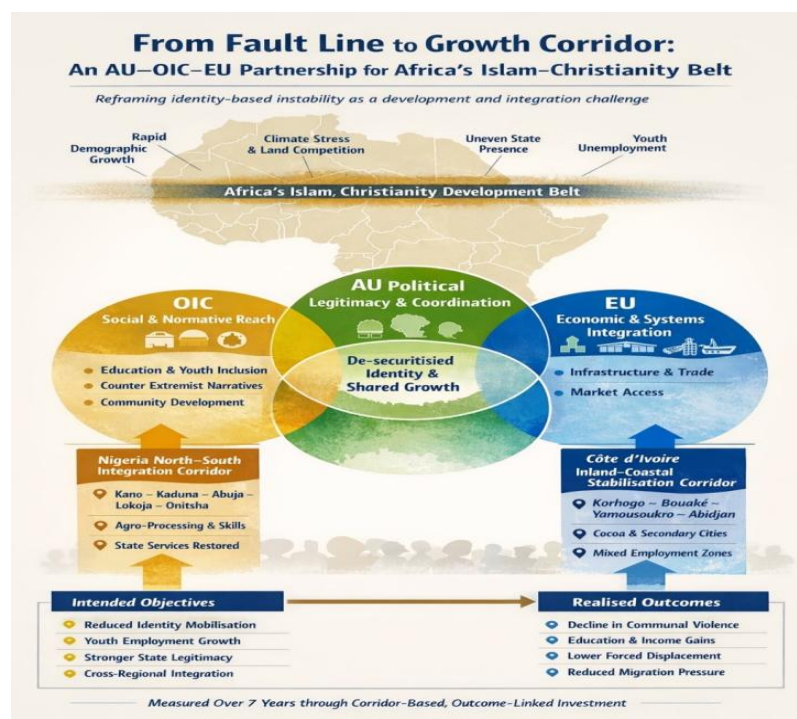
The accompanying infographic would visually layer AU political legitimacy at the core, OIC social and normative networks at the community level, and EU economic and systems integration at the market and infrastructure level, all intersecting across the belt. By showing corridors cutting across religious demography and institutional mandates overlapping rather

than competing, the graphic would communicate the partnership's central message: stability in Africa's Islam–Christianity belt is produced not by security containment, but by shared growth, civic inclusion, and coordinated international action.

Africa's Islam–Christianity Development Belt stretches across the Sahel and West Africa, forming a demographic and economic fault line where religious identity intersects with poverty, fragile state capacity, and climate stress. This belt is not a theological conflict zone but a structural challenge, reflecting historical inequalities imposed during colonial rule and reinforced by post-independence state asymmetries. Weak governance, youth unemployment, and resource scarcity have transformed identity into a proxy for access to opportunity and security. Mismanaged external engagement has too often reinforced this dynamic, privileging counter-terrorism or symbolic interventions over long-term structural integration.

The AU–OIC–EU Partnership reframes the belt as a space of opportunity rather than division, combining political legitimacy, social-normative influence, and economic-systemic integration. The African Union provides the political anchor, coordinating regional integration, conflict mediation, and early warning systems. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation channels social and educational support, strengthens civic institutions, and counteracts extremist narratives while engaging communities directly. The European Union invests in infrastructure, trade facilitation, market access, and regulatory frameworks, ensuring that economic transformation reaches belt populations tangibly.

Figure



Two pilot corridors exemplify this approach. In Nigeria, the north–south corridor links Kano, Kaduna, Abuja, Lokoja, and Onitsha, connecting Muslim-majority northern states to southern industrial and port hubs, combining agro-processing, vocational training, and the restoration of

state services. In Côte d'Ivoire, the inland–coastal corridor stretches from Korhogo through Bouaké and Yamoussoukro to Abidjan, integrating agricultural heartlands with export-oriented urban centers and fostering mixed-religion employment zones.

The partnership's core message is that de-securitising identity requires overlapping institutional action rather than isolated interventions. The integrated model visualised in the infographic shows the AU, OIC, and EU roles converging on shared objectives: reduced identity-based mobilisation, youth employment, state legitimacy, and regional integration. Outcomes are measured over seven years using corridor-based, outcome-linked investment, ensuring accountability and tangible impact. Success is captured in declining communal violence, improved education and income indicators, lower forced displacement, and reduced migration pressure.

Ultimately, this initiative demonstrates that Africa's diversity is an asset, not a vulnerability. By aligning legitimacy, norms, and economic power across actors, the partnership transforms historical fault lines into corridors of growth, stability, and shared prosperity. It offers a replicable model for continental cohesion, showing that when structural challenges are addressed holistically, peace and development can advance hand in hand. The belt thus becomes a laboratory of integrated, forward-looking African solutions, turning historic divisions into opportunities for connection, resilience, and collective flourishing.

Overlay Conflicts in Post-Colonial Africa

In conflict studies, “**overlay**” is used as a conceptual framework to describe situations where multiple layers of conflict coexist and interact within the same geographic, political, or social space. An overlay conflict does not consist of a single source of tension; rather, it arises when distinct forms of conflict—such as ethnic, political, economic, resource-based, or external/interstate disputes—overlap and reinforce one another, creating a more complex and resilient system of instability.

The concept emphasizes the interconnectedness and simultaneity of conflict dynamics. For example, a local ethnic dispute may be exacerbated by competition over natural resources, weak governance, and the involvement of external powers. Overlay conflicts are often harder to resolve because addressing one layer in isolation does not resolve the other layers, and interventions in one domain may unintentionally intensify tensions in another.

Analytically, the concept of overlay helps scholars and policymakers map the multi-dimensional nature of conflicts, understand the feedback loops between local, national, and international actors, and design multi-layered interventions that address not just symptoms but the interacting drivers of instability.

An **overlay conflict** occurs when multiple types of disputes coexist in the same space or between the same actors, reinforcing each other and making resolution more complex. In Africa, these include ethnic and identity tensions, competition over land and natural resources, struggles over governance and state legitimacy, and rivalries influenced by foreign powers or global economic pressures.

More often than not, overlay conflicts reemerge following an order-building moment, particularly when local conflicts have remained dormant. Periods of relative stability or institutional consolidation can temporarily suppress tensions, but underlying grievances—whether ethnic, resource-based, or political—persist beneath the surface. When triggered by new opportunities, external interventions, or shifts in governance, these latent conflicts interact with other layers, reigniting instability and often producing more complex and resilient patterns of violence.

The post-colonial legacy is a major source of overlay conflicts. The borders drawn during the colonial period rarely matched ethnic, cultural, or historical realities. As a result, states inherited heterogeneous populations, competition over centralized state resources emerged, and former colonial powers sometimes retained influence through economic and military means. This legacy often overlays local disputes with national and international stakes.

Examples of overlay conflicts in Africa include Sudan and South Sudan, where ethnic and religious divisions, civil war, oil control, and international involvement intersect; the Democratic Republic of Congo, where ethnic militias, mineral extraction conflicts, regional interventions, and weak state institutions coexist; Nigeria, where Boko Haram insurgency, ethnic tensions, oil resource disputes, and political corruption overlap; Somalia, where clan-based conflicts, Islamist insurgency, piracy, and foreign interventions interact; Ethiopia's Tigray region, where ethnic federalism tensions, secessionist claims, and regional geopolitical stakes converge; and Mali and the Sahel, where Tuareg rebellions, jihadist insurgency, state fragility, and foreign military presence combine.

Overlay conflicts operate through several mechanisms. Local disputes, such as ethnic grievances, can become internationalized when foreign actors intervene for resources or strategic reasons. Weak governance can lead to resource competition, fueling ethnic or insurgent conflicts and attracting foreign military or economic involvement. Conflicts in one country often spill across borders, creating layered instability, as seen in the Sahel or Great Lakes region.

The implications of overlay conflicts are significant. They are harder to resolve because addressing one layer, such as political reform, may not touch others, like resource exploitation or foreign interference. Effective interventions require multi-layered strategies, including mediation, governance reform, regional cooperation, and development support.

Table

Regions	Layers of Conflict
Sudan / South Sudan	Ethnic and religious divisions, civil war, oil control, and international involvement (UN, US, China)

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)	Ethnic militias, mineral extraction conflicts, regional interventions (Rwanda, Uganda), weak state institutions
Nigeria	Boko Haram insurgency (religious/ideological), ethnic tensions (Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, Yoruba), oil resource disputes in Niger Delta, political corruption
Somalia	Clan-based conflicts, Islamist insurgency, piracy and maritime trade disputes, foreign interventions
Ethiopia / Tigray region	Ethnic federalism tensions, secessionist claims, regional geopolitical stakes (Horn of Africa states, Red Sea access)
Mali / Sahel	Tuareg rebellions, jihadist insurgency, state fragility, foreign military presence (France, EU, UN)

Mechanisms of Overlay

- **Multiplying effects:** Local disputes (e.g., ethnic grievances) become internationalized when foreign actors intervene for resources or strategic reasons.
- **Feedback loops:** Weak governance leads to resource competition, which fuels ethnic or insurgent conflicts, attracting foreign military or economic involvement.
- **Subregional spillovers:** Conflicts in one country often spread across borders, creating layered instability (e.g., Sahel, Great Lakes region).

Implications

Overlay conflicts in Africa are particularly difficult to resolve because addressing one layer, such as political reform, often does not resolve others, like resource competition, ethnic tensions, or foreign interference. For the European Union, this means that stabilizing the

continent requires integrated approaches combining development assistance, diplomatic engagement, trade partnerships, and support for regional institutions. The United States must navigate both security and economic dimensions, balancing counterterrorism efforts, military cooperation, and investment in resilient governance structures. China's involvement, largely through infrastructure and resource-linked investments, adds a geoeconomic dimension, making it necessary for conflict resolution to consider the impacts of foreign economic leverage and local social tensions. The African Union plays a critical role as a regional actor, coordinating peacekeeping operations, mediating disputes, and fostering continental frameworks for cooperation, but its effectiveness depends on alignment with international partners and adequate resources. Overall, interventions must be multi-layered, combining local, regional, and global approaches to address the complex interplay of political, economic, and security dynamics inherent in overlay conflicts.

We recommend that the EU and China take the lead under their global partnership in cooperation with the African Union as supported by the United States.

6.0 BUILDING AFRICAN-EUROPEAN PARTNERSHIPS FROM MINERALS, MIGRATION, SECURITY AND STABLE BORDERS?

1.Minerals

Africa's rare earths and critical minerals sit at the centre of a difficult geopolitical trade off, and concerns about working conditions and child labour make that trade off even sharper. The world depends on African cobalt, lithium, manganese, graphite, and rare earths for the green and digital transitions, yet extraction often takes place in environments marked by unsafe labour practices, informal mining, and in some regions the documented use of child labour. These realities weaken Africa's bargaining position, expose communities to harm, and create reputational and regulatory risks for European and global supply chains. At the same time, attempts to eliminate these practices without addressing the underlying economic structures risk pushing vulnerable workers into deeper poverty or driving mining further underground.

A more balanced AU–EU approach would require treating labour conditions as a core part of mineral governance rather than an afterthought. Co investment in African processing and refining capacity would reduce dependence on informal artisanal mining, where unsafe conditions and child labour are most prevalent. Long term purchase agreements could stabilise prices and allow governments to enforce labour standards without fear of losing buyers. Technology partnerships and skills programmes would help shift employment from hazardous extraction to safer, higher value industrial work. Transparent supply chain systems—designed jointly rather than imposed externally—would allow Africa to meet EU due diligence requirements while strengthening its own regulatory authority. Continental coordination through the African Union could prevent states from competing by lowering labour standards and ensure that mineral wealth supports both industrialisation and human dignity.

By integrating labour rights into mineral strategy, Africa and Europe can move beyond extractive patterns and build a partnership that supports secure supply chains, ethical production, and long term development. I can also shape this into a compact paragraph if you want it ready for an academic paper.

Migration

Africa–Europe migration is shaped by demographic contrasts, labour market needs, political sensitivities, and uneven governance capacities. Europe prioritises border control and returns, while African states emphasise mobility, skills, and development opportunities. These mismatched priorities create recurring tensions around readmission, limited legal pathways, externalisation practices, and human rights concerns. Smuggling networks and fragmented African negotiating positions further complicate cooperation. A more balanced partnership requires co designed mobility schemes, fairer return arrangements, investment in skills, and stronger regional governance. Compromise solutions can reduce irregular migration, improve labour matching, and rebuild trust—if they are implemented as shared strategies rather than transactional deals.

Table

Legal Mobility	Targeted labour-migration and youth-mobility schemes	Builds trust; reduces irregular flows; aligns with EU labour needs	Politically sensitive in Europe; limited scale may frustrate Africa
Returns & Readmission	Joint return frameworks with reintegration support	Reduces diplomatic friction; improves predictability	Costly; requires strong monitoring; African states may still resist
Skills & Training	Co-funded vocational and digital-skills programmes	Supports African development; improves labour matching	Benefits take time; uneven uptake across countries
Border Governance	Professionalised, accountable border management	Weakens smuggling networks; improves rights protection	Risk of securitisation if not paired with mobility options
Regional Mobility in Africa	Support for AU free-movement initiatives	Reduces pressure on irregular routes; strengthens integration	Some states reluctant; requires institutional capacity
Narrative Shift	Framing migration as economic and developmental	Creates political space for cooperation; reduces polarisation	Hard to sustain during crises or election cycles

A workable Africa–Europe migration partnership depends on a set of compromise solutions that balance mobility, security, and development. Expanding legal mobility—through labour migration schemes and youth mobility programmes—helps build trust, reduces irregular migration, and matches Europe’s labour needs, though it remains politically sensitive and often limited in scale. If political conflicts are stabilised, the way forward would be to broaden these schemes into sector specific mobility corridors, especially in areas such as care work, agriculture, and digital services, and to design them jointly between the AU and EU.

More predictable and humane return arrangements also form part of the compromise. Joint return frameworks with reintegration support reduce diplomatic friction and create clearer procedures, but they are expensive and still face resistance from some African governments. Once political tensions ease, these arrangements could evolve into structured mobility partnerships that link returns with skills development and legal pathways, making the system more balanced and less coercive.

Skills and training programmes offer another area of convergence. Co funded vocational and digital skills initiatives support African development and improve labour matching, though their benefits take time to materialise and vary across countries. A forward looking approach would involve creating AU–EU skills academies, harmonising qualifications, and directly connecting training programmes to legal migration channels so that skills translate into real opportunities.

Border governance reforms also feature prominently. Professionalising and making border management more accountable weakens smuggling networks and improves rights protection, but it risks becoming overly securitised if not paired with mobility options. With conflicts resolved, border governance could be integrated into broader development and mobility planning, supported by joint anti smuggling task forces that target criminal networks rather than migrants.

Supporting regional mobility within Africa is another compromise that reduces pressure on irregular routes and strengthens continental integration. However, some African states remain cautious, and institutional capacity varies widely. A constructive way forward would involve AU–EU funding for regional mobility systems, including digital travel IDs and interoperable administrative tools that make movement safer and more predictable.

Finally, shifting the migration narrative from threat to opportunity helps create political space for cooperation, though such shifts are fragile during crises or election cycles. A more stable future approach would institutionalise joint AU–EU communication strategies and promote evidence based narratives that reflect real labour market needs and the developmental benefits of mobility.

Taken together, these compromise solutions show that a more balanced migration partnership is possible when both unions move from transactional bargaining to long term, co designed frameworks. If you want, I can now condense this into a single paragraph for an essay or expand it into a policy brief.

3. Security

The security relationship between the African Union and the European Union is shaped by a mixture of interdependence, strategic divergence, and evolving geopolitical pressures. At its core, the AU brings political legitimacy, proximity to crises, and the ability to deploy peace operations rapidly, while the EU contributes financial resources, training, logistics, and institutional expertise. This creates a partnership built on mutual need but marked by asymmetry, since the AU depends heavily on EU funding and the EU relies on the AU to stabilise regions that directly affect European security interests. The two unions also operate with different threat perceptions: the AU prioritises sovereignty, political stability, and conflict

prevention, whereas the EU focuses on terrorism, irregular migration, and the spillover effects of instability. These differing priorities shape how each side defines security and how they evaluate the success of interventions.

Table AU–EU Security & Defence Cooperation: Key Case Studies

Case Study	AU Role	EU Role	Successes	Challenges
Somalia (AMISOM/ATMIS)	Led peace operation; provided troops and political legitimacy	Largest financier; training, logistics, planning support	Long-term stabilisation; strong AU–EU coordination	EU accountability vs. AU flexibility; slow political transition
Sahel (EUCAP/EUTM & AU regional efforts)	Supported G5 Sahel; ECOWAS diplomacy	Training missions; capacity-building; border security	Complementary technical support	Coups disrupted cooperation; divergent political approaches
Central African Republic (CAR)	Led mediation (Khartoum Agreement)	Military training; financial support	Effective early coordination	Russian presence disrupted balance; differing risk tolerances

The dossier is further complicated by the growing role of African regional organisations such as ECOWAS, SADC, and the EAC, which increasingly lead interventions and require coordination between multiple layers of African governance and European support. External actors such as Russia, China, Turkey, and Gulf states have also entered the African security landscape, reducing the exclusivity of AU–EU cooperation and introducing new incentives for African governments. At the operational level, both unions struggle with the transition from military stabilisation to political settlement, as seen in Somalia, the Sahel, and the Central African Republic. These transitions expose the difficulty of aligning short term security imperatives with long term governance and development goals.

Several persistent issues repeatedly undermine the partnership. Funding tensions remain central: the EU demands strict financial accountability, while the AU requires flexible and rapid financing to respond to crises. Sovereignty and conditionality also create friction, as the AU emphasises African ownership and the EU ties support to governance and human rights standards. Divergent political timelines further complicate cooperation, with the AU often needing immediate action while the EU moves through slow, consensus based decision processes. The presence of non Western security actors challenges the coherence of AU–EU strategies, and fragmented African positions sometimes weaken the AU’s ability to negotiate collectively

Despite these challenges, several compromise solutions offer a path toward a more balanced and effective partnership. One compromise lies in designing financing mechanisms that combine EU accountability with AU flexibility, allowing for rapid deployment while maintaining transparency. Another involves creating joint political strategies that align the AU’s emphasis on sovereignty with the EU’s governance priorities, reducing the risk of

contradictory interventions. Strengthening regional organisations as intermediaries can also help bridge the gap between AU political leadership and EU technical support, ensuring that missions are both legitimate and operationally coherent. A further compromise is to integrate security assistance with development and governance programming, recognising that military operations alone cannot produce sustainable peace.

Assuming political conflicts are stabilised, the way forward involves institutionalising these compromise solutions into long term frameworks rather than ad hoc arrangements. A more predictable financing architecture would allow the AU to plan missions with confidence while meeting EU accountability standards. Joint strategic planning would ensure that both unions pursue coherent objectives across peacekeeping, stabilisation, and political dialogue. Strengthening African regional organisations would create a more decentralised but coordinated security architecture, reducing duplication and improving responsiveness. Finally, a shared narrative that frames security as a collective responsibility—rather than a donor recipient relationship—would help rebuild trust and create political space for deeper cooperation.

In essence, the AU–EU security dossier can evolve into a more balanced partnership if both unions commit to co ownership, predictable financing, and integrated political strategies. These steps would allow Africa and Europe to move beyond crisis driven cooperation and build a more stable, long term security relationship.

4. Borders of Africa

Border conflicts in Africa are a persistent source of insecurity, shaped by the interaction between colonial-era boundary making, post-independence state formation, and contemporary political and economic pressures. Most African borders were drawn during late-19th-century European colonial negotiations, often with little regard for ethnic, linguistic, ecological, or economic realities on the ground. At independence, African states largely accepted these borders under the principle of *uti possidetis juris* to avoid continent-wide territorial wars, but this choice also locked in latent disputes that continue to resurface.

Many border conflicts are not classic interstate wars, but rather low-intensity, recurring disputes that combine territorial ambiguity with local violence, militia activity, and state competition. Examples include Ethiopia–Eritrea, Sudan–South Sudan, Somalia–Ethiopia–Kenya, Cameroon–Nigeria, and Morocco–Western Sahara. These conflicts often fluctuate between diplomatic standoffs and armed escalation, making them difficult to resolve permanently.

A key driver of African border conflict is the overlap between borders and identity. Colonial boundaries frequently split ethnic or pastoral communities across multiple states, turning mobility, grazing rights, and cross-border trade into political and security issues. When states attempt to enforce rigid borders over historically fluid spaces, local tensions can escalate into broader conflicts.

Resource competition has become increasingly central. Oil (Sudan–South Sudan), gas and offshore resources (Eastern Mediterranean–style dynamics emerging in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean), fertile land, water access, and mineral deposits often lie in contested border regions.

Climate change intensifies these pressures by shrinking arable land and water availability, particularly in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa.

Border conflicts are also deeply entangled with internal governance weaknesses. Peripheral border regions tend to be under-governed, militarized, and economically marginalized. Armed groups exploit porous borders to evade state authority, while governments sometimes instrumentalize border disputes to consolidate domestic power or distract from internal crises.

Regional organizations such as the African Union, IGAD, ECOWAS, and SADC have played an increasing role in mediation, boundary commissions, and peacekeeping, but their effectiveness varies. Successful cases, such as the Cameroon–Nigeria resolution over Bakassi through international arbitration, remain the exception rather than the rule.

Ultimately, border conflicts in Africa matter not only because they threaten territorial integrity, but because they undermine regional integration, development corridors, and continental projects such as the African Continental Free Trade Area. Managing them requires moving beyond rigid territorial thinking toward shared resource management, cross-border governance, and political inclusion of borderland communities.

The African Union's approach to border conflicts is grounded in a normative and institutional framework designed to prevent violent territorial disputes while gradually transforming borders from lines of division into spaces of cooperation. The African Union Border Programme provides technical, legal, and political support for the delimitation and demarcation of borders, promotes joint border management mechanisms, and encourages confidence-building measures between neighboring states. This is reinforced by the Niamey Convention on Cross-Border Cooperation, which institutionalizes collaboration among states, local authorities, and border communities to manage security, mobility, trade, and shared resources. These instruments operate within the broader African Peace and Security Architecture, which prioritizes early warning, mediation, preventive diplomacy, and African-led solutions to interstate and cross-border tensions, while maintaining a strong commitment to the principle of territorial integrity.

European Union interests in African border conflicts are derived from its broader peace and security partnership with Africa and its strategic preference for supporting African-owned conflict management frameworks rather than direct territorial arbitration. The EU places particular emphasis on stability in border regions because of their strong links to irregular migration, transnational crime, and regional economic integration. EU engagement therefore focuses on strengthening border governance, rule of law, and institutional capacity, while embedding border stabilization within wider development, connectivity, and integration agendas. At the geopolitical level, the EU views stable African borders as essential for safeguarding trade routes, protecting strategic investments, and sustaining long-term cooperation on energy, infrastructure, and economic diversification.

United States objectives in relation to African border conflicts are primarily shaped by security and strategic considerations. U.S. policy consistently prioritizes counterterrorism and the containment of armed groups that exploit porous borders, particularly in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Lake Chad Basin. Border stability is treated as a prerequisite for preventing

state fragility, protecting freedom of navigation, and ensuring secure access to strategic resources. While the United States generally supports multilateral conflict resolution, international arbitration, and AU-led mediation, its engagement tends to be pragmatic and security-driven, with levels of involvement fluctuating according to broader global strategic priorities and threat perceptions.

China's objectives in African border conflicts are shaped less by the territorial substance of disputes and more by their implications for political stability, economic continuity, and long-term strategic presence. Beijing prioritizes stability in border regions insofar as instability threatens Chinese investments, infrastructure projects, and the safety of Chinese nationals. Many contested or fragile border areas intersect with transport corridors, ports, energy infrastructure, and mineral supply chains linked to the Belt and Road Initiative, making conflict prevention a practical economic concern. China emphasizes sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference, avoids taking explicit positions on disputed borders, and supports negotiated settlements aligned with African Union and United Nations frameworks. Its growing involvement in peacekeeping and limited security cooperation reflects a recognition that economic engagement increasingly requires a stable security environment, even as China remains largely risk-averse and focused on managing, rather than transforming, the underlying causes of border conflicts.

Table Border conflicts of Africa

Border Conflict (State Pair / Region)	Type of Conflict	AU Policy Relevance	EU Interests	U.S. Objectives
Eritrea–Ethiopia (Badme)	Territorial dispute	AUBP mediation and delimitation support	Support stability & development in Horn	Prevent escalation; counter spillover & extremist risks
Sudan–South Sudan	Territorial, resource/identity	Peace & border cooperation support	Stability in Horn/Red Sea, peacebuilding	Counter terrorism, protect energy flows
Cameroon–Nigeria (Bakassi)	Territorial/resource dispute	Peaceful resolution via legal frameworks	Rule of law & border governance	Limit militant spillover (Boko Haram)
Sudan–Ethiopia (Al-Fashaga)	Territorial/resource	Border delimitation pressure	Encourage AU-led talks	Stability buffer east Sahel
Kenya–South Sudan (Ilemi Triangle)	Territorial nomadic grazing	Cross-Border Cooperation (Niamey)	Support regional integration	Facilitate trade & security cooperation
Mauritania–Senegal	Inter-state over border incidents	Border cooperation/support	Sahel stability, conflict prevention	Prevent radicalisation spillover
Guinea-Bissau–Senegal	Border militia acusations	Cross-Border Cooperation	Enhance cross-border governance	Stabilise West Africa
Mali–Burkina Faso (Agacher Strip)	Territorial clashed	AUBP delimitation mechanisms	Sahel peace actions	Counter-terrorism (JNIM/ISIS)

Morocco– Western Sahara (SADR)	Territorial/identity	AU works for peaceful negotiation	Peace, economic integration	Political settlement stability
Somalia– Ethiopia (Ogaden)	Identity/insurgency spillover	Border security & cooperation	Stability & maritime security	Counter terrorism (al-Shabaab)
Somalia– Kenya (maritime dispute)	Resource/territorial (oil/gas)	AUBP & legal frameworks	Legal governance	Support rule of law, mitigate piracy
Ethiopia– Somalia (historic wars)	Interstate war legacy	AU conflict prevention	Regional security	Counter terrorism spillover
Algeria– Mali/Niger border tensions	Cross-border security	APSA & AU mediation	Sahel stabilization	Counter terrorism/Sahel security
Egypt–Sudan (Hala'ib Triangle)	Territorial	AU dispute resolution (principle)	Mediterranean security links	Nile and Egypt stability
Egypt– Ethiopia (GERD tensions)	Resource/identity	Continental infrastructure cooperation	Nile cooperation & migration	Water security, regional balance
Libya– Chad/TND borders	Militia spillover	AU security engagement	North Africa stability	Prevent weapons flow/terrorist mobility
DR Congo– Rwanda (Eastern DRC)	Cross-border insurgency	APSA early warning & mediation	Support peacekeeping missions	Access stable minerals, peace
Burundi– DRC border tensions	Refugee/ethnic spillover	Cross-border engagement	Local governance	Prevent regional destabilisation
Uganda– South Sudan border tensions	Refugee/identity spillover	Border cooperation	Stability & development	Counter LRA & militant groups
Niger– Benin/Togo border filtering (smuggling)	Security/resource flows	Border security capacity	Maritime & land border capacities	Counter arms/drugs/terrorist networks

Implications

Designing a solution-oriented African Union (AU) border conflict delimitation mechanism requires learning directly from the structural weaknesses revealed by past and ongoing African border disputes. The primary implication is that the AU must transform border conflicts from highly politicized sovereignty struggles into technically managed and legally grounded processes. Many African border disputes persist because political elites frame borders as symbols of national identity and regime legitimacy rather than as administratively solvable

boundary questions. A robust AU mechanism should therefore prioritize expert-driven delimitation based on historical treaties, colonial administrative boundaries, cartographic evidence, and modern geospatial technologies. By embedding delimitation within a technocratic framework, the AU can reduce the political costs for leaders to accept compromise outcomes.

At the same time, any effective mechanism must possess graduated but credible legal authority. While respect for state sovereignty remains a core AU principle, past experience demonstrates that purely voluntary or advisory rulings often lack compliance. A solution-oriented design would involve a structured escalation process that begins with mediation and proceeds to arbitration and, if necessary, binding legal decisions through AU judicial organs or referral to international courts. Crucially, advance consent by member states to accept such outcomes would strengthen predictability and reduce post-ruling contestation. Without this legal credibility, border rulings risk becoming symbolic rather than operational.

Another central implication is the need for preventive rather than reactive intervention. Most African border conflicts do not erupt suddenly but escalate following triggers such as the discovery of natural resources, environmental stress, or political transitions. An AU delimitation mechanism should therefore be integrated with early-warning systems capable of identifying high-risk border zones before violence emerges. Proactive technical surveys, diplomatic engagement, and temporary confidence-building arrangements could prevent disputes from militarizing. Prevention is not only more cost-effective but also more consistent with the AU's normative commitment to conflict avoidance.

Resource competition further complicates border delimitation, making it insufficient to focus exclusively on drawing lines on maps. In many cases, oil, gas, minerals, water, or fishing rights are the true drivers of conflict. A solution-oriented AU mechanism must therefore integrate border delimitation with resource-sharing frameworks such as joint development zones and cross-border management institutions. By decoupling access to resources from absolute territorial control, the AU can lower the stakes of delimitation and create incentives for cooperation rather than confrontation.

Equally important is the inclusion of local and community-level actors. African borders often cut across ethnic groups, pastoral routes, and economic networks, and ignoring these realities undermines the legitimacy and sustainability of delimitation outcomes. A credible AU mechanism should incorporate consultations with border communities and design flexible border regimes that protect livelihoods, mobility, and customary land use. Such inclusion reduces the likelihood that marginalized groups will resist or undermine agreed borders, particularly in regions where state authority is weak.

Border delimitation must also be embedded within the broader African Peace and Security Architecture. In fragile or conflict-affected states, borders are frequently contested by armed groups rather than governed by state institutions. A solution-oriented mechanism therefore requires close coordination with AU peacekeeping operations, security guarantees during implementation phases, and linkages to disarmament and demobilization efforts. Without a secure environment, even legally sound border agreements risk remaining unenforced.

Capacity constraints among AU member states represent another major design implication. Many governments lack the technical, legal, and administrative capacity to engage effectively in delimitation processes or to implement agreed outcomes. The AU must therefore invest in long-term capacity building, including training national boundary commissions, developing shared legal and cartographic databases, and providing financial and technical assistance for border management. Strengthening state capacity enhances both compliance and ownership.

Finally, the mechanism must carefully manage the role of external actors such as the European Union, the United Nations, and China. While these actors provide valuable funding, legal expertise, and diplomatic support, excessive external influence risks undermining African ownership and legitimacy. A solution-oriented AU delimitation mechanism should position the AU as the primary norm-setter and decision-maker, while selectively leveraging external resources under clearly defined AU leadership. This balance reinforces the AU's core norms of territorial integrity and peaceful dispute resolution while maintaining strategic autonomy.

In sum, an effective AU border conflict delimitation mechanism must be preventive, legally credible, technically grounded, and socially inclusive. By integrating legal authority, resource-sharing incentives, local participation, security coordination, and controlled external engagement, the AU can move from managing border conflicts episodically to resolving them sustainably.

To strengthen cooperation under an AU–EU partnership, the African Union Border Programme and the Niamey Convention can be leveraged as complementary instruments for technical, legal, and political support. The EU can provide financial resources, technical expertise, and capacity-building programs to enhance the AU's border delimitation and demarcation efforts, supporting both state authorities and local communities. Joint training programs for border officials, cartographers, and legal experts can increase the effectiveness of cross-border governance while embedding international best practices in conflict prevention and resource-sharing.

Confidence-building measures can be expanded through EU-supported cross-border development projects, such as joint infrastructure, trade corridors, health services, and environmental management, which create tangible benefits for local populations and reduce incentives for disputes. The Niamey Convention framework can be operationalized through regional pilot initiatives, co-financed and technically supported by the EU, that demonstrate how collaboration between states, municipalities, and border communities can improve mobility, security, and trade.

Information-sharing and early-warning systems can be strengthened via EU–AU digital platforms, allowing real-time monitoring of incidents, environmental pressures, and cross-border movements. Policy dialogue mechanisms, including regular AU–EU border forums, can institutionalize the exchange of experiences and harmonize approaches to legal and operational challenges. Finally, integrating cross-border cooperation into wider EU-Africa programs on peace, security, and regional development can ensure that border management contributes to stability, sustainable economic growth, and broader geopolitical alignment between the AU and EU.

Summary

A clear conclusion tying together minerals and rare earths, migration, and security management shows how the AU–EU relationship is increasingly shaped by structural interdependence rather than isolated policy files. Across all three dossiers, the partnership is defined by a tension between African agency and European influence, and by the need to transform asymmetry into co ownership.

In the field of minerals and rare earths, the way forward lies in shifting from extractive patterns to joint industrialisation strategies. Africa seeks value addition, better labour conditions, and technological upgrading, while Europe needs secure and ethical supply chains for its green transition. A balanced future requires co investment in processing capacity, long term contracts, and transparent governance frameworks that protect workers and eliminate child labour. If both unions commit to shared industrial planning, minerals can become a foundation for mutual prosperity rather than a source of dependency.

On migration, the path ahead depends on replacing transactional bargains with predictable, rights based mobility frameworks. Europe's focus on border control and returns must be matched with meaningful legal pathways, skills partnerships, and support for regional mobility within Africa. Africa, in turn, can strengthen governance, negotiate collectively, and integrate migration into development planning. A stable future partnership will treat mobility as a structural reality and a shared economic asset, not a crisis to be contained.

In security management, the AU–EU relationship must evolve from ad hoc crisis response to long term strategic alignment. The AU brings legitimacy and proximity, while the EU provides resources and institutional capacity. The next phase requires predictable financing for peace operations, joint political strategies, and stronger regional organisations capable of leading stabilisation efforts. As external actors expand their influence, coordinated AU–EU action becomes even more essential.

Taken together, these dossiers show that the AU–EU partnership is moving toward a model where shared interests outweigh historical asymmetries. Minerals demand co industrialisation, migration requires co governance, and security depends on co stewardship. The way forward is a partnership built on reciprocity, long term planning, and the recognition that Africa and Europe's futures are increasingly intertwined.

In the field of minerals and rare earths, improved governance directly affects Africa's leverage. Stronger regulatory institutions allow African states to enforce labour standards, eliminate child labour, manage environmental impacts, and negotiate fairer contracts with European and global companies. This shifts the relationship from extractive dependence to co industrialisation. It also aligns African production with EU sustainability requirements, making African minerals more competitive in Europe's green transition supply chains. Governance reform thus becomes a strategic asset that increases Africa's bargaining power and ensures that mineral wealth supports long term development rather than short term extraction.

Migration governance also benefits from stronger institutions. When African states improve civil registration systems, border management, labour market planning, and reintegration programmes, cooperation with the EU becomes more predictable and less politically

contentious. Better governance reduces the influence of smuggling networks, strengthens legal mobility schemes, and allows African states to negotiate from a position of agency rather than vulnerability. It also supports regional mobility under the AU's free movement agenda, which in turn reduces pressure on irregular routes toward Europe.

In security management, governance reform is transformative. More capable states can manage internal conflicts, professionalise security forces, and coordinate more effectively with AU and EU missions. This reduces the need for external stabilisation interventions and strengthens African ownership of peace operations. It also improves accountability and human rights compliance, which are essential for EU support. As Libya's integration into the Euro Mediterranean space progresses and the EU undergoes institutional reform, stronger governance across AU member states will be crucial for building a coherent regional security architecture that links North Africa, the Sahel, and Europe.

Since border conflicts are of a geopolitical nature, reinforced by both incomplete modernization, inter-state state conflict, balanced by the increasing competition between US, China and the EU on the continent, we recommend the EU to take a stake in the design of the AU border Program and associated border delimitation mechanism and to partner up on cross-border programs with the African Union in cooperation with the US and China, even if in Asia people are perfectly capable of trading with each other without being dependent on territorial delimitations which is of Western origin.

This dynamic of competing visions is comparable to how colonialism shaped Europe itself, and subsequently structured Africa, by imposing hierarchical systems, institutional designs, and economic patterns that reflected the interests and priorities of dominant powers. Just as colonial competition in Europe produced overlapping spheres of influence and rival governance models, the imposition of European designs on African territories created borders, institutions, and modes of administration that continue to influence conflict, cooperation, and state capacity today. In both cases, the interaction of competing preferences—whether among European powers or contemporary global actors—has enduring consequences for political organization, resource allocation, and the distribution of power.

Africa played a central role in shaping Europe economically, socially, and geopolitically, particularly from the late medieval period through the colonial era. The trans-Saharan trade, the transatlantic slave trade, and the extraction of raw materials from African colonies provided Europe with critical labor, capital, and commodities that fueled urbanization, industrialization, and mercantile expansion. African gold, ivory, and later cash crops—tobacco, sugar, cotton—were integral to European wealth accumulation and the development of financial institutions, including banks and stock exchanges.

The slave trade, in particular, supplied labor to European colonies in the Americas, generating enormous profits that underwrote the growth of European cities, infrastructure, and industrial capacity. African knowledge, agricultural products, and artisanal skills were also transferred, often forcibly, and shaped European consumption patterns, diets, and craft techniques. Furthermore, the competition among European powers for African territories and trade routes intensified state centralization, military innovation, and global exploration—processes that helped consolidate Europe as a dominant economic and political bloc.

In short, Europe's rise was deeply entangled with African resources, labor, and geopolitical structures: without Africa's material and human contributions, European economic expansion and imperial power would have been significantly constrained.

An additional motive is that competing visions and preferences over the design of international mechanisms are expected to increase within the pentarchy during the power transition. This competition unfolds along multiple dimensions, including institutional design, procedural rules, and agenda-setting authority, as each member seeks to shape global governance structures in ways that reinforce its strategic priorities. Differences may emerge over the balance between multilateralism and bilateral influence, the role of regional organizations versus centralized oversight, and the allocation of resources and responsibilities. As a result, the process of negotiating, implementing, and reforming international mechanisms is likely to become more contested, with states leveraging both formal channels and informal networks to advance their preferred models. The outcome of this contestation will influence the effectiveness, legitimacy, and resilience of these mechanisms, with the potential for both innovation and gridlock depending on how consensus—or compromise—is achieved.

Taken together, the strengthening of governance across AU member states acts as a multiplier for every aspect of the AU–EU partnership. It enhances Africa's negotiating power, improves the effectiveness of joint initiatives, and reduces the asymmetries that have long shaped the relationship. As both continents navigate new geopolitical pressures, governance reform becomes the foundation for a more balanced, resilient, and strategically aligned partnership.

7.0 THE GEOPOLITICAL IMPACT OF EU ENLARGEMENT AMIDST DYNAMIC CHANGE

EU enlargement has become one of the European Union's most consequential geopolitical instruments in the twenty first century. It serves not only as a mechanism of internal consolidation but also as a tool for projecting stability across the European continent.

By integrating new member states, the EU expands its political, economic, and normative reach.

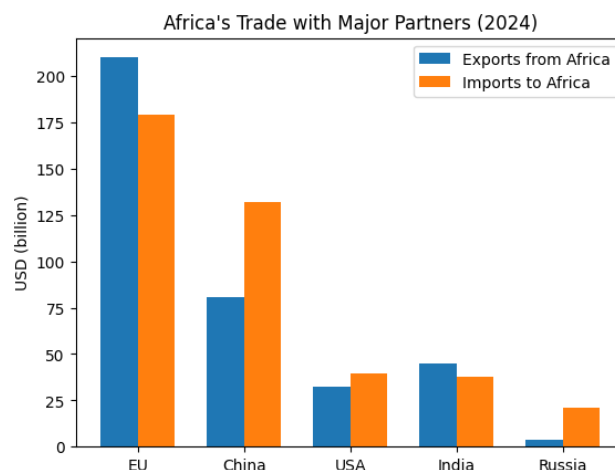
This expansion strengthens Europe's collective capacity to act in an increasingly competitive global environment. At the same time, enlargement redirects strategic attention toward the EU's eastern and southeastern neighbourhoods. This shift inevitably reshapes the distribution of diplomatic and financial resources within the Union.

As a result, Africa—traditionally a central partner in EU external relations—faces a relative decline in European engagement. The war in Ukraine has intensified this reorientation by elevating security concerns along Europe's borders. Consequently, enlargement is now framed as a response to geopolitical instability rather than merely an institutional process. This reframing alters the EU's priorities in ways that reverberate across its partnerships with Africa. New member states bring diverse historical experiences and foreign policy preferences into EU decision making. These internal differences complicate the formation of a coherent European strategy toward Africa. Some new members have limited historical ties to Africa, reducing their incentives to prioritize African issues. This diversification of interests can weaken the EU's collective commitment to Africa focused initiatives. Budgetary pressures also intensify

as enlargement increases demands on EU cohesion and structural funds. These financial obligations may constrain development assistance and investment flows to African countries.

In parallel, Africa's geopolitical significance is rising due to demographic growth, resource endowments, and strategic geography. This rise creates expectations for deeper and more equitable engagement with global partners. However, Europe's inward focus risks creating a mismatch between African expectations and EU capacities. This mismatch encourages African states to diversify their partnerships beyond Europe. China, Russia, Turkey, and Gulf states have expanded their influence on the continent in response to this opening. Such diversification enhances Africa's strategic autonomy but also intensifies geopolitical competition. EU enlargement also affects trade dynamics by expanding the size and regulatory power of the European market.

Figure



This expansion increases the EU's leverage in negotiations with African regional blocs.

At the same time, stricter regulatory standards may pose challenges for African exporters.

Enlargement further influences migration governance by shifting EU priorities toward border security in the east. This shift may reduce political space for mobility partnerships with African countries. Despite these challenges, enlargement can also create new opportunities for Africa through expanded markets and diversified cooperation. Ultimately, the geopolitical impact of EU enlargement on Africa is complex, multifaceted, and deeply intertwined with global power shifts.

It underscores the need for Africa to engage Europe strategically while simultaneously cultivating a broader set of international partnerships.

Africa's trade relations show a clear hierarchy among its major external partners. The European Union is Africa's largest trading partner, with total trade of roughly USD 389 billion, driven by African exports of minerals and energy and EU exports of machinery and industrial goods. China ranks second, with about USD 213 billion in total trade, characterised by African

commodity exports and large inflows of Chinese manufactured products. Trade with the United States is significantly smaller at around USD 71.6 billion, reflecting a more selective exchange of high-value manufactured goods, oil, and metals. India's trade with Africa, totalling approximately USD 83 billion, is relatively balanced and centred on energy, minerals, and pharmaceuticals. Russia's overall trade with Africa remains limited at about USD 24.5 billion compared to other major partners. African exports to Russia are particularly small, while Russian exports to Africa dominate the relationship. Overall, Africa's external trade pattern remains heavily oriented toward a few large partners, reinforcing its outward-looking and asymmetric trade structure.

Europe's strategic interests in Africa are manifold and increasingly intertwined with its domestic priorities. Supply chains for critical raw materials, including cobalt, lithium, and rare earths, are deeply reliant on African production. The green transition cannot succeed in Europe without reliable, sustainable, and locally beneficial sourcing arrangements.

Food security and energy interdependence further bind the EU and Africa. Europe's demographic decline and labour shortages make Africa a natural partner in co-developing industries, skills, and labour mobility frameworks. Security dynamics—from maritime threats in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa to instability in the Sahel—also require nuanced engagement that balances expeditionary action with local capacity-building.

A central shift is needed: moving beyond the donor-recipient framework to strategic co-production. Europe must invest alongside African partners in industrialisation, skills development, and value addition. Past efforts that focused solely on extractive industries or financial flows have often failed to create sustainable, inclusive growth.

Programs such as the Global Gateway must be aligned with African development priorities rather than merely European interests. Co-investment in manufacturing, renewable energy processing, and regional supply chains can create shared value, generating both economic returns and political goodwill. By designing mechanisms for joint ownership and accountability, the EU can foster durable partnerships built on trust rather than dependency.

Trade and industrial policy remain critical levers. Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) in their current form have been criticised for perpetuating structural imbalances and limiting African industrialisation. Instead, Europe can support African industrial clusters, regional value chains, and technological hubs, linking them to European supply chains in ways that respect local priorities.

A critical concern is avoiding “green extractivism,” where Europe imports renewable energy resources without contributing to local development or environmental sustainability. Genuine partnership requires co-planned industrial policy, joint research and innovation initiatives, and investment in African capacity to process and manufacture goods domestically, rather than exporting raw materials for European benefit.

Partnership is not only about economics—it is also about governance. Europe must respect Africa's political diversity without naïve neutrality. Institutional partnerships, ranging from the African Union (AU) to regional organisations and municipal governments, provide platforms for collaboration that can strengthen governance without imposing external templates.

Capacity-building must be framed as mutual learning rather than paternalism. Data sharing, regulatory harmonisation, and standard-setting can become vehicles for trust and interoperability, ensuring that European support reinforces African ownership and resilience rather than creating dependence.

EU security engagement in Africa has sometimes been perceived as inconsistent, selective, or externally imposed. To maintain credibility, Europe must shift from expeditionary missions to enabling regional security architectures. Investments in maritime security, cyber resilience, and hybrid threat mitigation should complement, rather than substitute, African-led initiatives.

Honesty in dialogue is critical: moral posturing alone is insufficient. Europe must recognise the strategic realities of competing global powers in Africa and engage in practical, politically informed cooperation that balances values with interests. Security partnership must be a tool of mutual benefit, not a means of asserting dominance.

Pour en Finir avec le Normative contestation between the EU and AU

In international relations (IR), norms can be defined as shared expectations or standards of appropriate behavior for actors within the international system. They are neither formal laws nor treaties, but socially constructed rules that guide and constrain the behavior of states, international organizations, and other actors. Norms help shape what is considered legitimate, acceptable, or obligatory in international politics, influencing how actors interact, make decisions, and justify their actions.

Norms can be formalized, for example through treaties or customary international law, or informal, relying on reputational pressures, moral authority, or peer recognition. They encompass a wide range of behaviors, including diplomatic conduct, human rights protection, conflict resolution, sovereignty respect, environmental stewardship, and governance standards. Importantly, norms are dynamic, evolving over time through socialization, advocacy, and contestation among international actors.

Scholars such as Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink have emphasized that norms operate through three stages: emergence, where a new norm is articulated; cascade, when the norm spreads across states and organizations; and internalization, when the norm becomes widely accepted and taken for granted. In practice, adherence to norms may be motivated by moral commitments, strategic considerations, or the desire for legitimacy and acceptance within the international community. Thus, norms in IR are central to understanding international cooperation, conflict, and the ways in which states and organizations navigate contested expectations and ethical frameworks in global politics.

The normative contestation between the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) reflects persistent tensions over the values, principles, and norms that guide their policies, partnerships, and cooperative engagements. Historically, the EU has approached Africa through a framework informed by its own governance, human rights, and market-oriented norms, often linking aid and trade to liberal democratic standards. The AU, in contrast, emphasizes African ownership, sovereignty, and pan-African approaches, frequently resisting the imposition of external models. These differences manifest across multiple domains, including governance, human rights, security, trade, and environmental regulation.

In governance, the EU emphasizes liberal democracy, rule of law, anti-corruption measures, and electoral integrity, whereas the AU recognizes diverse political systems and prioritizes stability, regional integration, and African-led solutions. In human rights, the EU places a strong emphasis on civil and political rights, gender equality, and LGBTQ+ protections, while the AU balances civil liberties with social, economic, and cultural rights, often reflecting more conservative social norms.

Security cooperation illustrates similar divergence, as the EU prioritizes civilian protection, liberal intervention, and conflict prevention, whereas the AU emphasizes sovereignty, AU-led peacekeeping, and non-interference. Trade and economic regulation also constitute a site of contestation, with the EU including sustainability, labor, and governance conditionalities in agreements, while the AU prioritizes economic sovereignty, industrialization, and capacity-building. Environmental norms represent a further area of disagreement, as the EU promotes Green Deal-style decarbonization standards, while the AU stresses climate justice and differentiated responsibilities to accommodate developmental imperatives.

Table

Area	EU Perspective	AU Perspective	Tension / Contestation
Governance & Democracy	Emphasis on liberal democracy, rule of law, anti-corruption measures, and electoral integrity.	Recognizes diverse political systems; emphasizes stability, regional integration, and African solutions to African problems.	Debate over whether EU democracy standards are universally applicable or intrusive.
Human Rights & Social Norms	Strong focus on civil and political rights, gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights.	Focus on human rights, but with prioritization of economic, social, and cultural rights; more conservative stances on certain social issues.	AU sometimes resists EU pressure to adopt social norms seen as incompatible with local context.
Security & Peacekeeping	Norms of civilian protection, liberal intervention, and conflict prevention.	Emphasis on sovereignty, AU-led peacekeeping, African solutions, and non-interference.	Disagreement over external military interventions vs. AU-led initiatives.
Trade & Economic Regulation	EU trade and investment agreements often include sustainability, labor, and governance conditionalities.	AU prioritizes economic sovereignty, industrialization, and capacity-building over externally imposed conditionalities.	Norms clash over “development vs. liberalization” priorities.
Environmental & Climate Norms	EU promotes Green Deal standards, sustainability conditionalities, and decarbonization.	AU emphasizes African developmental needs, “climate justice,” and differentiated responsibilities.	Tension over whether African states can be held to EU-style environmental standards without support.

Resolving these normative tensions requires a combination of strategic, institutional, and dialogical approaches. First, the EU and AU can employ institutionalized platforms for dialogue, including AU–EU summits, ministerial conferences, and inter-parliamentary

exchanges, to articulate shared goals while acknowledging normative divergences. Second, sectoral leadership and co-management structures within the AU–EU Partnership can allow member states and AU institutions to jointly design programs that integrate EU expertise with African priorities, fostering co-ownership and reducing the perception of norm imposition. Third, incremental norm harmonization through pilot projects in governance, trade, security, and climate can build mutual trust and demonstrate compatibility between European standards and African realities. Fourth, peer learning and technical exchanges involving African regional economic communities and EU agencies can provide practical, context-sensitive solutions, reducing the adversarial framing of normative expectations. Fifth, the creation of joint research, training, and policy centers can institutionalize continuous knowledge sharing, while third-party mediation by neutral international actors can help resolve particularly sensitive disputes. Sixth, the deployment of flexible conditionalities and incentive-based mechanisms rather than rigid mandates can encourage voluntary alignment without compromising African sovereignty. Seventh, promoting multi-level engagement, including civil society, private sector, and academic actors, ensures that normative debates are not limited to high-level diplomacy but rooted in shared experiences. Finally, consistent monitoring, evaluation, and public communication of outcomes can reinforce accountability, clarify mutual benefits, and normalize collaborative problem-solving. By combining these strategies, the EU and AU can gradually even out normative differences, fostering a more balanced partnership that respects African agency while promoting shared commitments to governance, human rights, sustainable development, and regional security.

Summary

The enlargement of the EU to the Balkans and the putative restoration of good governance under the Union for the Mediterranean under my leadership allows to think that something is in the works in the partnership between the EU and AU. The geopolitical implications of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans are significant for both the European Union and the African Union, though in different ways. For the EU, accession of Balkan states strengthens the bloc's political stability, security influence, and normative reach, extending EU governance, rule-of-law, and economic standards into a historically volatile region. This consolidation enhances the EU's credibility as a normative power, which can indirectly affect its external partnerships, including with the AU, by demonstrating the EU's ability to manage complex integration and promote stability. For the AU, EU enlargement in the Balkans provides both lessons and leverage: it offers a model of regional integration, conflict resolution, and institution-building that can inform AU initiatives, while also signaling the EU's evolving priorities and capacity constraints, potentially influencing AU–EU cooperation. Enlargement may shift EU attention and resources toward the Balkans, requiring African partners to navigate new EU internal dynamics when seeking political or development support. Finally, the expansion underscores the EU's strategic ambition to stabilize its neighborhood, which can create openings for the AU to negotiate partnerships on more equal terms, emphasizing African ownership, development priorities, and security collaboration within a global context of competing EU commitments.

At the same time, in international relations, norms are shared expectations about appropriate behavior for actors in the international system. They guide what is considered legitimate, acceptable, or obligatory without being formal law. Norms influence state actions, diplomacy,

and justification of policies, often through social pressure or reputational costs. They evolve over time through emergence, diffusion, and internalization among states and organizations. Ultimately, norms shape cooperation, conflict, and contested practices in global politics.

EU enlargement to the Western Balkans serves as a concrete demonstration of the EU's capacity to export norms, stabilize political systems, and integrate diverse states under common rules, reinforcing its identity as a normative power. This process directly intersects with the AU–EU normative contestation, as it provides both lessons and leverage for African actors in negotiating shared standards of governance, human rights, and regional cooperation. For the EU, successful enlargement signals the practical application of norms such as rule of law, democratic accountability, and conflict resolution, which it seeks to promote in AU partnerships. For the AU, observing the EU's enlargement process can inform approaches to pan-African integration, peacebuilding, and institution-strengthening, while also highlighting the limits of externally imposed conditionalities. In this context, normative rapprochement becomes possible through mutual learning and dialogue, where the EU can share its experiences in regional integration without dictating standards, and the AU can adapt applicable lessons to African political, economic, and cultural realities.

This link encourages strategies such as joint conferences, sectoral knowledge exchanges, pilot governance projects, and co-managed AU–EU programs that translate EU experiences in the Balkans into context-sensitive support for Africa. By framing EU enlargement as a model rather than a template, both unions can move toward a balanced partnership, reducing friction over norm imposition while promoting shared commitments to good governance, security, and sustainable development. Normative rapprochement in this case is thus instrumental and dialogical, using enlargement as a catalyst for trust-building, policy convergence, and institutionally anchored cooperation between AU and EU actors.

8.0 LIBYA IS AFRICA, AFRICA IS EUROPE

The leaders of the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) reaffirmed their commitment to a renewed strategic partnership rooted in shared history, geography, values, mutual respect, sovereignty, accountability, equality between partners, and reciprocal commitments. They agreed to build a common future focused on solidarity, security, peace, sustainable economic development, and prosperity for citizens of both continents. This Joint Vision for 2030 is intended to respond to both immediate challenges and long-term opportunities facing Africa and Europe.

It states:

Two Unions, a joint vision. We agree that the aim of the Joint Vision is to consolidate a renewed Partnership for solidarity, security, peace and sustainable and sustained economic development and prosperity for our citizens and for our future generations, bringing together our people, regions and organisations. This renewed Partnership will be founded on geography, acknowledgment of history, human ties, respect for sovereignty, mutual respect and accountability, shared values, equality between partners and reciprocal commitments. It aims to be the driving force in promoting our common priorities, shared values, international law, and preserving together our interests and common public goods. This includes inter alia: the

security and prosperity of our citizens, the protection of human rights for all, gender equality and women's empowerment in all spheres of life, respect for democratic principles, good governance and the rule of law, actions to preserve the climate, environment and biodiversity, sustainable and inclusive economic growth, the fight against inequalities, support for children's rights, and the inclusion of women, young people and the most disadvantaged disadvantaged”.

The declaration outlines several key areas of cooperation:

Health and pandemic response:

AU and EU leaders committed to supporting equitable access to vaccines and strengthening African health systems. This includes backing local and regional procurement mechanisms, increasing production capacities, and reinforcing regulatory frameworks to improve health sovereignty.

Economic recovery and investment:

A significant Africa-Europe Investment Package of at least €150 billion was announced to support diversified, inclusive, sustainable, and resilient economies aligned with AU Agenda 2063 and broader development goals. This package aims to boost investments in infrastructure, green and digital transitions, job creation, and industrialization.

Peace and security:

The partners agreed to enhance peace and security cooperation, focusing on supporting African-led peace operations, capacity building for security forces, training, equipment provision, and cooperation in areas such as cybersecurity and the rule of law.

Migration and mobility:

The declaration commits both Unions to address all aspects of migration in an integrated and balanced way that respects international law and human rights. This includes efforts to prevent irregular migration, fight trafficking and smuggling, strengthen border management, and develop legal pathways for migration.

People-to-people cooperation:

AU–EU leaders emphasized strengthening ties through scientific cooperation, exchanges of young people and students (including via Erasmus+), partnerships between universities, and cultural exchanges.

Multilateralism and global governance:

Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to effective multilateralism under international law. They pledged to work together to reduce inequalities, mitigate climate change, improve global public goods, support WTO reform, and implement international agreements such as the Paris Climate Agreement.

The declaration also noted the roundtable format of the summit, which allowed dynamic discussion on topics ranging from economic integration and private sector support to migration, energy transition, and health systems, and requested regular follow-up through existing AU–EU structures to monitor implementation.

Table

Country / Regional Actor	Political & Governance Challenges	Security Challenges	Economic & Infrastructure Challenges	Social & Human Development Challenges	Environmental / Climate Challenges	Geographic / Regional Competition	Actionable Pathways for AU–EU Cooperation
Nigeria	Weak institutional capacity; corruption; contested elections	Boko Haram, insurgencies, communal violence	High dependency on oil; poor transport & digital infrastructure	Youth unemployment, education gaps, urban-rural inequality	Floods, desertification	Gulf & Western influence; regional hegemony in West Africa	Strengthen democratic institutions; support regional peacekeeping; co-invest in digital infrastructure; youth employment programs; climate-resilient agriculture
South Africa	Governance challenges; political factionalism	High crime rates; social unrest	Industrial economy vulnerable to global shocks; infrastructure bottlenecks	Inequality, high youth unemployment	Water scarcity; urban environmental pressures	Economic leadership in Southern Africa; influence of China & EU trade	Facilitate industrial cooperation & skills transfer; strengthen rule-of-law institutions; joint urban resilience projects
Egypt	Centralized governance; political transitions; human rights tensions	Sinai insurgency; maritime security	Reliance on Suez Canal & tourism; energy dependency	Education & healthcare gaps	Water scarcity (Nile), desertification	Geopolitical positioning with Middle East & EU; Nile basin tensions	Support water-sharing agreements; enhance maritime security; co-develop renewable energy; education & human capital programs

Ethiopia	Ethnic federalism ; political transitions ; fragile institutions	Tigray conflict, insurgencies	Agriculture-dependent economy; transport & energy gaps	Health & education infrastructure; refugee crises	Droughts; climate-driven migration	Nile disputes; influence of regional actors (Egypt, Sudan)	Mediation support & peacebuilding; co-invest in infrastructure; climate-resilient agriculture; cross-border water management
Kenya	Electoral contestation; governance & corruption	Terrorism (Al-Shabaab); border insecurity	Trade hub dependent on port infrastructure; energy gaps	Urban poverty; youth unemployment	Droughts; flooding; agricultural vulnerability	Regional hub; influence from Gulf, China, EU	Support security cooperation & counter-terrorism; port & transport infrastructure projects; climate adaptation; digital economy development

Key Insights from the Cross-Tabulation

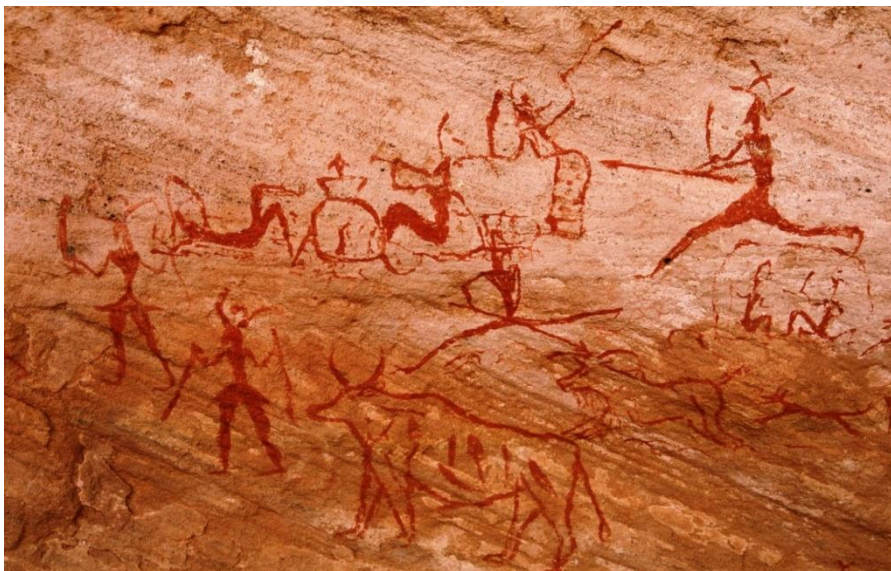
1. Shared Governance Constraints: Weak institutions, corruption, and contested transitions are common, limiting AU–EU program implementation and requiring governance-strengthening interventions.
2. Security Interdependence: Conflicts and insurgencies cross borders; maritime and counter-terrorism initiatives require regional coordination supported by AU–EU frameworks.
3. Economic & Infrastructure Dependencies: Reliance on extractive industries, insufficient infrastructure, and global market exposure highlight the need for joint industrial and infrastructure programs.
4. Social & Human Capital Challenges: Youth unemployment, education gaps, and urban pressures demand coordinated development and employment initiatives.
5. Environmental Vulnerabilities: Water scarcity, climate-induced migration, and extreme weather necessitate joint climate adaptation and green investment programs.
6. Geostrategic Complexity: External powers' involvement requires AU–EU strategies that reinforce African agency and mediate external influence in line with continental priorities.

Actionable Pathways for Moving Forward

Institutional strengthening must form the backbone of any sustainable partnership, requiring long-term investment in the administrative, regulatory, and oversight capacities of African states so that policies translate into effective governance, credible enforcement, and public trust. Regional security cooperation should evolve from episodic coordination into enduring AU–EU security architectures that integrate peacekeeping, counterterrorism, border management, and maritime security, enabling African-led responses to cross-border threats while benefiting from European operational, financial, and technical support.

Economic diversification and industrial policy demand deliberate co-investment in manufacturing capacity, green energy systems, digital infrastructure, and strategic transport corridors, anchoring local value addition and reducing structural dependency on raw commodity exports. Social and human development must be elevated as a central pillar of stability, with youth employment, health systems, and education strategies designed to be inclusive, locally grounded, and capable of scaling across diverse political and socio-economic contexts. Climate and environmental resilience require coordinated cross-border approaches to water governance, renewable energy deployment, and climate-smart agriculture, linking adaptation, food security, and conflict prevention into a single strategic framework.

At the core of this agenda lies negotiated interdependence and African agency, ensuring that African states are not passive recipients but co-authors of priorities, frameworks, and conditionalities. By embedding shared decision-making and accountability, AU–EU cooperation can decisively move beyond hierarchical aid models toward a mature strategic partnership defined by mutual interest, shared risk management, and long-term resilience.



Trade

Trade between the European Union and Africa holds far greater potential than current patterns suggest, and its expansion depends on recognising the structural interdependencies that bind the two continents together. For decades, the relationship has been shaped by a narrow exchange of African raw materials for European manufactured goods, a pattern that has limited Africa's industrial development and constrained Europe's ability to diversify its supply chains.

A more ambitious trade agenda requires both sides to move beyond this legacy and embrace a model built on co industrialisation, shared value creation, and long term strategic alignment. The EU's need for secure access to critical minerals, diversified energy sources, and resilient supply chains intersects directly with Africa's need for investment, technology transfer, and access to high value markets. These overlapping interests create a foundation for a deeper and more balanced trade partnership, provided that both continents commit to aligning their economic strategies rather than pursuing isolated or transactional initiatives.

The interdependencies shaping EU–Africa trade are profound and increasingly unavoidable. Africa depends on Europe for regulatory frameworks, investment capital, technological capabilities, and preferential market access, all of which influence the competitiveness of African exports. Europe, in turn, depends on Africa for essential inputs into its green and digital transitions, including cobalt, lithium, rare earths, hydrogen, agricultural products, and new energy corridors. As global geopolitics push Europe to reduce reliance on single suppliers, especially in Asia, Africa becomes a central pillar of European economic security. At the same time, Africa's demographic expansion and growing consumer markets create opportunities for European firms seeking long term growth beyond saturated markets. These interdependencies mean that trade policy cannot be separated from industrial policy, energy strategy, or geopolitical positioning. The future of EU–Africa trade will be shaped by how effectively both sides manage these overlapping dependencies and transform them into mutually reinforcing advantages.

North African states occupy a uniquely strategic position in this evolving landscape. Countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Egypt are already deeply integrated into European value chains through association agreements, preferential trade regimes, and long standing industrial partnerships. Their manufacturing sectors, especially in automotive components, textiles, agri food processing, and increasingly renewable energy and green hydrogen, serve as gateways linking African production to European markets. Their ports, logistics corridors, and regulatory frameworks are more closely aligned with European standards than those of many sub Saharan states, enabling them to function as continental connectors. As the African Continental Free Trade Area deepens, North African economies can play a bridging role, facilitating the movement of goods, investment, and technology between Europe and the rest of Africa. Their dual identity—as African states and Mediterranean neighbours—positions them as pivotal actors in shaping the next generation of EU–Africa trade relations.

Libya's potential integration into the Euro Mediterranean space, combined with the ongoing reform of the European Union, would significantly reshape the political and economic landscape of EU–Africa relations. These developments matter because Libya sits at the crossroads of North Africa, the Sahel, and the Mediterranean, and because EU reform is redefining how Europe manages enlargement, neighbourhood policy, migration governance, and external partnerships. Bringing these two dynamics into your broader analysis of AU–EU trade, migration, minerals, and security adds an important layer of strategic depth.

Libya's stabilisation and gradual integration into Euro Med frameworks would transform the regional geometry of cooperation. A functioning Libyan state with predictable institutions would reopen a major energy corridor, reconnect North Africa's western and eastern subregions, and restore a key maritime link between Africa and Europe. It would also shift the

balance of migration governance: Libya has long been a central transit hub, and its instability has amplified irregular flows, empowered smuggling networks, and complicated EU policy. Integration into Euro Med structures would allow Libya to participate in coordinated border management, legal mobility schemes, and economic development programmes, reducing the volatility that has shaped EU–Africa migration debates for more than a decade. Economically, Libya’s reconstruction and reintegration would create new demand for European investment and new opportunities for African labour mobility, while also strengthening North Africa’s role as a connector between the EU and the wider continent.

The reform of the EU itself adds another layer of impact. As the EU prepares for future enlargement, strengthens its external action instruments, and reconfigures its budgetary and governance mechanisms, its approach to Africa is shifting from development assistance to strategic partnership. EU reform is pushing Europe to think more in terms of geopolitical interdependence, supply chain resilience, and neighbourhood stabilisation, all of which elevate Africa’s importance. A more integrated and strategically oriented EU will seek deeper cooperation on energy, critical minerals, digital infrastructure, and security governance. This will influence how Europe engages with the African Continental Free Trade Area, how it deploys Global Gateway investments, and how it negotiates migration frameworks. EU reform also strengthens the role of Mediterranean member states—Italy, Spain, France, Greece, Cyprus, Malta—whose priorities naturally pull Africa higher on the European agenda.

Together, Libya’s integration and EU reform reinforce the centrality of North Africa in the future of EU–Africa relations. A stabilised Libya would complete the Mediterranean arc, enabling smoother trade flows, more coherent migration governance, and stronger regional energy networks. EU reform, meanwhile, creates the institutional capacity and political incentive for Europe to engage Africa not as a peripheral partner but as a strategic neighbour. These shifts would amplify Africa’s leverage in negotiations on minerals, migration, and security, while also giving Europe a more stable and interconnected southern neighbourhood.

The EU’s Global Gateway initiative adds another layer of strategic opportunity. Designed as Europe’s answer to China’s Belt and Road, Global Gateway aims to mobilise large scale investment in infrastructure, digital connectivity, energy systems, and regulatory harmonisation. Its real transformative potential lies in its ability to reduce the structural barriers that have historically limited African competitiveness. Poor transport networks, fragmented energy grids, and inconsistent regulatory environments have long increased the cost of African exports and discouraged European investment. If Global Gateway is aligned with African priorities—particularly those of the AfCFTA—it can support the development of industrial corridors, cross border infrastructure, and green energy value chains that directly feed into European markets. It can also help African states meet the regulatory requirements of the EU’s increasingly stringent trade environment, including sustainability standards, carbon border adjustments, and digital compliance frameworks. The initiative’s success will depend on whether it reinforces African agency rather than imposing European preferences, and whether it supports long term productive capacity rather than short term connectivity projects.

Is there a case for reviewing the multi-bilateral policy-mix between the African Union and the European Union ?

The institutional configuration of African states significantly shapes their patterns of engagement with the European Union. Presidential systems, characterized by concentrated executive authority, often gravitate toward highly centralized and bilateral negotiation channels, enabling leaders to exercise tighter control over trade and regulatory commitments. In contrast, parliamentary and hybrid systems, which distribute authority across multiple actors, tend to favor regional coordination, policy harmonization, and multilateral bargaining frameworks. Least Developed Countries make strategic use of preferential access schemes such as Everything But Arms to anchor domestic reforms, attract development assistance, and strengthen the linkage between trade concessions and broader governance objectives.

Variation in EU–Africa trade agreements also reflects enduring historical, geopolitical, and economic trajectories. North African states—including Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia—draw on long-standing diplomatic ties, geographic proximity to Europe, and established industrial linkages, resulting in more advanced and sector specific bilateral arrangements. Sub Saharan African countries, by contrast, primarily engage through regional Economic Partnership Agreements designed to promote regional integration, industrial upgrading, and collective bargaining capacity, particularly within the emerging AfCFTA framework.

A more coherent and continent wide EU–AU partnership offers substantial strategic advantages. It enhances regulatory consistency across diverse agreements, aligning industrial policy, environmental standards, and climate related obligations. It also enables the EU to synchronize trade incentives with development, governance, and institutional capacity objectives rather than dispersing them across fragmented bilateral channels. Furthermore, an integrated approach strengthens regional infrastructure development and cross border supply chains, reducing the inefficiencies associated with isolated bilateral trade corridors. By mitigating tensions between national and regional priorities, such a framework ultimately reinforces the African Union’s collective agency and its ability to negotiate from a position of continental coherence.

Key acronyms are central to understanding the structure and implications of EU–Africa trade engagement. The Economic Partnership Agreement, or EPA, is a formal trade agreement between the EU and African regional blocs such as ECOWAS, EAC, and SADC, replacing older preferential arrangements like the Cotonou Agreement. EPAs grant preferential EU market access while promoting regional integration. They encourage African states to harmonize tariffs, standards, and customs procedures, facilitating industrialization and intra-African trade. Countries engaged in EPAs are typically more deeply integrated into EU trade networks, with higher regulatory and reporting obligations.

The Everything But Arms scheme, known as EBA, is an EU unilateral trade preference offering duty-free, quota-free access for all products except arms for Least Developed Countries, or LDCs. EBA allows these countries to access EU markets without negotiation, providing strong incentives for domestic reforms in labor, governance, and environmental standards. Engagement under EBA is relatively high in export opportunities, but limited in negotiation power, as the relationship is essentially unilateral.

Figure

Country	EU Trade Agreement	Government Type	AU—EU Strategic Focus	Lead Partners
 Nigeria	EPA Agreement		 Regional Integration	 SOUTH AFRICA
 Ghana	EBA / GSP+			
 Kenya	Bilateral / Sectoral		 Industrial & Digital Corridors	 TANZANIA
 Tanzania	EPA Agreement			
 South Africa	EPA Agreement		 Climate & Sustainable Trade	 EGYPT
 Mozambique	EBA / GSP+			 DRC
 Egypt	EBA / GSP+			
 Niger	EBA / GSP+		 Climate & Sustainable Trade	 LIBYA
 Morocco	AU—EU COHERENT POLICY SPACE ALIGNING TRADE, DEVELOPMENT & GOVERNANCE			
	Brazil & Mexico			

The Generalized System of Preferences Plus, or GSP+, is a preferential framework offering tariff reductions for countries that implement international conventions on human rights, labor rights, environmental protection, and good governance. GSP+ encourages governance reforms and compliance with international standards. Engagement under this scheme is conditional and regulatory-heavy, linking trade benefits to policy performance rather than simply market access.

Least Developed Countries, or LDCs, are classified by the United Nations based on low income, limited human assets, and economic vulnerability. LDCs receive preferential treatment under schemes such as EBA and can access targeted EU development programs. Engagement tends to be high in terms of assistance and trade support, but low in negotiation leverage, highlighting the need for coordinated multi-bilateral approaches.

The African Continental Free Trade Area, or AfCFTA, is a continent-wide agreement establishing a single market for goods and services among African Union member states. Countries participating in AfCFTA have incentives to harmonize tariffs, standards, and regulatory frameworks. When EU trade agreements, such as EPAs, are aligned with AfCFTA objectives, engagement becomes multilevel, linking national, regional, and continental trade and policy priorities.

The African Union, or AU, serves as the continental organization coordinating political, economic, and security policies among member states. AU oversight ensures that EU trade agreements are consistent with regional integration and industrial policy goals. Engagement through the AU is strategic and governance-focused, acting as a coordinating layer across bilateral EU–African agreements.

Regional Economic Communities, including SADC, ECOWAS, and EAC, facilitate trade, economic integration, and policy harmonization among member states. Countries within these blocs often negotiate EPAs collectively. By embedding national trade commitments into regional frameworks, RECs increase the level of engagement, support industrial clusters, develop infrastructure corridors, and promote harmonized regulations.

Harmonization and standardization are key to creating coherence across African trade engagements with the EU. Areas of convergence include tariffs and customs procedures, where EPAs require consistent tariff schedules, duty-free access, and uniform customs classification across regional blocs such as ECOWAS, EAC, and SADC. Regulatory standards are similarly harmonized, particularly in sanitary and phytosanitary measures and product quality standards, ensuring smooth access to EU markets for agricultural, fisheries, and processed goods. Trade facilitation and digital reporting are increasingly standardized, with electronic documentation and border procedures supporting both regional integration and alignment with AfCFTA objectives. Environmental and labor compliance is also a shared point of standardization, with GSP+ and EBA schemes establishing common expectations around labor rights, environmental protection, and human rights observance. Investment rules and industrial policy alignment, particularly in project-specific or sectoral agreements such as energy, digital infrastructure, and transport, further reinforce harmonized regulatory frameworks while promoting regional industrial clusters.

Despite these areas of harmonization, countries differentiate themselves based on national priorities, governance capacity, and historical relationships. North African states like Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia often leverage long-standing bilateral ties with the EU, allowing them flexibility outside the constraints of regional bloc frameworks. Sub-Saharan countries, by contrast, follow EPAs more closely, emphasizing collective regional commitments. Economic structure and export composition also shape differentiation, as LDCs under EBA or GSP+ preferential schemes often depend on a narrow range of commodities, affecting both negotiation leverage and the ability to meet regulatory standards. Government type and capacity further influence engagement, with presidential systems favoring centralized, national-level deals and parliamentary or hybrid systems emphasizing regional consensus. Sectoral focus also creates variation; Egypt prioritizes energy, Kenya invests in digital corridors, and South Africa targets industrial clusters, tailoring agreements to comparative advantages. Compliance readiness varies as well, with some countries better positioned to meet EU-mandated regulatory, labor, and environmental standards than others.

These points of differentiation naturally generate friction in the trade and policy environment. Tensions can emerge between national priorities and regional integration goals when countries seek bilateral advantages that conflict with collective EPA or AfCFTA obligations. Compliance gaps among LDCs and low-capacity countries can hinder enforcement of SPS, labor, and environmental standards, creating challenges for EU market access. Overlapping agreements, particularly for countries belonging to multiple regional blocs or bilateral deals, can produce conflicting tariff schedules, rules of origin, or reporting obligations. Strategic competition from external actors, including the US and China, may complicate harmonization by offering parallel incentives in infrastructure, digital, or energy sectors. Finally, divergence in industrial or investment priorities across countries can result in uneven benefits, potentially undermining collective AU–EU industrial integration.

Strategically, harmonization should be actively reinforced through regional coordination, technical assistance, and AU oversight. Differentiation points, while potential sources of friction, are also sources of comparative advantage and can be leveraged when integrated into a multi-bilateral AU–EU strategy. Friction points require careful monitoring and mitigation through joint early warning systems, capacity-building initiatives, and dispute-resolution

mechanisms to ensure that national variation does not compromise continental or EU-aligned objectives.

African trade engagement with the European Union operates through a complex mix of agreements, frameworks, and regional arrangements, shaped by historical ties, governance structures, and economic priorities. At the core are formal trade agreements such as the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), which the EU negotiates with African regional economic blocs including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the East African Community (EAC), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). EPAs are designed to replace older preferential arrangements like the Cotonou Agreement and provide preferential market access to the EU while promoting regional integration among African states. They encourage harmonization of tariffs, customs procedures, and regulatory standards, facilitating industrialization and intra-African trade. Countries participating in EPAs are typically more deeply integrated into EU trade networks, with higher reporting obligations and compliance requirements, reflecting a multilevel engagement that links national, regional, and continental trade and policy objectives.

Other trade mechanisms complement EPAs by offering selective, often unilateral, market access. The Everything But Arms (EBA) scheme grants Least Developed Countries, as classified by the United Nations, duty-free and quota-free access to EU markets for all products except arms. This arrangement allows LDCs to access European markets without negotiation while incentivizing domestic reforms in labor, governance, and environmental protection. Engagement under EBA is relatively high in export opportunities but limited in negotiation power. Similarly, the Generalized System of Preferences Plus (GSP+) provides preferential tariff reductions for countries that implement international conventions on human rights, labor rights, environmental protection, and good governance. GSP+ links trade benefits to compliance with international standards, making engagement conditional and regulatory-intensive rather than purely market-driven. LDCs also benefit from targeted development programs alongside these schemes, enhancing support while highlighting the importance of coordinated multi-bilateral approaches to overcome low negotiation leverage.

At a continental scale, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) provides a unifying framework that creates a single market for goods and services among African Union member states. AfCFTA alignment encourages countries to harmonize tariffs, standards, and regulatory frameworks, complementing EU trade agreements and enabling a multilevel engagement model that spans national, regional, and continental levels. The African Union itself acts as a critical coordinating body, ensuring that EU trade agreements are consistent with broader regional integration, industrial policy, and governance objectives. Through the AU, trade engagement is strategic and governance-focused, providing a layer of oversight that links bilateral, regional, and continental actions. Regional Economic Communities such as SADC, ECOWAS, and EAC further enhance coordination, embedding national trade commitments into collective frameworks that support industrial clusters, infrastructure corridors, and harmonized regulations, thereby increasing both the intensity and effectiveness of engagement.

Despite these harmonization points, differentiation is inevitable. Countries vary in their negotiation styles, economic structures, sectoral priorities, governance capacity, and historical relationships. North African countries, including Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, often leverage

historic bilateral ties and geographic proximity to the EU, allowing them flexibility outside regional bloc frameworks. Sub-Saharan countries tend to adhere more strictly to collective EPA obligations, emphasizing regional integration. Economic composition affects differentiation, as LDCs often rely on narrow commodity exports, influencing their ability to meet EU standards and their negotiation leverage. Government type also shapes engagement: presidential systems may favor centralized national-level agreements, whereas parliamentary or hybrid systems often prioritize regional consensus and alignment with collective obligations. Sectoral priorities create further divergence, with Egypt focusing on energy, Kenya on digital infrastructure and transport corridors, and South Africa on industrial clusters. Compliance readiness varies, producing differences in the speed and effectiveness with which countries can meet EU-mandated labor, environmental, and sanitary standards.

These points of differentiation naturally generate friction within the trade and policy landscape. Conflicts can arise between national priorities and regional integration goals when countries seek bilateral advantages that may conflict with collective EPA or AfCFTA obligations. Compliance gaps among LDCs and low-capacity states may hinder enforcement of regulatory, labor, and environmental standards, affecting market access and integration. Overlapping agreements, particularly in countries belonging to multiple regional blocs or bilateral deals, can produce conflicting tariff schedules, rules of origin, or reporting obligations. Strategic competition from external actors, including the United States and China, adds further complexity by introducing parallel incentives in infrastructure, digital, or energy sectors, potentially undermining harmonization. Divergence in industrial and investment priorities across countries can also result in uneven benefits, threatening the effectiveness of AU–EU regional industrial integration and multi-bilateral strategies.

Table

Country / Region	EU Trade Agreement Type	Government Type	Harmonization / Standardization Points	Points of Differentiation	Expected Friction	Lead Partner / Role	External Engagement (EU, US, China, etc.)
Nigeria	EPA (ECOWAS)	Presidential	Tariffs, customs procedures, SPS & product standards, digital reporting	Centralized bilateral negotiation preference, export composition (oil & agriculture)	National vs regional priorities, compliance gaps, overlapping EPAs	South Africa (continental support), Nigeria (regional)	EU: trade & industrial policy; US & China: infrastructure & energy
Ghana	EPA (ECOWAS)	Parliamentary	Tariffs, customs, SPS standards, investment rules	Sectoral focus (agriculture & industrial clusters), regional coordination emphasis	Regional integration vs national industrial priorities	South Africa	EU trade incentives, AfCFTA integration
Kenya	EPA (EAC)	Presidential	Tariffs, standards, border procedures,	Digital & transport corridors, national	Compliance gaps in SPS &	Tanzania (East Africa lead)	EU: digital & transport infrastructure, US/China:

			AfCFTA alignment	industrial strategy	labor standards		tech & energy projects
Tanzania	EPA (EAC)	Presidential	Regional integration, customs & tariff harmonization	Refugee & migration management, national industrial policy	National vs regional coordination	Tanzania (lead)	EU: development & trade, US: security assistance
South Africa	EPA (SADC)	Parliamentary	Industrial clusters, investment rules, climate compliance	Energy sector prioritization, strategic industrial hubs	Sectoral divergence with other SADC members	South Africa (lead)	EU: climate & trade, China: infrastructure, US: tech & investment
Mozambique	EBA / GSP+	Single-party dominant	Tariffs, SPS standards for LDC exports	Narrow commodity exports (gas, agriculture), LDC compliance	Regulatory compliance gaps, limited negotiation power	South Africa (continental support)	EU: trade & development programs, China: infrastructure
Egypt	Bilateral / Sectoral	Semi-presidential	Energy standards, investment rules, industrial alignment	Mediterranean energy & transport corridors, bilateral flexibility	Divergence from regional EPA harmonization	Egypt (lead)	EU: energy & industrial policy, US & China: infrastructure
Libya	Bilateral / Sectoral	Transitional	Limited harmonization in regional security & migration corridors	Conflict zone, energy corridor prioritization	Governance fragility, strategic security conflicts	Libya (lead)	EU & US: security & migration management
Niger	EPA / Sahel coordination	Presidential	Tariffs, customs, regional security cooperation	Security & trade corridors, LDC export dependence	Compliance gaps, national vs regional priorities	Niger (lead)	EU: security & trade, US: counterterrorism, China: infrastructure
DRC	EPA (SADC overlap)	Presidential	Resource governance, customs & SPS alignment	Conflict-sensitive trade, extractive sector focus	Overlapping regional obligations, regulatory compliance	DRC (lead)	EU: mining & governance, US & China: mining & infrastructure
Morocco	Bilateral	Monarchy	Energy standards, investment rules, industrial alignment	Industrial clusters, renewable energy prioritization	Divergence from regional EPAs, bilateral flexibility	Egypt / EU advisory	EU: energy & industrial policy, US & China: investment
Ethiopia	EBA	Single-party dominant	Tariffs, SPS compliance, trade facilitation	Narrow export base, LDC	Compliance gaps, limited	South Africa / AU support	EU: trade & development, US &

				governance leverage	negotiation leverage		China: infrastructure
Rwanda	EBA / GSP+	Parliamentary	Tariffs, SPS & labor standards, digital reporting	Narrow export profile, governance reforms	Capacity & compliance gaps	South Africa / AU support	EU: development & governance, US: security & development

Strategically, harmonization should be actively reinforced through regional coordination, technical assistance, and oversight by the African Union. Differentiation points, while potential sources of friction, also represent comparative advantages that can be leveraged when integrated into a multi-bilateral AU–EU strategy. Friction points require careful monitoring and mitigation through joint early warning mechanisms, capacity-building initiatives, and dispute-resolution frameworks to ensure that national variations do not compromise continental or EU-aligned objectives.

In summary, EU–Africa trade engagement is a multi-layered system of agreements, incentives, and governance structures that operate simultaneously at national, regional, and continental levels. Harmonization points provide coherence and regulatory consistency, differentiation reflects comparative advantage and national priorities, and friction points highlight areas requiring targeted coordination and risk management. A coherent, integrated multi-bilateral policy approach, combining AU leadership with EU technical, financial, and regulatory support, allows for strategic alignment, strengthens African agency, and maximizes the developmental and industrial benefits of trade engagement across the continent. Lead partners such as South Africa, Egypt, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Libya, and Niger anchor the regional and functional dimensions of this strategy, while peripheral partners like Brazil and Mexico offer additional support in development, industrial policy, and urban governance, creating a fully interconnected, continentally grounded, and strategically coherent framework for trade and economic cooperation with the EU.

Implications for AU and EEAS (as fused with DG INTPA)

The complex landscape of EU–Africa trade agreements, regional blocs, and differentiated national strategies carries significant bureaucratic implications for the European External Action Service (EEAS), the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), and the African Union (AU). At the EU level, the multiplicity of trade frameworks—EPAs, EBA, GSP+, bilateral sectoral agreements, and AfCFTA-aligned initiatives—requires close coordination between diplomatic and technical services. EEAS must manage political oversight, intergovernmental coordination, and strategic alignment with external partners, while DG INTPA focuses on technical, developmental, and sectoral implementation. The fusion of policy oversight and operational execution is essential to avoid fragmented messaging, duplication of effort, or conflicting incentives across EU Delegations and member states. For instance, EPA implementation may require harmonized customs and regulatory support across multiple DG INTPA programs, while GSP+ compliance monitoring may demand intensive reporting and governance assessments coordinated with EEAS political guidance.

The differentiated capacities and governance types of African countries further increase bureaucratic complexity. Presidential systems may negotiate or implement agreements at a centralized level, necessitating direct engagement with EU headquarters and delegations. Parliamentary or hybrid systems often require regional consultation mechanisms, implying a need for DG INTPA and EEAS to interface simultaneously with national ministries, regional blocs, and AU technical units. LDCs engaged through EBA or GSP+ schemes may require extra layers of capacity-building support, compliance monitoring, and development program alignment to ensure trade benefits translate into sustainable governance and industrial outcomes.

From the AU perspective, these arrangements demand a robust internal coordination mechanism to reconcile continental, regional, and national priorities. The AU must mediate between member states participating in multiple frameworks, harmonize reporting obligations, and ensure that bilateral or regional deals complement AfCFTA objectives rather than undermine them. For example, EPAs negotiated with ECOWAS, EAC, or SADC must be monitored in a way that aligns with AU-led industrialization, climate, and infrastructure agendas. The AU also faces pressure to provide policy guidance, technical oversight, and dispute resolution while retaining agency and legitimacy in multi-bilateral EU engagements.

Operationally, these dynamics imply the need for integrated EU–AU bureaucratic processes. This could include joint monitoring dashboards for trade compliance, harmonized reporting templates across DG INTPA and EEAS, shared early-warning mechanisms for friction points, and joint task forces for sectoral priorities such as digital corridors, renewable energy, and industrial clusters. Bureaucratic fusion at this level also allows for the synchronization of development funding, technical assistance, and regulatory enforcement, ensuring that EU incentives support AU-led strategic objectives rather than creating parallel, uncoordinated projects.

Finally, the presence of external actors such as the US and China introduces additional layers of bureaucratic complexity. Both EEAS and DG INTPA must maintain situational awareness of competing incentives, coordinate with AU authorities to prevent overlap or conflict, and develop adaptive negotiation strategies that preserve EU standards while reinforcing African agency. This requires a highly integrated, multi-level bureaucratic architecture, combining strategic oversight, technical implementation, and continuous coordination between EU institutions, AU governance structures, and national authorities.

Euro-MED FTA and AfTA

The relationship between the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Agreements (Euro-Med FTAs) in North Africa is complex, layered, and largely complementary, though it also raises strategic and policy challenges for the region. Here's a detailed explanation:

AfCFTA is a pan-African initiative aimed at creating a single continental market for goods, services, capital, and labor. Its purpose is to foster intra-African trade, industrialization, and economic integration, reducing dependence on external markets. In contrast, Euro-Med FTAs are bilateral or regional trade agreements between the European Union and individual North

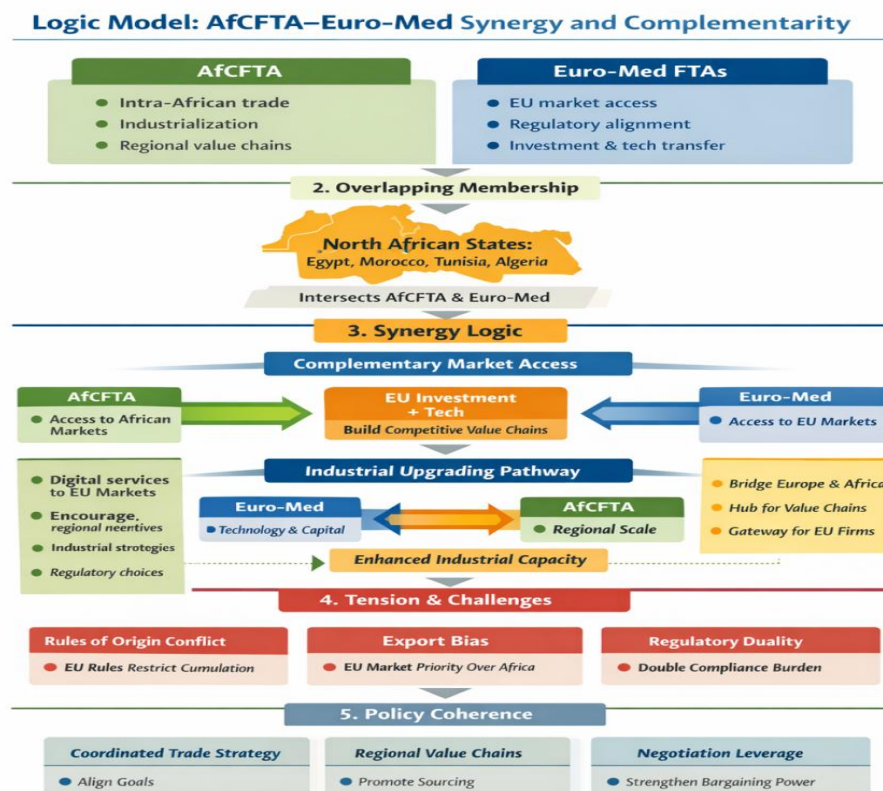
African countries—such as Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt—focused on reducing tariffs, facilitating market access, and promoting trade between Europe and these countries. While AfCFTA is Africa-led, Euro-Med FTAs are largely external, reflecting Europe's economic and strategic interests in the Mediterranean.

For North African economies, both frameworks intersect because countries like Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia are part of both AfCFTA and Euro-Med agreements. Euro-Med FTAs can bring technology transfer, foreign direct investment, and market access to Europe, while AfCFTA provides opportunities to expand regional trade, diversify supply chains, and strengthen economic resilience. In theory, a North African country can leverage its Euro-Med FTA for exports to Europe while using AfCFTA to build regional value chains across the continent.

Despite complementarity, there are areas of tension. Euro-Med FTAs often include stringent rules of origin, regulatory standards, and asymmetrical liberalization, which can limit the flexibility of North African countries to fully integrate into AfCFTA supply chains. For example, preferential access to European markets may incentivize exports to Europe at the expense of regional trade. There is also a risk that reliance on European investment and trade could slow regional industrial integration, undermining AfCFTA's goal of intra-African value chain development.

The dual engagement with AfCFTA and Euro-Med FTAs positions North Africa as a bridge between Europe and Africa. Policymakers can use Euro-Med agreements to attract capital, technology, and expertise, while AfCFTA can be leveraged to expand regional networks, promote diversification, and strengthen negotiation leverage with external partners. Success depends on coherent trade and industrial policies that align both frameworks, encourage regional value chains, and prevent trade diversion that favors Europe over African integration.

Figure



The African Continental Free Trade Area seeks to establish a unified African market that strengthens intra African trade, industrial development, and regional economic integration. In contrast, the Euro Mediterranean Free Trade Agreements are externally driven arrangements that provide North African countries with preferential access to European markets and encourage regulatory alignment with EU standards. Countries such as Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia participate in both frameworks, creating a dual trade environment that shapes their industrial strategies and market incentives. This dual participation enables them to attract European investment, technology, and expertise while simultaneously expanding commercial opportunities within the African continent. AfCFTA offers scale and the potential for diversified regional value chains that Euro Med agreements alone cannot deliver.

However, Euro Med rules of origin and regulatory requirements can restrict the ability of North African firms to source inputs from African partners without losing preferential access to the EU. These constraints may encourage exporters to prioritize European markets over African ones, thereby weakening AfCFTA's objective of increasing intra African trade. The resulting incentive structure risks diverting production and investment away from regional integration and toward established European supply chains. Despite these tensions, the two frameworks can function in a complementary manner when national trade and industrial policies are aligned coherently. When effectively coordinated, North African states can position themselves as strategic intermediaries linking European technological and financial resources with the expanding markets and production networks emerging under AfCFTA.

The relationship between AfCFTA and the Euro Med FTAs can be conceptualized as a layered system in which North Africa occupies a pivotal intermediary position. At the top of this system lies the Euro Mediterranean framework, which channels European capital, technology, and regulatory norms into North African economies. Beneath it sits AfCFTA, which provides a continental platform for market expansion, regional production networks, and industrial diversification. North Africa stands at the intersection of these two regimes, functioning as a conduit through which European capabilities can be linked to African demand and supply chain potential. The flow of benefits is bidirectional: European partnerships support technological upgrading and investment attraction, while AfCFTA offers the scale and regional connectivity necessary for competitive production. Yet the system also contains friction points, particularly where EU rules of origin and regulatory obligations limit the flexibility required for African value chain integration. These tensions create a structural imbalance in which export incentives may tilt toward Europe rather than Africa, potentially undermining the continental integration agenda. The overall configuration resembles a bridge in which North Africa's economic strategy determines whether the two frameworks reinforce one another or operate at cross purposes. When policy coherence is achieved, the bridge becomes a platform for Euro African industrial cooperation; when coherence is absent, it becomes a bottleneck that restricts regional integration. The infographic thus illustrates a dynamic system in which synergy and constraint coexist, and in which strategic policy alignment determines the ultimate developmental outcome.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is a continental, Africa-led integration framework aimed at fostering intra-African trade, industrialization, and regional value chains. Its primary tools include tariff reduction, liberalization of services, investment protocols, and mobility frameworks for goods and labor. In contrast, Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Agreements (Euro-Med FTAs) are EU-driven bilateral or regional agreements with North African states, designed to provide preferential access to EU markets, regulatory alignment, and investment attraction. Euro-Med FTAs also facilitate technology transfer and require adherence to rules of origin and regulatory standards. North African states such as Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria participate in both AfCFTA and Euro-Med FTAs, placing them at the intersection of two trade regimes. This overlapping membership shapes market incentives, industrial strategies, regulatory choices, and supply-chain orientation, creating both opportunities and constraints.

The complementary market access logic allows AfCFTA to expand African market opportunities while Euro-Med agreements provide high-value European markets. EU investment and technology can be leveraged to build competitive production capacities in North Africa, which can then scale across Africa via AfCFTA. Industrial upgrading follows a two-step pathway: Euro-Med FTAs supply capital, technology, and standards, while AfCFTA enables regional scale and diversification. This synergy strengthens North Africa's strategic positioning as a bridge between Europe and Africa, a hub for value chains, and a gateway for EU firms. Tensions arise due to rules of origin, as strict Euro-Med requirements can limit integration with African partners. Export incentives may be distorted, as firms prioritize stable EU markets over smaller African markets, undermining intra-African trade goals. Regulatory duality imposes compliance burdens, as firms must meet EU standards while AfCFTA standards continue to harmonize. Coordinated trade strategies are needed to align AfCFTA industrial goals with Euro-Med regulatory obligations. Regional value chain prioritization

encourages African sourcing while using EU investment to enhance production capacity. North Africa's dual membership enhances negotiation leverage, allowing countries to strengthen bargaining power with both Europe and the rest of Africa. The synergy logic illustrates how external investment can support African-led integration when guided by coherent policy. Policy coherence requires careful management of incentives, standards, and investment to avoid trade diversion. Ultimately, the interaction of AfCFTA and Euro-Med FTAs demonstrates the potential for North African states to combine continental integration with strategic European partnerships. This model highlights the importance of governance, planning, and alignment to maximize benefits while mitigating structural tensions.

Thus, the AfCFTA represents a continental, Africa led integration framework designed to expand intra African trade, promote industrialization, strengthen regional value chains, and enhance economic resilience. It relies on instruments such as tariff reduction, services liberalization, investment protocols, and mobility frameworks to achieve these goals. In contrast, the Euro Mediterranean Free Trade Agreements constitute EU driven bilateral and regional arrangements that offer North African states access to European markets, regulatory alignment, investment attraction, and technology transfer. These agreements operate through mechanisms including tariff elimination, rules of origin, regulatory convergence, and investment facilitation. North African countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and eventually Algeria participate in both AfCFTA and Euro Med frameworks simultaneously. Their dual membership places them at the intersection of two distinct trade regimes that shape their market incentives, industrial strategies, regulatory choices, and supply chain orientations. This overlapping engagement generates both opportunities for economic upgrading and constraints that complicate policy coherence. AfCFTA expands access to African markets, encourages regional value chains, and reduces dependence on external partners, while Euro Med agreements provide preferential access to the EU, offer high value export opportunities, and attract foreign investment and technology. The synergy between the two systems lies in the ability of North African states to use European capital and technological inputs to build competitive production capacities that can then scale across the African continent through AfCFTA. Euro Med partnerships supply technology, standards, and capital that support domestic industrial upgrading, whereas AfCFTA offers the scale, diversification, and regional supply chain integration needed to deploy these capabilities effectively. This dual positioning allows North Africa to function as a bridge between Europe and Africa, a hub for Euro African value chains, and a gateway for European firms seeking access to African markets.

Such a role enhances the region's bargaining power in both continental and external negotiations. However, tensions arise because Euro Med rules of origin are strict and often bilateral, limiting the ability of North African firms to incorporate African inputs without losing EU preferences. AfCFTA rules are more flexible, but the incompatibility between the two systems can discourage regional sourcing and weaken African value chain integration. Export incentives also become distorted, as the stability and profitability of EU markets may lead North African exporters to prioritize Europe over Africa, undermining AfCFTA's objective of increasing intra African trade. Regulatory duality further complicates integration, since Euro Med agreements require alignment with stringent EU sanitary, technical, and environmental standards, while AfCFTA is still in the process of harmonizing its regulatory frameworks. This dual compliance burden can fragment production strategies and increase costs for firms operating across both regimes. To maximize complementarity, North African states must

pursue coordinated trade strategies that align AfCFTA's industrial objectives with Euro Med regulatory commitments. They must also prioritize regional value chain development by using European investment to build African based supply networks and by promoting African sourcing to reduce dependence on EU intermediates. Finally, they can leverage AfCFTA membership to strengthen their negotiating position with the EU, while simultaneously using Euro Med access to reinforce their strategic role within the African continental market.

The African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)

To strengthen governance of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) — the framework of institutions and mechanisms that support the AU's peace and security mandate — reform and enhancement can focus on several key areas based on recent AU reviews and peace and security literature:

One major pathway is to enhance institutional coherence and resourcing, addressing structural bottlenecks such as limited political will, weak prioritization across AU organs, and resource constraints, which have been highlighted in the 2025 High Level Panel review of AU governance and peace and security frameworks. Strengthening coordination between the African Governance Architecture (AGA) and APSA can integrate governance, rule of law, and security initiatives more effectively with Agenda 2063 and national institutional reforms, ensuring that peace frameworks are not siloed.

Improving capacity for early warning, analysis, and implementation is another priority: expanding the reach and analytic depth of the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) enhances the AU's ability to anticipate conflicts and provide timely advice to the Peace and Security Council. Coupling this with robust security sector reform (SSR) policies — that modernize national security institutions, promote accountability, and strengthen civilian oversight — forms a foundation for more effective conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Greater civil society engagement and inclusive dialogue with African stakeholders, including grassroots organizations, enhances legitimacy, broadens the knowledge base, and fosters locally grounded solutions to conflict challenges. Finally, integrating regional and subregional mechanisms (RECs/RMs) more fully with APSA, clarifying roles, and consolidating administrative and operational linkages can reduce duplication, enhance subsidiarity, and improve responsiveness to crises — a longstanding governance objective within AU peace and security reform efforts.

To significantly strengthen governance of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) — the comprehensive framework of institutions, policies, and operational mechanisms that underpins the African Union's mandate for continental peace, stability, and security — reforms must target a combination of structural, operational, and political dimensions, informed by recent AU assessments, High-Level Panel reviews, and contemporary peace and security scholarship. APSA's effectiveness hinges not only on its formal structures, such as the Peace and Security Council (PSC), the Panel of the Wise, and the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), but also on its ability to integrate decision-making, resource allocation, strategic vision, and operational execution across the diverse AU organs and regional economic communities (RECs).

A primary pathway to improved governance involves enhancing institutional coherence, policy alignment, and resourcing, directly addressing long-standing bottlenecks, including limited political will, fragmented prioritization, inconsistent administrative capacity, and resource constraints across AU departments. By aligning APSA more systematically with the African Governance Architecture (AGA) and broader continental initiatives such as Agenda 2063, the AU can ensure that governance, rule-of-law, human rights, and security interventions are mutually reinforcing, coordinated across layers of authority, and anchored in a long-term development and peacebuilding strategy rather than implemented in isolated silos. This alignment would also facilitate clearer roles, responsibilities, and accountability mechanisms across AU organs, regional mechanisms (RMs), and member states, ensuring that operational mandates translate into effective action on the ground.

Strengthening analytical and operational capacity is another critical pillar. Expanding the reach, quality, and analytic depth of the Continental Early Warning System enhances the AU's ability to anticipate political, social, and humanitarian crises, providing timely and evidence-based guidance to the PSC and other decision-making bodies. When combined with comprehensive security sector reform (SSR) programs — designed to modernize national security institutions, promote transparency, strengthen civilian oversight, and build interoperable capacities across member states — the AU can create a resilient foundation for conflict prevention, rapid response, and post-conflict stabilization. This dual focus on early warning and security sector modernization positions APSA to shift from reactive interventions toward proactive, preventive engagement, reducing the human and economic costs of crises.

Equally vital is deepening civil society participation, stakeholder engagement, and inclusive dialogue at continental, regional, and local levels. By integrating grassroots organizations, academia, community leaders, and private-sector actors into APSA decision-making and implementation processes, the AU can enhance the legitimacy, credibility, and contextual relevance of its interventions. Such engagement not only broadens the knowledge base and operational intelligence but also ensures that policies and peacebuilding measures are grounded in local realities, culturally informed, and sustainable over time.

Finally, reinforcing coordination with RECs, subregional mechanisms, and cross-border frameworks is essential to reduce duplication, promote subsidiarity, and create a coherent operational architecture. Clarifying mandates, harmonizing administrative procedures, and establishing shared operational standards across APSA and the RECs will improve responsiveness to rapidly evolving crises while maximizing the strategic value of limited human and financial resources. In addition, fostering strong partnerships with international actors, such as the European Union, United Nations, and strategic bilateral partners, can provide targeted technical, financial, and logistical support, ensuring that APSA remains both African-led and globally reinforced.

Taken together, these measures — spanning institutional reform, capacity enhancement, civil society engagement, regional integration, and strategic international partnerships — address the full spectrum of governance, operational, and legitimacy challenges facing APSA. By implementing them in a coordinated and sustained manner, the AU can transform APSA into a more effective, accountable, inclusive, and resilient architecture, capable of anticipating, preventing, and managing conflicts while supporting Africa's broader objectives for peace,

security, and sustainable development. Collectively, these approaches address governance, capacity, coordination, and inclusivity in ways that can make APSA more effective, legitimate, and sustainable.

Infrastructure Projects

The promotion of continental infrastructure integration and the restoration of efficient trade flows between inland regions, coastal areas, and major economic centers requires a coordinated set of large scale, cross border interventions. Five strategic project proposals are outlined below, each designed to strengthen connectivity, reduce structural bottlenecks, and enhance the competitiveness of regional economies.

A high capacity, cross border rail system linking inland production zones with major seaports would significantly reduce transport costs and transit times. Such a network would facilitate the movement of bulk commodities, manufactured goods, and agricultural products, thereby improving the reliability of supply chains. Priority corridors could include connections between Central Africa and the East African coast, the Sahel and West African ports, and the Great Lakes region and the Indian Ocean.

The creation of strategically located dry ports and logistics centers would extend port level services into the interior of the continent. These facilities would integrate road, rail, and air transport systems, enabling customs clearance, container handling, and warehousing to occur inland. This approach would reduce congestion at coastal ports, enhance trade efficiency for landlocked states, and support the development of regional value chains.

Reliable and affordable energy is essential for industrialization and the functioning of modern logistics systems. The development of cross border electricity transmission lines, supported by renewable energy generation clusters, would strengthen regional power pools and reduce energy deficits. Improved energy availability would support manufacturing, agro processing, and transport operations in inland regions.

A harmonized digital system for customs procedures, tariff schedules, certificates of origin, and cargo tracking would reduce administrative delays and enhance transparency. Such a platform would be central to the effective implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), enabling seamless movement of goods across borders and reducing non tariff barriers.

Economic corridors combining transport infrastructure, energy systems, and industrial zones would stimulate investment and employment along major trade routes. These corridors could host agro processing parks, light manufacturing clusters, and export oriented logistics facilities. By concentrating economic activity along key routes, they would strengthen linkages between inland regions and coastal gateways.

These proposed projects are consistent with the African Union's long term development agenda. Agenda 2063 emphasizes the need for integrated high speed rail networks, energy interconnection, digital transformation, and industrialization. The Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA) prioritizes cross border transport corridors, regional power systems, and ICT backbone networks. Furthermore, the AfCFTA requires

harmonized customs procedures and improved trade facilitation mechanisms to unlock the continent's economic potential.

Collectively, these initiatives reinforce the AU's vision of a connected, competitive, and industrialized continent, while addressing persistent logistical and infrastructural constraints that hinder intra African trade.

Vision 2063

The African Union's Agenda 2063, the continent's long-term blueprint for "The Africa We Want," outlines a series of flagship projects designed to accelerate socio-economic transformation and continental integration by 2063. One of the most ambitious initiatives is the development of an integrated high-speed rail network, connecting all African capitals and commercial centers to improve the movement of goods, people, and services while reducing transport costs. Complementing this is the African Commodities Strategy, which seeks to help countries add value to their natural resources, achieve higher rents from commodities, and integrate more fully into global value chains, moving beyond a dependence on raw-material exports.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) establishes a single continental market to accelerate intra-Africa trade, strengthen Africa's global trading position, and drive economic growth and sustainable development. Alongside trade liberalization, the African Passport and Free Movement of People initiative aims to remove travel barriers, facilitating work, residence, and movement across the continent. The "Silencing the Guns" initiative is a flagship effort to end wars, civil conflicts, violent extremism, and gender-based violence, promoting peace, security, and stability throughout Africa.

The Grand Inga Dam project seeks to harness the Congo River's hydroelectric potential, generating substantial power to support regional energy needs and industrial development. The Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM) is designed to create a unified air transport system, improving connectivity, liberalizing air services, and enhancing the movement of people and cargo. At the institutional level, the establishment of African financial architecture, including an African Investment Bank, Pan-African Stock Exchange, African Monetary Fund, and African Central Bank, aims to mobilize resources and deepen economic integration.

Technological and educational transformation is targeted through the Pan-African E-Network, which expands broadband connectivity, e-services, and ICT integration to benefit education, healthcare, and economic sectors. The African Outer Space Strategy develops space science and technology capabilities to support agriculture, disaster management, climate forecasting, and telecommunications. The African Virtual and E-University expands access to higher education and professional training through distance and online learning, while the cybersecurity initiative strengthens data protection and secure digital infrastructure across the continent.

Cultural and intellectual development is supported through the Great African Museum, which preserves and promotes Africa's heritage, and the Encyclopaedia Africana, which provides a continent-wide reference on African history, culture, law, and society. Finally, the African Economic Forum brings together political leadership, business, academia, and civil society to

discuss strategies for economic transformation. Together, these flagship projects form the operational backbone of Agenda 2063, establishing the foundations for continental integration, technological advancement, economic growth, and cultural renaissance, reflecting Africa's aspirations for inclusive and sustainable development by 2063.

AfCFTA

The African Continental Free Trade Area is the most significant development shaping the future of EU–Africa trade. By creating a unified market of more than a billion people, the AfCFTA reduces fragmentation, increases economies of scale, and strengthens Africa's bargaining power in global trade negotiations. For Europe, a more integrated African market offers a more predictable and attractive environment for investment, enabling European firms to build regional value chains rather than navigating dozens of separate national markets. The AfCFTA also provides a platform for rethinking the EU's existing Economic Partnership Agreements, which currently divide Africa into sub regions and sometimes undermine continental integration. Over time, the AU and EU could move toward a continent to continent trade framework, but this will only be viable once African industries are strong enough to compete with European firms. In the near term, the priority is to support African industrialisation, harmonise standards, modernise customs systems, and ensure that African producers can actually take advantage of preferential access to European markets.

Strengthening governance across African Union member states has a decisive impact on every major dimension of the AU–EU relationship—trade, migration, security, and the management of minerals and rare earths. When governance improves, the entire architecture of cooperation becomes more predictable, more balanced, and more capable of delivering shared outcomes. Integrating this dimension into your broader analysis helps show why institutional reform within Africa is not a peripheral issue but a structural driver of the future partnership.

Stronger governance enhances Africa's ability to negotiate, implement, and enforce trade agreements with the EU. More capable institutions improve regulatory alignment, reduce corruption, and create a stable environment for investment, all of which make African economies more attractive partners for European firms. This is especially important as the African Continental Free Trade Area expands, because its success depends on customs modernisation, harmonised standards, and transparent regulatory systems. Governance reform therefore strengthens Africa's position in global value chains and increases the credibility of continent to continent trade frameworks.

Country	AU Membership / Role	EU Relations / Engagement	Key EU-AU Collaborative Areas
Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)	Full AU member; participates in APSA, CEWS, and AU human security initiatives	Not an EU member; associated via European Development Fund and bilateral agreements; EU supports peacekeeping and humanitarian operations	Peacekeeping (MONUSCO/EUCAP), early warning systems, human security frameworks (AHSI), infrastructure development, governance reforms
Mozambique	Full AU member; participates in	Not an EU member; benefits from EU Development Cooperation	Counter-terrorism and stabilization (Cabo Delgado), human security

	SADC (Southern African Development Community) and AU initiatives	Instrument, humanitarian assistance, and maritime security programs	index monitoring, economic recovery programs, climate adaptation support
Nigeria	Full AU member; participates in ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), AU Peace & Security Council	Not an EU member; Strategic partnership with EU includes trade (EPA), migration, and development cooperation	Human security initiatives (AHSI), regional peacekeeping, trade and infrastructure integration, governance support, health and education programs
Angola	Full AU member; participates in SADC and AU initiatives	Not an EU member; receives development and investment support from EU, particularly in energy, infrastructure, and governance	Human security assessments, energy projects, regional integration, economic development and industrialization initiatives, environmental resilience

The Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Angola are all full members of the African Union, actively contributing to continental initiatives aimed at regional integration, peace, security, and sustainable development. Each country participates in AU-led frameworks such as the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), the Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), and human security assessments under the African Human Security Index (AHSI). These mechanisms allow the countries not only to influence continental policies but also to benefit from coordinated efforts to stabilize conflict-affected regions, promote economic connectivity, and advance Agenda 2063's flagship projects. Through their engagement, these nations play a pivotal role in operationalizing AU strategies while addressing national and regional vulnerabilities.

Although none of these countries are EU members, each maintains significant bilateral and multilateral relations with the European Union. These relationships encompass development assistance, trade agreements, technical cooperation, capacity-building initiatives, and security partnerships. The EU has provided targeted support in governance reform, public health, infrastructure development, economic diversification, and climate resilience, aligning these interventions with AU priorities and national development strategies. This relationship demonstrates a hybrid model of collaboration, where EU resources and technical expertise complement African-led frameworks and enhance continental policy implementation.

The EU–AU collaborative dimension is particularly pronounced in regional security, conflict prevention, and human development. Counter-terrorism and peacekeeping operations, for example in northern Mozambique and eastern DRC, are coordinated alongside human security monitoring under the AHSI, ensuring that security interventions are informed by data-driven assessments of vulnerability and risk. Infrastructure, connectivity, and governance capacity-building projects further strengthen state institutions, improve service delivery, and facilitate economic integration, aligning national, regional, and continental development priorities with international support.

Regional organizations function as critical intermediaries between national policies and continental strategies. Mozambique and Angola leverage the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to coordinate regional security, economic integration, and policy harmonization. Nigeria operates within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which plays a central role in regional peacekeeping, trade facilitation, and governance. The Democratic Republic of Congo, strategically positioned in central Africa, aligns national policy objectives with AU frameworks while participating in regional networks that address conflict prevention, resource governance, and infrastructure connectivity. These multilayered relationships demonstrate the complex interplay between national priorities, regional integration, and EU-AU cooperation, emphasizing a holistic approach to human security, sustainable development, and continental cohesion.

Taken together, these dynamics show that expanding EU–Africa trade is not simply a matter of lowering tariffs or signing new agreements. It requires a structural transformation of how both continents conceive of their economic relationship. Europe must recognise Africa not as a supplier of raw materials but as a strategic partner in global value chains. Africa must leverage its demographic, mineral, and market advantages to negotiate from a position of agency rather than dependency. North African states will play a decisive role as connectors and industrial anchors. Global Gateway can provide the infrastructure backbone for deeper integration, while the AfCFTA offers the continental framework for a more balanced and transformative trade partnership. The future of EU–Africa trade will depend on whether both sides can align these elements into a coherent strategy that supports shared prosperity and long term stability

AU-EU Partnership on Entrepreneurship, RDI & Technology

The strategic partnership between the African Union and the European Union in the areas of entrepreneurship, research, development, and innovation, as well as technology, is central to fostering economic competitiveness and sustainable development across the continent. This collaboration is framed within the broader context of Africa's Agenda 2063, which prioritizes industrialization, digitalization, and the creation of knowledge-based economies, while aligning with the European Union's strategic objectives of promoting inclusive growth, digital transformation, and green innovation in partner regions. These priorities intersect directly with trade agreements, including Economic Partnership Agreements and the African Continental Free Trade Area, as well as investment frameworks that support industrial clusters, regional value chains, and technological hubs.

Entrepreneurship forms a core pillar of this partnership. Joint AU–EU initiatives aim to scale early-stage ventures and foster the development of small and medium-sized enterprises. Access to finance is facilitated through blended finance instruments, EU innovation funds, and African Development Bank programs, enabling enterprises to invest in growth and innovation. Capacity building and skills development are promoted through training programs, incubators, and mentorship networks, while cross-border entrepreneurship networks strengthen intra-African trade, link regional supply chains, and expand access to European markets.

Research, development, and innovation represent another central dimension of AU–EU cooperation. Collaborative RDI frameworks provide joint funding mechanisms for research institutes, universities, and technology hubs, with a focus on sectors such as energy, agriculture,

health, digital technologies, and climate-smart solutions. Knowledge transfer initiatives support the strengthening of African research capacities, while regulatory and policy alignment ensures that innovation is protected and incentivized, particularly through robust intellectual property frameworks and public–private collaboration.

Technology and digital transformation are integral to this strategic partnership. Investments in digital infrastructure, including connectivity, cloud computing, and smart city initiatives, underpin both economic and social development. Complementary programs enhance human capital through education and training in ICT skills, preparing a high-tech workforce capable of supporting digital economies. Technology also serves governance objectives through e-government solutions, digital trade facilitation, and data-driven policy monitoring. Furthermore, technology is deployed to address sustainability challenges, encompassing renewable energy solutions, artificial intelligence for climate monitoring, and precision agriculture technologies.

Effective governance and institutional coordination are essential to the success of AU–EU initiatives. The African Union plays a critical role in ensuring that continental priorities guide project selection and implementation, while the European External Action Service provides strategic oversight and DG INTPA contributes technical expertise. Joint monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, including shared dashboards, track entrepreneurship metrics, RDI outcomes, and technology adoption rates. Multi-level stakeholder engagement, involving the private sector, civil society, universities, and innovation hubs, ensures that initiatives remain contextually relevant, inclusive, and impactful.

The strategic outcomes of this partnership are manifold. AU–EU cooperation strengthens African innovation ecosystems and enhances global competitiveness, increases private-sector participation in cross-border ventures and technology adoption, and supports the harmonization of regulatory and policy frameworks conducive to entrepreneurship and research. Collectively, these efforts contribute to the creation of resilient, knowledge-based economies aligned with the AU and EU’s long-term industrial, digital, and sustainable development strategies.

To realize these objectives, it is recommended that multi-bilateral projects combining EU funding, AU oversight, and national execution be prioritized. The establishment of joint innovation funds targeting priority sectors such as energy, agriculture, and information and communication technology is essential. Regional incubation hubs and scale-up programs for startups and SMEs should be supported, while technology and RDI initiatives must be aligned with AfCFTA objectives and industrial cluster development. Finally, robust monitoring, data collection, and knowledge-sharing frameworks should be strengthened across AU–EU innovation initiatives to ensure transparency, accountability, and measurable impact.

The implementation of AU–EU initiatives in entrepreneurship, research, development, innovation, and technology requires a careful distribution of responsibilities and funding obligations among the African Union, international financial institutions, and the European Union to ensure efficiency, ownership, and alignment with continental and regional priorities. The African Union assumes a central role in strategic oversight, coordination, and priority-setting. As the principal continental body, the AU is responsible for identifying regional needs, ensuring alignment with Agenda 2063 and AfCFTA objectives, and providing guidance to

national authorities and regional economic communities. The AU also oversees joint monitoring frameworks, facilitates knowledge-sharing across member states, and ensures that initiatives respect regional industrial, technological, and governance strategies. Financially, the AU contributes co-financing for strategic programs, particularly those supporting continental integration, innovation clusters, and multi-country technology projects, leveraging its capacity to coordinate pooled resources from member states.

International financial institutions, including the African Development Bank, World Bank, and regional development banks, provide the technical and financial backbone for the partnership. IFIs fund large-scale infrastructure, research, and technology initiatives, provide risk-mitigation instruments such as guarantees and blended finance facilities, and support capacity-building programs for national agencies. They are particularly crucial in projects with high capital intensity, such as renewable energy deployment, digital infrastructure, and industrial innovation hubs, where commercial investment alone may be insufficient. IFIs also act as neutral facilitators in multi-bilateral projects, ensuring transparency, accountability, and rigorous monitoring and evaluation standards.

The European Union, through DG INTPA and EEAS, provides both financial resources and technical expertise. The EU funds innovation programs, RDI grants, and entrepreneurship support schemes, often combining development assistance with targeted trade and investment incentives. The EU also delivers specialized advisory support, regulatory guidance, and technology transfer initiatives, ensuring that interventions are compatible with EU standards in digitalization, sustainability, and industrial policy. EU Delegations coordinate with both AU institutions and national authorities to implement multi-bilateral programs while reinforcing harmonization across EPAs, AfCFTA-aligned industrial clusters, and sectoral priorities such as renewable energy, ICT, and agri-tech innovation.

It is not uncommon to see African women building businesses with a resilience that is anything but small. Their progress is no minor achievement, even if it is often spoken of with quiet understatement. In many regions, opportunity arrives slowly and softly, like a cautious dawn. Yet women continue to rise, and work and plan and push, refusing to be still. Their stories form a living allegory, where each entrepreneur becomes a seed insisting on sprouting through stone. The marketplace is a maze, but they navigate it with the precision of seasoned cartographers. Barriers stand tall, but they are not insurmountable. Access to capital is no trivial hurdle, though it is often treated as such. Cultural expectations can feel like invisible chains, light enough to deny yet heavy enough to restrict. Still, women move forward with courage and craft and clarity, refusing to yield. Their ambition is a quiet fire, rarely acknowledged but impossible to extinguish. In rural areas, a woman's business may begin as a single spark, but it can grow into a wildfire of innovation. The challenges they face are not insignificant, though they are frequently minimized. Many women must balance family and finance and farming, all before noon. Their determination is a drumbeat, steady and strong beneath the noise of doubt. Some communities offer support, though it is not always abundant.

Training programs arrive like scattered raindrops, refreshing but rarely enough to fill the well. Yet women gather these drops and turn them into rivers. Their enterprises become bridges, connecting households to hope. Microloans, though modest, can act as keys, unlocking long closed doors. Digital tools serve as lanterns, illuminating paths once hidden. The

entrepreneurial landscape is not entirely barren, though it can appear so from afar. Women cultivate it with patience and persistence and purpose, transforming dust into harvest. Their leadership is a lighthouse, guiding younger generations toward possibility. When policies fail them, they innovate anyway—what a testament to tenacity! Their progress is no small ripple, for it reshapes entire economic tides. Networks of women entrepreneurs form gardens, where ideas bloom in shared soil. Mentorship becomes a map, charting routes through uncertainty. Education acts as a ladder, lifting women beyond the limits once imposed. Access to markets is not entirely absent, but it is often narrow and winding. Still, women walk these paths with grit and grace and grit again, refusing to retreat. Their creativity is a compass, pointing toward solutions others overlook. Bureaucratic barriers are not exactly helpful, though they persist stubbornly. Women navigate them like sailors steering through storms. Their enterprises become engines, driving local economies forward. Community support, when present, acts as a wind, filling their sails. When absent, women row anyway—what strength! Their success is no mere coincidence, but the product of relentless effort. Technology becomes a thread, weaving rural entrepreneurs into global markets. Investment gaps are not negligible, yet they can be bridged with intentional policy. Women’s resilience is a river, carving new channels through rigid terrain.

Their innovation is a harvest, feeding families and futures alike. Structural inequality is not a minor inconvenience, but it can be dismantled. With training, capital, and community, women rise like sunflowers, turning toward every sliver of light. Their enterprises become stories, retold in villages and cities as lessons in possibility. Collaboration acts as a chorus, amplifying voices once muted. Policy reform becomes a plow, breaking the hardened ground of outdated norms. When barriers fall, women soar—what a sight! Their achievements are not to be underestimated, for they reshape the continent’s economic horizon. And so, lifting female entrepreneurship in Africa becomes not just a goal but a journey, where every woman is both traveler and trailblazer.

Strategically, this distribution of bills ensures a division of labor that leverages comparative strengths: the AU provides continental legitimacy and strategic alignment, IFIs supply large-scale financing and risk management expertise, and the EU contributes technical know-how, market access linkages, and innovation support. This arrangement also strengthens African agency by ensuring that ownership resides with the continent, while the EU and IFIs act as enablers rather than primary drivers. Such a framework reduces the risk of fragmented implementation, avoids duplication, and allows for scalable interventions across national and regional contexts. By clearly defining financial and operational responsibilities, this multi-actor approach promotes sustainable and inclusive entrepreneurship ecosystems, robust RDI capacities, and accelerated technology adoption across Africa.

In the words of a female entrepreneur Ajay Banga: “Africa can, and must, chart a course towards a brighter future.” This statement reflects the Bank’s strategic view that Africa’s progress hinges not on external assumptions but on deliberate policy choices, human capital investment, and structural transformation, aligning well with trade, governance, and development priorities in AU–EU discussions.

Table

Domain / Activity	African Union (AU)	International Financial Institutions (IFIs)	European Union (EU – DG INTPA + EEAS)
Strategic Oversight & Policy Alignment	Defines continental priorities; aligns initiatives with Agenda 2063 and AfCFTA; sets benchmarks and multi-country frameworks	Provides advisory support on project selection; ensures compliance with international financial and governance standards	Advises on regulatory harmonization, EU trade and investment alignment; coordinates with AU to ensure policy coherence
Entrepreneurship Development	Coordinates regional SME support and startup ecosystems; monitors cross-border networks	Provides risk-sharing instruments, guarantees, and blended finance for startups; funds regional incubation hubs	Offers funding for entrepreneurship programs; provides mentorship networks, capacity building, and market access support
Research, Development, and Innovation (RDI)	Sets continental and sectoral research priorities; facilitates collaboration across universities and research institutes	Funds large-scale RDI projects; supports infrastructure, grants, and cross-border innovation clusters; ensures accountability	Co-funds joint RDI programs; provides technology transfer, technical expertise, and EU standards alignment
Technology & Digital Transformation	Coordinates continental ICT strategies and digital inclusion; monitors adoption metrics	Funds infrastructure-heavy projects such as connectivity, cloud, smart cities; manages blended finance risk	Provides digital innovation grants, regulatory guidance, and technical expertise; supports e-governance, AI applications, and sustainability tech
Monitoring, Evaluation & Knowledge Sharing	Develops continental monitoring dashboards; collects data; ensures AU-wide reporting	Provides independent evaluation frameworks, compliance auditing, and impact assessment	Supports technical reporting, harmonized KPIs, and lessons-learned dissemination; ensures EU-AU

			alignment in monitoring
Funding & Co-financing	Allocates AU pooled resources for continental/regional initiatives; contributes co-financing for strategic programs	Provides primary capital for large-scale, high-risk projects; blended finance, guarantees, loans, and grants	Provides development funds, technical assistance grants, and targeted sectoral investments; supports multi-bilateral EU-AU initiatives

The African Union serves as the strategic owner and principal coordinator in AU–EU partnerships, providing leadership that ensures African agency, continental coherence, and alignment with broader regional integration objectives. By defining continental priorities, harmonizing initiatives with Agenda 2063 and AfCFTA frameworks, and setting clear benchmarks for entrepreneurship, research, development, innovation, and technology, the AU anchors the partnership in African interests and ensures that external assistance is fully adapted to local and regional contexts. Its role extends to monitoring cross-border programs, facilitating collaboration among member states, and maintaining oversight of multi-country projects, thereby safeguarding continental legitimacy and coherence.

International financial institutions function as the financial and technical backbone of these initiatives, delivering large-scale funding, risk mitigation, and operational expertise essential for high-capital projects and cross-border programs. By providing blended finance instruments, guarantees, and grants, IFIs enable ventures that may otherwise face prohibitive investment risks, including infrastructure development, regional incubation hubs, and RDI clusters. Their technical advisory capacity supports the AU and national governments in program design, evaluation, and compliance monitoring, ensuring transparency, accountability, and the long-term sustainability of investments.

The European Union complements these efforts as a technical enabler and innovation partner, bringing both financial resources and specialized expertise to the table. The EU supports regulatory alignment, facilitates knowledge transfer, and co-funds entrepreneurship and innovation programs, ensuring that interventions meet EU standards for sustainability, digitalization, and industrial policy. By coordinating with AU authorities and regional institutions, the EU helps integrate trade, investment, and innovation objectives, promoting multi-bilateral projects that are consistent with continental priorities while leveraging European technical know-how and market linkages.

Successful implementation of multi-bilateral initiatives depends on highly synchronized coordination among the AU, IFIs, and EU. Each actor leverages its comparative strengths to reduce duplication, optimize resource allocation, and maximize developmental impact. This integrated approach strengthens African entrepreneurship ecosystems, accelerates the adoption of research, development, and innovation outcomes, and supports the deployment of advanced technologies across sectors such as energy, agriculture, and ICT. Ultimately, the partnership reinforces African agency, promotes continental integration, and fosters resilient, knowledge-

driven economies capable of sustaining inclusive growth, industrial modernization, and regional competitiveness.

Strengthening African Public Administration under an Africa Compact: A Strategic Analysis

Public administration across Africa is remarkably diverse, reflecting the continent's vast geographic, political, historical, and economic landscape. Governance systems span presidential, parliamentary, hybrid, and traditional monarchical structures, each with varying capacities for policy formulation, implementation, and oversight. Some countries, such as Rwanda, Mauritius, and South Africa, demonstrate relatively strong bureaucratic systems with structured civil service and functional regulatory frameworks, while fragile or conflict-affected states such as Libya, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo exhibit severely constrained administrative capacity, weak institutions, and limited service delivery. Institutional functions including fiscal management, regulatory enforcement, public service provision, and oversight mechanisms often encounter chronic challenges, including limited technical capacity, political interference, corruption, and uneven decentralization. Non-state actors, including civil society organizations, traditional authorities, and informal networks, frequently supplement state functions, but this can create fragmentation and inconsistent governance outcomes. Across the continent, overlapping mandates among national governments, regional economic communities, and AU institutions further complicate administrative coherence, creating ambiguity in roles, accountability, and the delivery of development, trade, and industrial policies.

The challenges facing public administration are multidimensional. Capacity gaps in key ministries, regulatory bodies, and digital administration limit effective governance. Institutional fragmentation slows decision-making, undermines accountability, and reduces efficiency. Transparency and oversight mechanisms are frequently underdeveloped, leaving civil services vulnerable to politicization, patronage, and corruption. Infrastructure deficits, including limited ICT connectivity, data systems, and logistical networks, constrain service delivery and impede data-driven policymaking. Scarcity of resources, both human and financial, limits the ability to recruit skilled personnel, provide ongoing training, and fund operational requirements. Importantly, these challenges are highly contextual: fragile states, resource-rich but poorly managed economies, and relatively stable countries require tailored interventions, as a one-size-fits-all approach would be ineffective and potentially destabilizing.

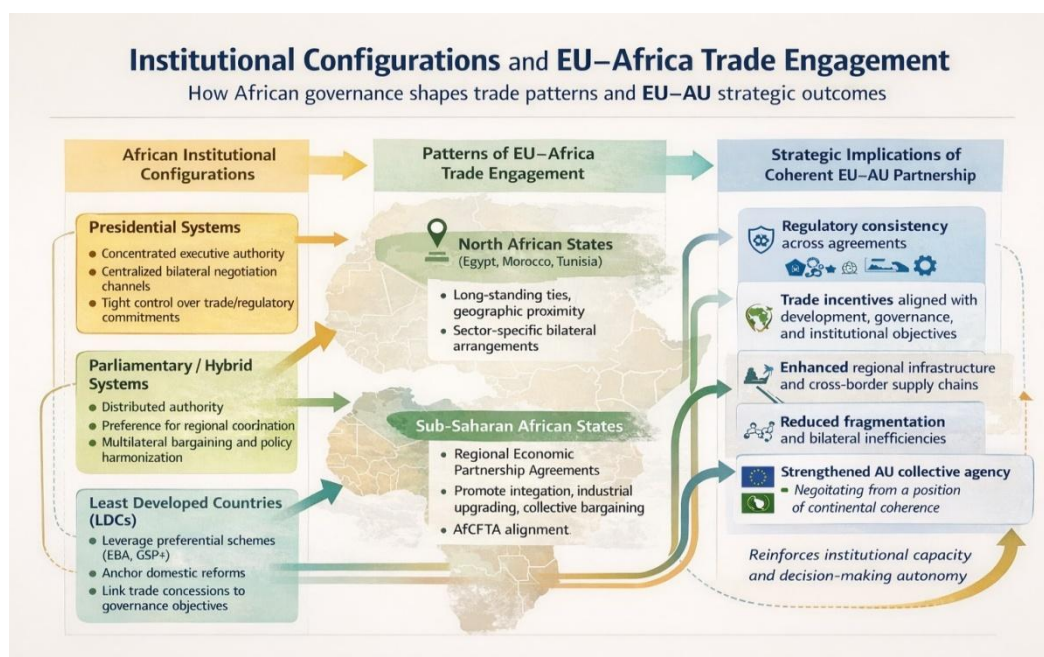
In this context, an Africa Compact designed to strengthen public administration must place African agency at its core while leveraging the comparative advantages of external partners. The African Union serves as the principal strategic owner, defining continental priorities, harmonizing initiatives with Agenda 2063 and AfCFTA objectives, and setting benchmarks for cross-country programs in entrepreneurship, research, development, innovation, and technology. By coordinating regional networks, facilitating collaboration among member states, and maintaining oversight of multi-country initiatives, the AU ensures that interventions respect continental integration strategies and reinforce governance legitimacy. International financial institutions, including the African Development Bank, World Bank, and regional development banks, provide the financial and technical backbone of such initiatives. They supply large-scale funding, risk mitigation instruments, and operational expertise for high-

capital projects such as infrastructure development, cross-border incubation hubs, and regional RDI clusters, while also ensuring compliance, accountability, and evaluation rigor.

The European Union acts as a technical enabler and innovation partner, bringing specialized expertise, co-funding, and regulatory guidance. The EU supports digital administration, governance reform, and capacity-building programs, aligning interventions with trade agreements, industrial policy, and sustainability standards. The EU also facilitates knowledge transfer, mentorship networks, and market linkages, ensuring that entrepreneurship and innovation programs are both technically robust and strategically coherent with continental priorities. The United States contributes expertise in governance reform, anti-corruption initiatives, civil service training, and performance management, reinforcing accountability and institutional professionalism. China's engagement complements these efforts by delivering infrastructure and ICT systems that enhance digital administration, financial management, and logistical capacity, particularly in countries or regions with limited local technical capabilities.

Strategic interventions should focus on areas that offer the highest leverage for systemic transformation. These include policy and regulatory systems modernization, digital governance platforms, capacity-building programs for civil servants, performance monitoring and evaluation systems, and mechanisms for regional and continental coordination. Interventions must be context-sensitive, scaling ambitious programs in stable countries while providing incremental capacity-building and stabilization support in fragile states. Funding requirements depend on ambition, scale, and time horizon. Smaller states may require \$50–100 million over five to seven years to establish foundational systems, training, and regulatory frameworks, while regional or continental programs could demand \$500–1,000 million to support multi-country coordination, AfCFTA-aligned harmonization, and large-scale infrastructure or ICT investments. Funding should be blended across AU resources, IFIs, and EU/US/China contributions, ensuring African ownership and sustainable outcomes.

Figure



Effective coordination among the AU, IFIs, and EU/US/China is critical. Each actor leverages its comparative advantages to reduce duplication, maximize developmental impact, and reinforce African agency. When strategically aligned, these interventions strengthen entrepreneurship ecosystems, accelerate research, development, and innovation adoption, enhance technology deployment across priority sectors such as energy, agriculture, and ICT, and create resilient, knowledge-driven economies capable of sustaining inclusive growth, industrial modernization, and regional competitiveness. By investing in public administration, external partners and African institutions alike can unlock synergies with trade agreements, reduce transaction costs, build investor confidence, and support the continental agenda for economic transformation, all while preserving the agency and leadership of African states in defining and executing their own development trajectories.

The infographic titled “Institutional Configurations and EU–Africa Trade Engagement” visualizes how African governance shapes trade patterns and informs EU–AU strategic outcomes. It is organized into three connected tiers, showing institutional types, trade engagement, and strategic implications. The left tier presents African institutional configurations, distinguishing presidential systems, parliamentary or hybrid systems, and least developed countries (LDCs). Presidential systems concentrate executive authority, rely on bilateral negotiation channels, and maintain tight control over trade and regulatory commitments. Parliamentary or hybrid systems distribute authority, prefer regional coordination, and engage in multilateral bargaining to harmonize policies. LDCs leverage preferential trade schemes, anchor domestic reforms, and link trade concessions to governance objectives. Each configuration is connected by arrows to the middle tier, showing how governance influences trade engagement patterns.

The middle tier maps EU–Africa trade engagement geographically. North African states, such as Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, maintain long-standing ties with the EU, benefiting from geographic proximity and sector-specific bilateral arrangements. Sub-Saharan African states engage through Regional Economic Partnership Agreements, promoting integration, industrial upgrading, and collective bargaining, aligned with the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Arrows from the institutional tier to the trade tier illustrate the causative relationship between governance type and trade approach. For example, concentrated presidential authority in North Africa often results in strong bilateral arrangements, while distributed parliamentary authority in Sub-Saharan Africa encourages regional alignment.

The right tier demonstrates the strategic implications of a coherent EU–AU partnership. Regulatory consistency across agreements ensures harmonized industrial, environmental, and climate standards. Trade incentives are aligned with development, governance, and institutional objectives, maximizing the impact of economic engagement. Enhanced regional infrastructure and cross-border supply chains are promoted, supporting economic integration. Reduced fragmentation and bilateral inefficiencies allow African states to negotiate from a more unified position. The AU’s collective agency is strengthened, reinforcing institutional capacity and decision-making autonomy. Feedback arrows from the strategic tier to the institutional tier indicate that successful partnership outcomes can reinforce governance structures.

The infographic emphasizes that trade engagement and strategic alignment are mutually reinforcing processes. Institutional type shapes how countries approach trade, which in turn informs EU–AU strategies and strengthens continental coherence. The visualization uses color coding to differentiate tiers and arrow flows, aiding clarity. Map segments highlight geographic regions, while icons represent governance, industrial, and infrastructure functions. Overall, the diagram communicates that coordinated action between the AU and EU can produce systemic improvements across governance, trade, and development. It suggests that governance reforms, strategic infrastructure, and trade alignment are intertwined levers for sustainable continental progress. The visual also illustrates that LDCs can use preferential schemes to catalyze domestic reforms while integrating into continental trade networks. By connecting governance, trade, and strategic outcomes, the infographic encapsulates the logic of multi-level, institutionalized partnership. It demonstrates how harmonized policies and coordinated interventions can reduce inefficiencies, promote integration, and enhance Africa’s negotiating position globally. Ultimately, the diagram conveys that structural alignment and partnership, rather than isolated interventions, are key to long-term economic and institutional resilience in Africa.

The institutional configuration of African states significantly shapes their patterns of engagement with the European Union. Presidential systems, characterized by concentrated executive authority, often gravitate toward highly centralized and bilateral negotiation channels, enabling leaders to exercise tighter control over trade and regulatory commitments. In contrast, parliamentary and hybrid systems, which distribute authority across multiple actors, tend to favor regional coordination, policy harmonization, and multilateral bargaining frameworks. Least Developed Countries make strategic use of preferential access schemes such as Everything But Arms to anchor domestic reforms, attract development assistance, and strengthen the linkage between trade concessions and broader governance objectives.

Variation in EU–Africa trade agreements also reflects enduring historical, geopolitical, and economic trajectories. North African states—including Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia—draw on long-standing diplomatic ties, geographic proximity to Europe, and established industrial linkages, resulting in more advanced and sector specific bilateral arrangements. Sub Saharan African countries, by contrast, primarily engage through regional Economic Partnership Agreements designed to promote regional integration, industrial upgrading, and collective bargaining capacity, particularly within the emerging AfCFTA framework.

A more coherent and continent wide EU–AU partnership offers substantial strategic advantages. It enhances regulatory consistency across diverse agreements, aligning industrial policy, environmental standards, and climate related obligations. It also enables the EU to synchronize trade incentives with development, governance, and institutional capacity objectives rather than dispersing them across fragmented bilateral channels. Furthermore, an integrated approach strengthens regional infrastructure development and cross border supply chains, reducing the inefficiencies associated with isolated bilateral trade corridors. By mitigating tensions between national and regional priorities, such a framework ultimately reinforces the African Union’s collective agency and its ability to negotiate from a position of continental coherence.

Summary

It could strengthen the African Union's ability to act collectively and negotiate from a unified position, giving it greater influence over trade and regional development. By aligning EU trade incentives with African strategies, the partnership reduces fragmentation and ensures that bilateral and multilateral engagements support continental priorities. Technical and financial support from the EU builds the capacity of national and regional institutions, allowing states to manage trade, industrial, and governance reforms more effectively. Shared ownership of projects, including infrastructure and regulatory alignment, promotes sustainable cooperation and reduces dependency. Linking economic incentives to governance and regional integration also addresses structural drivers of conflict, contributing to more stable political environments. The partnership supports industrial upgrading, strengthens supply chains, and harmonizes standards across environmental, climate, and industrial domains, creating predictable rules for both African states and European investors.

Expected impacts include stronger economic integration, with increased intra-African trade and better connectivity, higher industrial productivity, and more competitive regional value chains. Governance and institutional capacity improve through better regulatory frameworks and functional mechanisms for regional coordination. Peace and security are enhanced as conflicts linked to resources or identity are reduced, and communities experience more stability. Social outcomes include expanded employment, especially for youth, greater access to education and skills training, and more inclusive participation in governance. Migration pressures toward Europe decrease as local opportunities increase.

Evaluation of the partnership focuses on measuring trade growth, industrial output, and infrastructure development, alongside improvements in governance, regulatory frameworks, and conflict prevention mechanisms. Social progress is assessed through employment, education, and community cohesion indicators. The effectiveness of the partnership is also judged by the level of AU leadership, alignment of EU investment with African priorities, and coordination between AU, EU, and OIC. Together, these measures link the partnership's intended goals to tangible outcomes in economic development, governance, peace, and social inclusion.

8.0 AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES: AFRICA'S GEOPOLITICAL POSITION

Africa's geopolitical trajectory is shaped by a complex interplay of demographic, economic, strategic, and environmental factors, which collectively position the continent as a rising pole of influence in the 21st century. The circular diagram illustrates this multidimensional landscape, emphasizing the interconnectedness of forces rather than a linear cause-effect chain. At the center lies the concept of Africa as a rising geopolitical hub, surrounded by eight mutually reinforcing dimensions.

Demographic Power is the foundation of Africa's potential influence. With a population exceeding 1.4 billion and a median age below 20, the continent is poised to become a global driver of labor supply, consumption, and innovation. Youthful populations create opportunities for economic expansion but also demand governance, education, and employment policies to harness their potential.

Figure



Strategic Geography amplifies Africa's global significance. Situated at the crossroads of the Atlantic, Indian Ocean, and Mediterranean trade routes, the continent controls critical maritime chokepoints and logistics corridors. This geography not only makes Africa central to global trade but also attracts external security investments and military presence.

Africa's Critical Mineral Endowment enhances its leverage in technological and energy transitions. Resources such as cobalt, lithium, and rare earth elements are essential for batteries, renewable energy systems, and high-tech industries. Control over these minerals positions Africa as a vital partner—and sometimes a point of competition—for major industrial powers.

Economic Integration through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) strengthens collective bargaining power. By expanding the internal market, harmonizing regulations, and facilitating cross-border investment, the AfCFTA enhances Africa's ability to negotiate trade, investment, and development agreements on favorable terms.

Multipolar Diplomacy reflects Africa's engagement with a diverse set of global actors, including China, the European Union, the United States, India, and Gulf states. This diplomatic flexibility allows African states to leverage competition among external powers, pursue strategic autonomy, and secure development resources without dependency on a single partner.

Within the continent, Regional Power Constellations—anchored by Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt, and Ethiopia—shape political leadership and influence the collective African voice in global governance. Regional dynamics often determine the success of continental initiatives, from peacekeeping to infrastructure development.

Security Competition underscores Africa's position as an arena of geopolitical contestation. External military deployments, peacekeeping missions, and private security engagements reflect both opportunities for partnerships and risks of conflict spillover. Security challenges are intricately linked to regional leadership, demographic pressures, and external interests.

Finally, Climate and Energy Politics highlight Africa's dual role as a vulnerable actor and a potential renewable energy powerhouse. The continent's exposure to climate change creates imperative for adaptive strategies, while its solar, hydro, and wind potential offers a platform to influence global energy transitions and climate governance.

The circular model demonstrates that Africa's rise is not reducible to a single dimension. Rather, it is the synergistic effect of these forces—demography fueling markets, minerals driving investment, and geography attracting global attention—that positions Africa as a geopolitically consequential actor. This systems-oriented perspective underscores the importance of integrated strategies for policy, investment, and security planning, acknowledging that shifts in one domain reverberate across others.

In conclusion, Africa's geopolitical significance is emergent and multidimensional. The circular diagram serves as both an analytical framework and a visual heuristic, reminding policymakers, scholars, and investors that Africa's influence is shaped by the dynamic interaction of multiple forces, each reinforcing and constraining the others. Understanding this complexity is essential for engaging with the continent strategically, sustainably, and effectively.

Trade between the European Union and Africa holds far greater potential than current patterns suggest, and its expansion depends on recognising the structural interdependencies that bind the two continents together. For decades, the relationship has been shaped by a narrow exchange of African raw materials for European manufactured goods, a pattern that has limited Africa's industrial development and constrained Europe's ability to diversify its supply chains. A more ambitious trade agenda requires both sides to move beyond this legacy and embrace a model built on co industrialisation, shared value creation, and long term strategic alignment. The EU's need for secure access to critical minerals, diversified energy sources, and resilient supply chains intersects directly with Africa's need for investment, technology transfer, and access to high value markets. These overlapping interests create a foundation for a deeper and more balanced trade partnership, provided that both continents commit to aligning their economic strategies rather than pursuing isolated or transactional initiatives.

Figure



Economic integration

The interdependencies shaping EU–Africa trade are profound and increasingly unavoidable. Africa depends on Europe for regulatory frameworks, investment capital, technological

capabilities, and preferential market access, all of which influence the competitiveness of African exports. Europe, in turn, depends on Africa for essential inputs into its green and digital transitions, including cobalt, lithium, rare earths, hydrogen, agricultural products, and new energy corridors. As global geopolitics push Europe to reduce reliance on single suppliers, especially in Asia, Africa becomes a central pillar of European economic security. At the same time, Africa's demographic expansion and growing consumer markets create opportunities for European firms seeking long term growth beyond saturated markets. These interdependencies mean that trade policy cannot be separated from industrial policy, energy strategy, or geopolitical positioning. The future of EU–Africa trade will be shaped by how effectively both sides manage these overlapping dependencies and transform them into mutually reinforcing advantages.

North African states occupy a uniquely strategic position in this evolving landscape. Countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Egypt are already deeply integrated into European value chains through association agreements, preferential trade regimes, and long standing industrial partnerships. Their manufacturing sectors, especially in automotive components, textiles, agri food processing, and increasingly renewable energy and green hydrogen, serve as gateways linking African production to European markets. Their ports, logistics corridors, and regulatory frameworks are more closely aligned with European standards than those of many sub Saharan states, enabling them to function as continental connectors. As the African Continental Free Trade Area deepens, North African economies can play a bridging role, facilitating the movement of goods, investment, and technology between Europe and the rest of Africa. Their dual identity—as African states and Mediterranean neighbours—positions them as pivotal actors in shaping the next generation of EU–Africa trade relations.

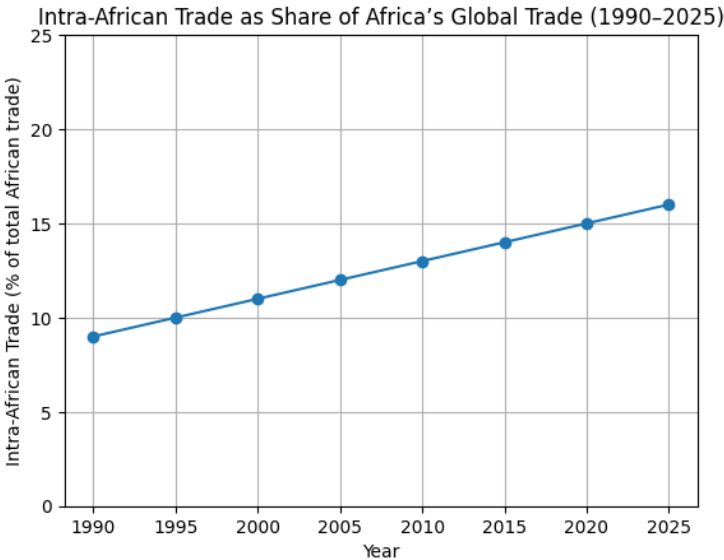
Libya's potential integration into the Euro Mediterranean space, combined with the ongoing reform of the European Union, would significantly reshape the political and economic landscape of EU–Africa relations. These developments matter because Libya sits at the crossroads of North Africa, the Sahel, and the Mediterranean, and because EU reform is redefining how Europe manages enlargement, neighbourhood policy, migration governance, and external partnerships. Bringing these two dynamics into your broader analysis of AU–EU trade, migration, minerals, and security adds an important layer of strategic depth.

Libya's stabilisation and gradual integration into Euro Med frameworks would transform the regional geometry of cooperation. A functioning Libyan state with predictable institutions would reopen a major energy corridor, reconnect North Africa's western and eastern subregions, and restore a key maritime link between Africa and Europe. It would also shift the balance of migration governance: Libya has long been a central transit hub, and its instability has amplified irregular flows, empowered smuggling networks, and complicated EU policy. Integration into Euro Med structures would allow Libya to participate in coordinated border management, legal mobility schemes, and economic development programmes, reducing the volatility that has shaped EU–Africa migration debates for more than a decade. Economically, Libya's reconstruction and reintegration would create new demand for European investment and new opportunities for African labour mobility, while also strengthening North Africa's role as a connector between the EU and the wider continent.

The reform of the EU itself adds another layer of impact. As the EU prepares for future enlargement, strengthens its external action instruments, and reconfigures its budgetary and governance mechanisms, its approach to Africa is shifting from development assistance to strategic partnership. EU reform is pushing Europe to think more in terms of geopolitical interdependence, supply chain resilience, and neighbourhood stabilisation, all of which elevate Africa’s importance. A more integrated and strategically oriented EU will seek deeper cooperation on energy, critical minerals, digital infrastructure, and security governance. This will influence how Europe engages with the African Continental Free Trade Area, how it deploys Global Gateway investments, and how it negotiates migration frameworks. EU reform also strengthens the role of Mediterranean member states—Italy, Spain, France, Greece, Cyprus, Malta—whose priorities naturally pull Africa higher on the European agenda.

Together, Libya’s integration and EU reform reinforce the centrality of North Africa in the future of EU–Africa relations. A stabilised Libya would complete the Mediterranean arc, enabling smoother trade flows, more coherent migration governance, and stronger regional energy networks. EU reform, meanwhile, creates the institutional capacity and political incentive for Europe to engage Africa not as a peripheral partner but as a strategic neighbour. These shifts would amplify Africa’s leverage in negotiations on minerals, migration, and security, while also giving Europe a more stable and interconnected southern neighbourhood.

Table



Despite incremental progress since the early 1990s, intra-African trade has increased only modestly, rising from approximately 9 per cent of Africa’s total global trade in 1990 to around 16 per cent by 2025. This limited expansion underscores the persistence of an outward-oriented trade structure shaped by historical patterns of colonial extraction, commodity dependence, and external market integration. Rather than evolving into a dense network of regional value chains, African economies have largely remained configured around exporting primary goods to external partners while importing manufactured and high-value products from outside the continent.

The continued weakness of intra-African trade reflects deep structural constraints, including inadequate transport and logistics infrastructure, fragmented regulatory regimes, high non-tariff barriers, and limited industrial complementarities among African economies. These factors have inhibited the emergence of integrated production networks and constrained the development of scale economies within the continent. As a result, Africa's internal market potential remains underutilised, limiting productivity growth, employment creation, and resilience to external economic shocks.

From a strategic perspective, the slow pace of internal market integration constitutes a long-term challenge to Africa's economic sovereignty and geopolitical agency. Low levels of intra-African trade reduce the continent's capacity to leverage collective market power, weaken bargaining positions in global trade negotiations, and heighten vulnerability to fluctuations in global demand and external political pressures. Addressing this structural imbalance requires sustained investment in cross-border infrastructure, regulatory harmonisation, and industrial policy coordination, particularly within the framework of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

The EU's Global Gateway initiative adds another layer of strategic opportunity. Designed as Europe's answer to China's Belt and Road, Global Gateway aims to mobilise large scale investment in infrastructure, digital connectivity, energy systems, and regulatory harmonisation. Its real transformative potential lies in its ability to reduce the structural barriers that have historically limited African competitiveness. Poor transport networks, fragmented energy grids, and inconsistent regulatory environments have long increased the cost of African exports and discouraged European investment. If Global Gateway is aligned with African priorities—particularly those of the AfCFTA—it can support the development of industrial corridors, cross border infrastructure, and green energy value chains that directly feed into European markets. It can also help African states meet the regulatory requirements of the EU's increasingly stringent trade environment, including sustainability standards, carbon border adjustments, and digital compliance frameworks. The initiative's success will depend on whether it reinforces African agency rather than imposing European preferences, and whether it supports long term productive capacity rather than short term connectivity projects.

The African Continental Free Trade Area is the most significant development shaping the future of EU–Africa trade. By creating a unified market of more than a billion people, the AfCFTA reduces fragmentation, increases economies of scale, and strengthens Africa's bargaining power in global trade negotiations. For Europe, a more integrated African market offers a more predictable and attractive environment for investment, enabling European firms to build regional value chains rather than navigating dozens of separate national markets. The AfCFTA also provides a platform for rethinking the EU's existing Economic Partnership Agreements, which currently divide Africa into sub regions and sometimes undermine continental integration. Over time, the AU and EU could move toward a continent to continent trade framework, but this will only be viable once African industries are strong enough to compete with European firms. In the near term, the priority is to support African industrialisation, harmonise standards, modernise customs systems, and ensure that African producers can actually take advantage of preferential access to European markets.

Strengthening governance across African Union member states has a decisive impact on every major dimension of the AU–EU relationship—trade, migration, security, and the management of minerals and rare earths. When governance improves, the entire architecture of cooperation becomes more predictable, more balanced, and more capable of delivering shared outcomes. Integrating this dimension into your broader analysis helps show why institutional reform within Africa is not a peripheral issue but a structural driver of the future partnership.

Stronger governance enhances Africa’s ability to negotiate, implement, and enforce trade agreements with the EU. More capable institutions improve regulatory alignment, reduce corruption, and create a stable environment for investment, all of which make African economies more attractive partners for European firms. This is especially important as the African Continental Free Trade Area expands, because its success depends on customs modernisation, harmonised standards, and transparent regulatory systems. Governance reform therefore strengthens Africa’s position in global value chains and increases the credibility of continent to continent trade frameworks.

In the field of minerals and rare earths, improved governance directly affects Africa’s leverage. Stronger regulatory institutions allow African states to enforce labour standards, eliminate child labour, manage environmental impacts, and negotiate fairer contracts with European and global companies. This shifts the relationship from extractive dependence to co industrialisation. It also aligns African production with EU sustainability requirements, making African minerals more competitive in Europe’s green transition supply chains. Governance reform thus becomes a strategic asset that increases Africa’s bargaining power and ensures that mineral wealth supports long term development rather than short term extraction.

Migration governance also benefits from stronger institutions. When African states improve civil registration systems, border management, labour market planning, and reintegration programmes, cooperation with the EU becomes more predictable and less politically contentious. Better governance reduces the influence of smuggling networks, strengthens legal mobility schemes, and allows African states to negotiate from a position of agency rather than vulnerability. It also supports regional mobility under the AU’s free movement agenda, which in turn reduces pressure on irregular routes toward Europe.

In security management, governance reform is transformative. More capable states can manage internal conflicts, professionalise security forces, and coordinate more effectively with AU and EU missions. This reduces the need for external stabilisation interventions and strengthens African ownership of peace operations. It also improves accountability and human rights compliance, which are essential for EU support. As Libya’s integration into the Euro Mediterranean space progresses and the EU undergoes institutional reform, stronger governance across AU member states will be crucial for building a coherent regional security architecture that links North Africa, the Sahel, and Europe.

Taken together, the strengthening of governance across AU member states acts as a multiplier for every aspect of the AU–EU partnership. It enhances Africa’s negotiating power, improves the effectiveness of joint initiatives, and reduces the asymmetries that have long shaped the relationship. As both continents navigate new geopolitical pressures, governance reform becomes the foundation for a more balanced, resilient, and strategically aligned partnership.

Taken together, these dynamics show that expanding EU–Africa trade is not simply a matter of lowering tariffs or signing new agreements. It requires a structural transformation of how both continents conceive of their economic relationship. Europe must recognise Africa not as a supplier of raw materials but as a strategic partner in global value chains. Africa must leverage its demographic, mineral, and market advantages to negotiate from a position of agency rather than dependency. North African states will play a decisive role as connectors and industrial anchors. Global Gateway can provide the infrastructure backbone for deeper integration, while the AfCFTA offers the continental framework for a more balanced and transformative trade partnership. The future of EU–Africa trade will depend on whether both sides can align these elements into a coherent strategy that supports shared prosperity and long term stability.

Table Key regional leaders challenge

Countr y / Region al Actor	Political & Governance Challeng es	Security Challenge s	Economic & Infrastruct ure Challenges	Social & Human Developme nt Challenges	Environme ntal / Climate Challenges	Geostrate gic / Regional Competiti on	Actionable Pathways for AU–EU Cooperatio n
Nigeri a	Weak institution al capacity; corruption ; contested elections	Boko Haram, insurgenci es, communal violence	High dependency on oil; poor transport & digital infrastructur e	Youth unemploym ent, education gaps, urban- rural inequality	Floods, desertificatio n	Gulf & Western influence; regional hegemony in West Africa	Strengthen democratic institutions; support regional peacekeepi ng; co- invest in digital infrastructu re; youth employmen t programs; climate- resilient agriculture
South Africa	Governan ce challenges ; political factionalis m	High crime rates; social unrest	Industrial economy vulnerable to global shocks; infrastructur e bottlenecks	Inequality, high youth unemploym ent	Water scarcity; urban environmen tal pressures	Economic leadership in Southern Africa; influence of China & EU trade	Facilitate industrial cooperation & skills transfer; strengthen rule-of-law institutions; joint urban resilience projects
Egypt	Centralize d governanc e; political transitions ; human rights tensions	Sinai insurgenc y; maritime security. Libya- Libya.	Reliance on Suez Canal & tourism; energy dependency	Education & healthcare gaps	Water scarcity (Nile), desertificatio n	Geopolitic al positionin g with Middle East & EU; Nile	Support water- sharing agreements; enhance maritime security; co-develop

						basin tensions	renewable energy; education & human capital programs
Ethiopia	Centralized governance; political transitions; human rights tensions	Sinai insurgency; maritime security	Reliance on Suez Canal & tourism; energy dependency	Education & healthcare gaps	Water scarcity (Nile), desertification	Geopolitical positioning with Middle East & EU; Nile basin tensions	Support water-sharing agreements; enhance maritime security; co-develop renewable energy; education & human capital programs
Ethiopia	Ethnic federalism; political transitions; fragile institutions	Tigray conflict, insurgencies	Agriculture-dependent economy; transport & energy gaps	Health & education infrastructure; refugee crises	Droughts; climate-driven migration	Nile disputes; influence of regional actors (Egypt, Sudan)	Mediation support & peacebuilding; co-invest in infrastructure; climate-resilient agriculture; cross-border water management
Kenya	Electoral contestation; governance & corruption	Terrorism (Al-Shabaab); border insecurity	Trade hub dependent on port infrastructure; energy gaps	Urban poverty; youth unemployment	Droughts; flooding; agricultural vulnerability	Regional hub; influence from Gulf, China, EU	Support security cooperation & counter-terrorism; port & transport infrastructure projects; climate adaptation; digital economy development

Advancing the AU–EU partnership requires a comprehensive approach that begins with institutional strengthening, supporting capacity-building within African governance structures and regulatory agencies to ensure effective policy implementation, compliance, and accountability. This must be complemented by regional security cooperation, in which joint AU–EU initiatives in peacekeeping, counter-terrorism, and maritime security work to mitigate

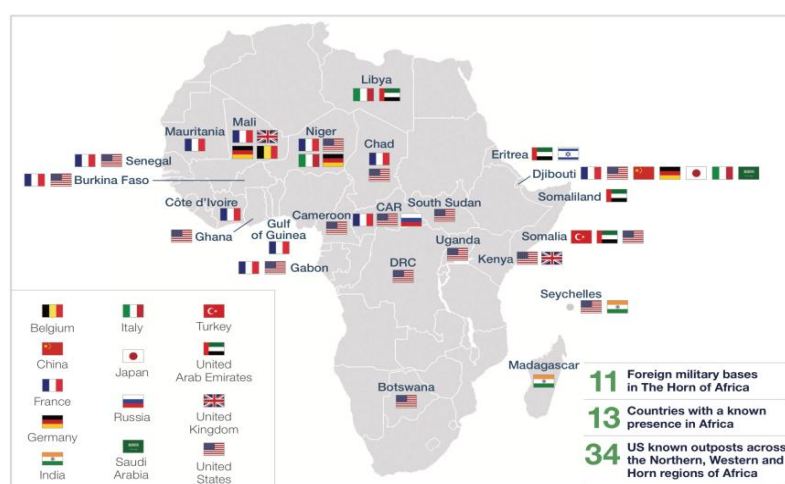
cross-border threats and stabilize fragile regions. Economic transformation is equally crucial, necessitating co-investment in industrial policy, manufacturing, green energy, digital infrastructure, and transport corridors, thereby reducing dependency on extractive industries and fostering local value creation. To address the continent's demographic and social challenges, initiatives focused on youth employment, education, and healthcare should be inclusive, contextually tailored, and scalable, promoting human development while reducing the risk of social unrest. At the same time, climate and environmental resilience must be prioritized through cross-border water management, renewable energy projects, and climate-smart agricultural practices, ensuring sustainable growth in the face of environmental pressures. Underpinning all these efforts is the principle of negotiated interdependence and African agency, where African states actively co-define priorities, frameworks, and conditionalities, transforming AU–EU cooperation from a hierarchical or donor-recipient dynamic into a genuinely strategic, mutually beneficial partnership that aligns with Africa's long-term development objectives.

Diagnosing Security Competition and Resource Rivalry in Africa

The African continent is increasingly shaped by strategic competition among external powers, with implications for security, governance, and resource management. Rivalry over access to military bases, logistical hubs, and critical resource deposits—particularly minerals essential for the green transition such as cobalt, lithium, and rare earths—has intensified. States such as China, the United States, Russia, and Gulf actors pursue overlapping security and economic interests, often negotiating bilateral agreements with individual African states. This fragmented approach exacerbates geopolitical tension, weakens continental coordination, and risks turning African states into arenas for proxy competition.

The map highlights the extensive foreign military presence across Africa, illustrating both the driving factors behind basing and the broader implications for regional and global geopolitics. Strategic location is a central driver, particularly in the Horn of Africa, where countries such as Djibouti, Eritrea, and Somalia host multiple bases due to their proximity to the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and the Gulf of Aden.

Figure



These maritime chokepoints are critical for global trade and energy shipments, making the region highly valuable for countries seeking both commercial and military influence. In West Africa, bases in Senegal, Mauritania, and Niger provide access to the Sahel, a region characterized by insecurity, weak governance, and the presence of extremist groups, creating a natural rationale for counterterrorism operations and military outposts.

Counterterrorism and regional security concerns are prominent drivers of foreign military presence. Countries in the Sahel and East Africa face persistent threats from jihadist organizations such as AQIM, Boko Haram, and Al-Shabaab. These threats have prompted interventions and the establishment of bases by Western powers including the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, as well as by regional allies. Bases serve as platforms for rapid response, intelligence gathering, and training of local security forces.

Geopolitical competition among global powers further motivates basing in Africa. The map identifies thirteen countries with a military presence, including the United States, France, China, Russia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and India, reflecting Africa's emergence as a competitive arena for influence. Foreign bases allow these powers to project force, secure economic interests, and enhance diplomatic leverage. In particular, China's base in Djibouti protects maritime supply lines and infrastructure linked to the Belt and Road Initiative, while Gulf states and India maintain a presence to safeguard regional investments and trade corridors.

Economic and resource interests also underlie military basing. Africa's wealth of critical minerals, energy resources, and strategic trade routes attracts foreign powers seeking to protect these assets through military infrastructure. Historical alliances and partnership networks, such as those between France and its former colonies or NATO-aligned states, reinforce these basing arrangements, providing legitimacy and operational support. Weak states, ongoing conflicts, and fragile institutions in countries like Libya, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, and Somalia create opportunities for foreign powers to establish operational footholds under the guise of stabilization or intervention missions.

The implications of foreign military presence are multifaceted. On the one hand, bases enhance regional security by supporting counterterrorism operations, deterring aggression, and providing rapid-response capabilities. On the other hand, they can generate local resentment, challenge national sovereignty, and create dependency on external military support. Globally, Africa's military bases reflect intensifying competition among major powers, with the United States maintaining the largest footprint and other countries, including China, Russia, Turkey, and Gulf states, seeking to expand their influence. This competition risks militarizing diplomacy and transforming Africa into a theater for strategic rivalry.

Domestically, hosting foreign bases can provoke political debates over sovereignty and legitimacy, as governments seen as dependent on external forces may face public criticism. Economically, bases can contribute to local infrastructure, employment, and investment, but overreliance may undermine the development of indigenous security institutions. In regions such as the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Guinea, bases also play a critical role in securing shipping lanes, protecting global trade, and deterring piracy.

Overall, foreign military presence in Africa is shaped by a combination of strategic geography, regional instability, economic interests, historical ties, and global power competition. The Horn of Africa and the Sahel stand out as particularly sensitive regions, where multiple foreign powers converge, reflecting both opportunities for security cooperation and risks of geopolitical friction. These bases function as nodes in global strategy, enabling power projection, conflict management, and economic protection, while simultaneously reshaping regional politics, sovereignty, and the balance of influence across the continent.

The African Union, primarily through its Peace and Security Council, serves as the central continental body coordinating African security interests. While the AU does not maintain a formal basing policy comparable to those of NATO or the United States, several strategic tendencies and priorities can be discerned. African states consistently emphasize the preservation of sovereignty, expecting any foreign military presence on the continent to respect national authority, avoid long-term occupation, and support African-led security initiatives rather than impose external agendas. This reflects a broader insistence on retaining agency and decision-making power in the management of security affairs.

In addition, the AU seeks to enhance rapid deployment capabilities through mechanisms such as the African Standby Force, necessitating flexible basing arrangements capable of supporting operational readiness without creating permanent foreign installations. Basing considerations are closely linked to regional security architectures, including the economic communities of West, East, and Southern Africa, which African states view as crucial for fostering regional autonomy and multilateral coordination. Furthermore, African policymakers often favor dual-use infrastructure that serves both security and civilian development objectives, such as transport networks, ports, or logistical hubs, thereby integrating strategic imperatives with socio-economic benefits.

The AU and its member states are also highly attentive to the risks of strategic entrapment. They are cautious about allowing external basing agreements that could draw African states into broader geopolitical conflicts or subordinate them to the interests of external powers. Consequently, African states seek arrangements that preserve their autonomy and minimize the potential for involuntary involvement in global strategic rivalries.

External actors seeking to engage with African security priorities must adopt a partnership-oriented approach that supports AU- or regional-led initiatives rather than imposing unilateral basing solutions. Such engagement should emphasize flexibility, non-permanence, and capacity-building, including the enhancement of African operational capabilities, regional logistics, and intelligence-sharing mechanisms. Infrastructure investments linked to basing should be designed to generate civilian as well as military benefits, thus aligning with the AU's overarching security-development framework. Finally, transparency and joint governance are essential, with African states expecting shared decision-making regarding basing arrangements, clear operational mandates, and clearly defined conditions for withdrawal or adjustment.

In sum, African security policy concerning basing and external presence is guided by principles of sovereignty, flexibility, regional integration, and dual-use utility. Effective accommodation by external partners requires alignment with these principles, with a focus on enhancing

African capacity, respecting agency, and ensuring that security initiatives contribute to broader developmental and governance objectives.

Minerals

Africa is exceptionally rich in mineral resources, including a broad range of rare earth elements (REEs), strategic metals, and industrial minerals essential to modern technology and the green energy transition. These deposits are unevenly distributed across the continent. For instance, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) holds vast reserves of cobalt and significant copper deposits, which are critical for batteries and electronics. South Africa is notable for its platinum group metals (PGMs) and chromium, while Namibia, Tanzania, and Malawi host significant quantities of lithium. Rare earth elements, such as neodymium, dysprosium, and terbium, essential for high-tech applications like wind turbines and electric vehicles, are found in notable quantities in countries such as South Africa, Burundi, and Madagascar. Other key deposits include manganese in Gabon, bauxite in Guinea, and graphite in Mozambique.

The politics surrounding these deposits are complex and operate at multiple levels. At the national level, governments frequently view mineral wealth as both a critical source of revenue and a strategic asset for industrialization, development, and regional influence. However, weak institutional frameworks, corruption, and governance deficits can result in rent-seeking, unequal distribution of benefits, and the entrenchment of political elites. In some cases, control over mineral resources has contributed to prolonged conflicts, as seen in the DRC, where competing militias and political factions have historically contested cobalt and coltan deposits.

At the regional level, competition for access to strategic minerals is influenced by the intersection of economic interests and geopolitical alignments. Neighboring states and regional blocs such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the East African Community (EAC) often play a mediating role, though tensions can emerge when cross-border mining operations, artisanal extraction, and trade corridors are involved. The influx of foreign direct investment from powers such as China, the European Union, and the United States has added a layer of geopolitical competition, often creating dependencies that exacerbate domestic tensions and expose African states to external pressures.

Several stressors further complicate the management of Africa's mineral wealth. Environmental degradation and social displacement associated with mining operations create local grievances, sometimes escalating into political instability. Market volatility for rare earths and strategic metals can generate fiscal uncertainty, particularly in states heavily reliant on resource exports. Additionally, illicit trade, smuggling, and under-regulated artisanal mining undermine state revenue and often fund informal or armed networks. Finally, climate change and water scarcity intersect with mining activities, particularly in arid regions such as Namibia or parts of South Africa, adding an environmental stressor that can inflame local political disputes and create sustainability challenges.

Overall, Africa's rare earth and strategic mineral endowment represents both a transformative economic opportunity and a source of potential instability. Effective governance requires the establishment of transparent regulatory frameworks, equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms, and environmental safeguards, as well as careful navigation of regional and global power

dynamics. Strategic engagement by external partners must balance investment with capacity-building, ensuring that African states retain agency over their resources while mitigating the risks posed by environmental degradation, market dependency, and geopolitical competition.

African Union Analysis of Abusive and Exploitative Practices in Global Raw Material Supply Chains

The African Union (AU) has increasingly positioned itself as a normative and policy-setting actor in addressing abusive and exploitative practices within Africa's extractive sectors, particularly those linked to global supply chains for critical raw materials. Through instruments such as the African Mining Vision (AMV), the AU articulates a vision of mineral governance that prioritizes transparency, equity, environmental sustainability, and inclusive development, while explicitly challenging historical patterns of extraction that have generated limited domestic value for African economies (African Union, 2009). It says: "Transparent, equitable and optimal exploitation of mineral resources to underpin broad-based sustainable growth and socio-economic development". This line is the core defining vision from the African Mining Vision document, capturing the strategic objective of transforming Africa's mineral wealth into sustained development outcomes rather than simple extraction.

Within this framework, exploitation is understood not merely as illegality but as a structural condition arising from asymmetries in power, information, and value capture between African producer states and multinational corporate actors.

The AU's analysis identifies weak regulatory capacity, fragmented national mining regimes, and limited bargaining power as central enablers of abusive practices in extractive industries (African Union, 2009). These vulnerabilities are exacerbated by growing global demand for critical raw materials linked to energy transitions and food security, which incentivizes rapid extraction under conditions that frequently undermine labor rights, environmental protection, and community participation. The AMV therefore emphasizes the transformation of mining sectors from export-oriented enclaves into integrated components of national and regional development strategies, grounded in principles of accountability, local value addition, and intergenerational equity (African Union, 2009).

In the African Green Mining Strategy (AGMS) recognizes that "Africa must move beyond raw mineral exports and build strong, integrated value chains that foster local beneficiation, job creation, and economic diversification". This quote reflects the central aim of the African Green Minerals Strategy to leverage green mineral endowments toward value-added industrial development rather than merely exporting raw materials.

Best practices promoted within AU policy frameworks include the harmonization of mining legislation across member states, the formalization of artisanal and small-scale mining, the strengthening of environmental and social safeguards, and the development of continental mechanisms for contract negotiation and oversight (African Union Commission, 2022). The AU further recognizes that exploitative practices are embedded in transnational supply chains and cannot be effectively addressed through national regulation alone. As a result, traceability and due-diligence mechanisms that extend beyond African jurisdictions are viewed as

necessary but insufficient without parallel reforms in global governance structures (OECD, 2016).

Investigative journalism has played a critical role in reinforcing the AU's analytical claims by documenting the human consequences of extractive supply chains. The work of Nicholas Niarchos, particularly on cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo, has revealed how global demand intersects with precarious labor conditions, coercion, and systemic neglect at extraction sites, underscoring the gap between corporate sustainability narratives and lived realities (Niarchos, 2021).

Western companies sourcing minerals from Africa are increasingly subject to extraterritorial legal obligations that align with aspects of the AU's normative agenda. Instruments such as the European Union's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive and the EU Conflict Minerals Regulation require companies to identify, prevent, and mitigate human rights and environmental harms within their supply chains (European Union, 2017, 2023). In the regulation 2017/821, it says: "This Regulation establishes a Union system for supply chain due diligence ... in order to curtail opportunities for armed groups and security forces to trade in tin, tantalum and tungsten, their ores, and gold" This wording from the Regulation's introductory provisions succinctly states its purpose: establishing due diligence obligations to prevent the financing of armed conflict through mineral supply chains.

In the EU Corporate Sustainability Directive, it says: "The objective of the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive is to foster sustainable and responsible corporate behaviour in companies' operations and across their global value chains"

Similarly, the OECD Due Diligence Guidance establishes internationally recognized standards for responsible mineral sourcing in conflict-affected and high-risk areas (OECD, 2016). While these frameworks represent important advances, the AU has consistently argued that compliance-based approaches risk legitimizing exploitative structures if they do not address deeper inequities in ownership, decision-making, and value distribution.

Application to Phosphate Mining in Western Sahara

The extraction of phosphate resources in Western Sahara exemplifies the intersection of exploitative practices, contested sovereignty, and global supply chain governance. Western Sahara is recognized by the United Nations as a non-self-governing territory, and international law affirms that the exploitation of its natural resources must be conducted in accordance with the wishes and interests of the indigenous Sahrawi population (United Nations, 1962). From an AU perspective, phosphate mining in the territory without demonstrable free, prior, and informed consent constitutes a violation of the principle of permanent sovereignty over natural resources, which is foundational to postcolonial African resource governance norms.

The AU's analytical framework highlights how legal ambiguity surrounding Western Sahara's status has enabled foreign corporations and importing states to maintain access to phosphate supplies while deflecting responsibility for political and human rights implications. Despite the existence of EU legal rulings requiring that trade agreements involving Western Sahara respect the distinct and separate status of the territory, European companies continue to face limited enforcement pressure when sourcing phosphates under contested arrangements (European

Union, 2017). This dynamic reflects a broader pattern in which economic imperatives related to agricultural inputs and food security are prioritized over ethical sourcing considerations.

Applying AU best practices to this case reveals that exploitative extraction persists not because of a lack of international legal norms, but because of their selective application. Investigative reporting and legal challenges within European courts have contributed to greater transparency, yet structural change remains constrained in the absence of coordinated political intervention by regional organizations such as the AU and the EU. The Western Sahara case thus underscores the limits of corporate social responsibility frameworks that do not engage directly with questions of self-determination and political legitimacy (United Nations, 1962).

Application to Cobalt Mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) presents a distinct manifestation of exploitative extraction embedded within global energy transition supply chains. The DRC supplies the majority of the world's cobalt, a mineral critical to lithium-ion batteries and electric vehicle production, yet mining regions remain characterized by poverty, insecurity, and labor precarity. The AU's framework identifies this paradox as emblematic of extractive dependency, wherein resource wealth coexists with underdevelopment due to limited domestic value addition and weak regulatory enforcement (African Union Commission, 2022).

Artisanal and small-scale mining plays a central role in cobalt extraction in the DRC, providing livelihoods to large segments of the population while exposing miners to unsafe working conditions, child labor, and exploitation by intermediaries. Investigative accounts by Niarchos (2021) illustrate how these conditions are sustained by global demand from Western technology and automotive firms, whose supply chains prioritize cost efficiency and uninterrupted access over social protection. From an AU perspective, such practices reflect systemic failures rather than isolated abuses.

Although Western legal instruments such as the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive and the OECD Due Diligence Guidance require companies to assess and mitigate human rights risks, the AU's analysis suggests that these mechanisms often externalize responsibility onto local actors without altering underlying power relations (European Union, 2023; OECD, 2016). As a result, exploitative conditions persist despite formal compliance. The AU therefore emphasizes the need for public investment, institutional capacity building, and regional coordination to transform artisanal mining into a regulated and socially protected economic activity.

Proposed Interventions by the African Union and the European Union

Addressing exploitative practices in Western Sahara phosphate mining and Congolese cobalt extraction requires coordinated and complementary interventions by both the AU and the EU. From the AU's perspective, priority should be given to strengthening continental enforcement mechanisms linked to the African Mining Vision, including peer review systems and compliance benchmarks that hold member states and corporate partners accountable (African Union, 2009). In cases involving contested territories such as Western Sahara, the AU should adopt a more explicit diplomatic role, reinforcing normative commitments to self-

determination and supporting international legal processes that protect the rights of affected populations.

In the DRC, AU-led interventions should focus on scaling up the formalization of artisanal mining through technical assistance, regional financing instruments, and cross-border cooperation aimed at reducing illicit trade and improving traceability. Supporting local beneficiation and processing aligns with the African Green Minerals Strategy's objective of integrating critical minerals into broader industrial development pathways (African Union Commission, 2022).

The EU, in turn, should strengthen the enforcement of due-diligence obligations by linking market access to demonstrable improvements in labor conditions, environmental protection, and community welfare. In Western Sahara, this entails aligning trade and import policies with international legal standards concerning consent and sovereignty rather than relying on narrow interpretations of commercial legality (United Nations, 1962). In the cobalt sector, the EU should complement regulatory requirements with development finance and partnership mechanisms that support infrastructure, health, and education in mining regions, thereby addressing the root causes of exploitation.

Strengthening government enforcement in the EU requires moving from formal compliance to real investigative capacity, with dedicated authorities empowered to act proactively rather than only on complaints. Enforcement responsibilities should be consolidated nationally and coordinated at EU level through a shared intelligence and risk-analysis hub linking customs, sustainability, competition, and financial oversight. Sanctions must be credible and harmonised, including turnover-based fines, exclusion from public procurement, and personal liability for directors in cases of systematic negligence. Judicial systems need specialised training and fast-track procedures for transnational sustainability and supply-chain cases.

In African states, enforcement strength depends less on new laws and more on building durable regulatory institutions such as mining inspectorates, environmental authorities, and geological surveys with audit powers. These agencies require stable funding insulated from political cycles to resist capture and ensure continuity. Licensing regimes should be used as enforcement tools by tying extraction rights to local processing, disclosure obligations, and environmental performance bonds. Administrative sanctions, including licence suspension, must be enforceable without lengthy criminal proceedings. Regional pooling of expertise through AU and regional economic communities can compensate for capacity gaps and enable cross-border investigations.

Joint EU–Africa enforcement should move away from conditionality toward co-enforcement, based on shared standards and coordinated action. Due diligence rules should be aligned between the African Mining Vision, the African Green Minerals Strategy, and EU legislation to avoid regulatory arbitrage. Joint audits, shared risk assessments, and coordinated sanctions combining EU market access with African licensing powers can create real leverage. Common digital traceability and reporting systems should be recognised by both EU and African regulators. Capacity-building finance should be directed specifically toward inspectors, prosecutors, laboratories, and monitoring systems rather than advisory studies. Such a

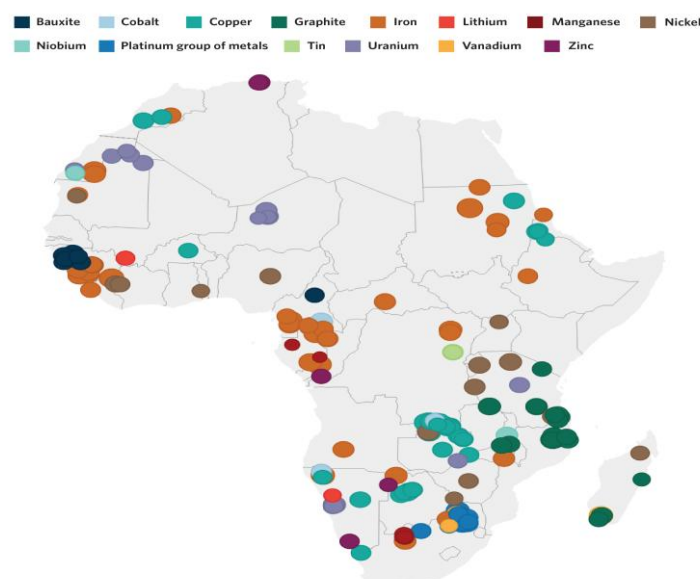
combined approach strengthens African regulatory sovereignty while giving EU rules real extraterritorial effect.

Ultimately, a credible AU–EU response to abusive extractive practices must acknowledge that exploitation is structurally embedded within existing global raw material regimes. Transformative change will require shared responsibility, redistribution of value along supply chains, and the centering of African communities in decisions governing the extraction and use of their natural resources.

These dynamics intersect with the green transition, as Africa holds significant reserves of the minerals and renewable energy potential necessary for global decarbonization. Competition over these resources can undermine local development objectives when extraction and investment agreements prioritize external industrial needs over African industrialization, environmental sustainability, and equitable resource governance. The establishment of foreign military or logistical bases near strategic resource zones further complicates the security landscape, raising concerns about sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the potential militarization of economic hubs.

Figure

Figure 3. Select Transition Mineral and Metal Deposits Discovered in Africa, 1990–2019



Source: Adapted from James Cust and Albert Zeufack, eds., *Africa's Resource Future: Harnessing Natural Resources for Economic Transformation During the Low-Carbon Transition* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2023), 9.

A joint EU–AU strategy for rare earth and strategic minerals should combine governance reform, regional coordination, sustainable industrial investment, environmental protection, and geopolitical management. By emphasizing African agency, transparent regulation, and mutually beneficial partnerships, the strategy can transform Africa's mineral wealth into a driver of regional stability, economic development, and global technological competitiveness, while mitigating the risks of conflict, exploitation, and environmental degradation.

At the regional level, the lack of harmonized governance frameworks allows external actors to exploit asymmetries between African states, often bypassing continental institutions such as the African Union. This creates fragmentation, limits collective bargaining power, and undermines initiatives for regional resource integration and security coordination. The combination of resource dependence, external rivalry, and weak institutional oversight thus poses a dual challenge: ensuring the green transition while maintaining regional stability and strategic autonomy.

1. **Integrated Resource Governance:** AU–EU cooperation should establish joint frameworks for managing critical minerals and renewable energy resources. This includes transparent licensing, environmental safeguards, local value addition requirements, and alignment with regional industrial priorities. Such frameworks would reduce the leverage of external actors and ensure African states retain strategic control over resources essential for the green transition.
2. **Security and Risk Coordination:** AU–EU strategies should include joint assessment of security risks associated with foreign bases, extractive projects, and logistical hubs. Coordinated monitoring, intelligence sharing, and risk mitigation can prevent militarization of resource zones while strengthening regional stability.
3. **Regional Industrial Alliances:** Promote co-investment in African-based green industries, such as battery manufacturing, solar and wind technology, and electric mobility. By creating regional value chains under AU–EU oversight, African states can reduce dependence on external supply and ensure that green transition projects generate local employment and technological spillovers.
4. **Multilateral Negotiation Platforms:** Encourage African states to leverage AU mechanisms, supported by the EU, to coordinate external agreements, harmonize fiscal and environmental terms, and collectively negotiate with global powers. This strengthens bargaining power and reduces the risk of unilateral, exploitative deals.
5. **Strategic Foresight and Planning:** Develop continental roadmaps for green resource use and base management, integrating climate policy, security planning, and economic development. This should include scenario planning to anticipate geopolitical shifts and align AU–EU policies with long-term sustainability and sovereignty objectives.
6. **Capacity Building and Local Agency:** Strengthen the technical, regulatory, and monitoring capabilities of African institutions to manage strategic resources and security risks. The EU can support training, knowledge transfer, and technology deployment, ensuring African actors exercise real agency rather than serving as passive intermediaries.

In sum, AU–EU cooperation can transform security and resource competition from a source of instability into a platform for shared development. By harmonizing governance, investing in local industrial capacity, coordinating security oversight, and reinforcing African agency, the partnership can ensure that the green transition advances both global climate objectives and African strategic autonomy.

A Joint EU–AU Action Plan for Africa’s Rare Earths and Strategic Minerals

The EU and AU face a shared interest in ensuring that Africa’s rare earth and strategic mineral wealth contributes to sustainable development, industrialization, and regional stability, while

mitigating the risks of conflict, environmental degradation, and geopolitical exploitation. A joint strategy should integrate governance, investment, and regional coordination into a coherent framework.

A cornerstone of the strategy is strengthening governance frameworks. The EU and AU should support the establishment of transparent, standardized regulatory regimes for mining and mineral exports, including licensing, environmental assessments, and revenue management. Initiatives such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) could be expanded across more African states, with EU technical assistance, to ensure accountability in licensing, royalties, and taxation. Capacity-building programs should target national mining authorities, judicial institutions, and customs agencies to reduce corruption and prevent illegal extraction or smuggling.

Given the cross-border nature of many deposits and trade routes, the strategy should enhance regional coordination through RECs and AU-led mechanisms. Joint monitoring of mining zones and shared border corridors can prevent illicit trade and mitigate disputes. The EU and AU could establish a regional mineral security observatory to map deposits, track exports, and flag potential flashpoints where competition over resources may intersect with local or regional conflicts. Early warning systems can inform both AU peacekeeping planning and EU diplomatic engagement.

The EU should align its investment policies with African industrial priorities. Joint initiatives could focus on value-added processing of rare earths within Africa, rather than simple extraction and export. For example, co-investment in refining, battery manufacturing, and green technology supply chains could promote African industrialization while securing critical inputs for European green transitions. Public-private partnerships, involving African states, EU investors, and responsible mining corporations, can create standards for ethical sourcing, labor rights, and environmental protection.

Mining operations must integrate environmental and social safeguards. The joint strategy should include funding for rehabilitation of mining sites, protection of water resources, and community development programs. EU technical expertise in environmental management and renewable energy can be transferred to mining operations, mitigating the ecological footprint and reducing local grievances that might otherwise escalate into social or political tensions.

The EU and AU must jointly navigate external geopolitical pressures from global competitors, particularly China and the United States, who have strong interests in African mineral resources. A shared strategy should aim to preserve African agency, ensuring that foreign investment aligns with AU development priorities rather than creating dependency. The EU can provide diplomatic support for equitable contracts, standards enforcement, and dispute resolution, while the AU ensures regional ownership and oversight.

Finally, the strategy should emphasize knowledge sharing, technology transfer, and research collaboration. EU universities, research centers, and industrial clusters can partner with African institutions to advance mineral extraction technologies, sustainable mining practices, and renewable energy applications. Joint innovation hubs could foster African expertise in high-

tech sectors, including battery technology, electronics, and green industrial processes, reinforcing economic resilience and technological sovereignty.

AFRICA: MARITIME CROSSROADS

Africa occupies a unique geopolitical and economic position at the crossroads of global maritime corridors and interregional trade networks. Its coasts touch the Atlantic, Indian Ocean, and Mediterranean, while the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden connect to the Suez Canal and global shipping lanes. These corridors are critical not only for global energy flows and container traffic but also for linking Africa internally and externally. Historically, African trade networks—from trans-Saharan caravans to Indian Ocean commerce—integrated the continent into global systems, though colonial disruption redirected trade outward and fractured regional interconnectivity. Today, Africa's geographic position could be leveraged to reconnect internal and external markets, turning structural centrality into economic opportunity.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) provides a framework to convert strategic location into concrete economic gains. By reducing tariffs, harmonizing standards, and improving cross-border infrastructure, AfCFTA can enable regional value chains, allowing coastal ports and maritime corridors to become hubs for processing, manufacturing, and transshipment rather than purely points of export. Goods arriving in hubs such as Mombasa, Lagos, or Durban can be processed regionally and transported inland along standardized corridors, enhancing local industrialization. AfCFTA also reorients trade flows internally, increasing the density and value of intra-African commerce along maritime and riverine corridors and linking production centers to urban markets and ports efficiently. Predictable continental trade rules and corridor-linked transport hubs make Africa more attractive for investors, shipping companies, and industrial parks. This allows African states to capture more value from logistics, port services, and maritime trade, rather than letting intermediaries dominate revenue. By increasing the economic value of secure corridors and interregional trade, AfCFTA can also create material incentives for states and regional actors to stabilize border regions and maritime zones, reducing piracy, smuggling, and localized conflict that have historically disrupted trade networks.

Africa's corridor-centric geography makes it highly relevant for external partners, but success depends on strategic alignment with African-led frameworks. European powers can invest in infrastructure, port modernization, and technical assistance, but should prioritize alignment with AfCFTA's rules and continental priorities. Supporting African-led logistics corridors ensures that African states, not foreign actors, retain control over trade revenues and regulatory authority. Joint programs can include digital trade facilitation, maritime security coordination, and regional customs standardization. China and India, which are already deeply involved in African ports, railways, and manufacturing zones, could optimize their engagement by embedding investments in regional value chains rather than purely export-oriented projects, aligning with AfCFTA to encourage continental industrialization rather than national extraction. The United States could focus on supporting transparent regulatory frameworks, energy corridors, and digital trade infrastructure, connecting African hubs to global markets while reinforcing African ownership and resilience.

Effectively, Africa can transform its crossroads status from strategic vulnerability into economic leverage by integrating maritime corridors, port hubs, and transport networks into a continental market logic. AfCFTA provides the legal and regulatory framework to consolidate gains, while the EU and other global powers can act as partners rather than substitutes, supporting infrastructure, trade facilitation, and skills transfer in ways that reinforce African agency and economic sovereignty. African states must coordinate infrastructure planning regionally, prioritizing corridor efficiency over national visibility. Maritime security, customs harmonization, and standardized logistics should become continental public goods, protected and managed collectively. External powers' investments should be anchored in African-led governance structures, ensuring that corridor revenues, trade benefits, and industrial development accrue primarily to Africa. By combining its strategic geography, AfCFTA's integrative mechanisms, and selective global partnerships, Africa has the potential to reshape its economic role in global trade, reduce dependence on external actors, and simultaneously reinforce state capacity and regional cohesion.

Beyond economic integration, the control and management of maritime corridors can serve as a lever for continental security and strategic autonomy. African states, coordinated through the AU and PSC, can use these corridors to monitor and respond to piracy, trafficking, and illicit trade, linking trade security with broader state-building efforts. Investment in smart port management, digital tracking, and regional patrols can ensure that commercial expansion does not exacerbate insecurity. Furthermore, regional industrial hubs connected to these corridors can generate employment, reduce youth marginalization, and weaken the socio-economic drivers of conflict. By strategically combining trade facilitation with security oversight, Africa can create a virtuous cycle in which prosperity and stability reinforce one another. The development of intermodal corridors—connecting ports, railways, and river networks—offers opportunities to integrate remote regions into continental value chains, fostering cohesion across historically peripheral areas. As global competition intensifies, African-led corridor governance allows the continent to negotiate from strength, setting conditions for partnerships with the EU, China, India, and the US on terms that preserve African priorities and revenue capture. Ultimately, leveraging its crossroads position under AfCFTA is not merely an economic project but a strategic framework for consolidating sovereignty, regional integration, and continental influence in global trade and security affairs.

MULTIPOLAR DIPLOMACY

The African Union (AU) has increasingly pursued a multipolar diplomatic approach, seeking to engage multiple global powers simultaneously while safeguarding African agency, sovereignty, and strategic autonomy. This strategy emerges from both opportunity and necessity: Africa occupies a central position in global trade, energy flows, and natural resources, and external actors—including China, the EU, the United States, India, Russia, and Turkey—have all demonstrated interest in shaping the continent's political, economic, and security trajectories. AU multipolar diplomacy is therefore both an expression of agency and a hedge against dependence on any single external partner.

The AU's multipolar approach operates across several dimensions. First, there is the economic dimension, exemplified by AfCFTA and continental infrastructure projects, which seeks to attract investment and technology transfer while promoting intra-African trade and

industrialization. Second, the security dimension involves partnerships for peacekeeping, counter-terrorism, maritime security, and the broader African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), including the Peace and Security Council (PSC). Third, the political and normative dimension reflects the AU's ambition to set continental standards, mediate conflicts, and assert African positions in global governance fora such as the UN, G20, and climate negotiations. Fourth, there is a technological and educational dimension, increasingly evident in cooperation agreements on digital infrastructure, energy transition, and higher education.

Despite its promise, AU multipolar diplomacy is not without contradictions. On one hand, Africa seeks strategic autonomy, leveraging multiple partners to maximize bargaining power. On the other hand, external dependencies remain: many states rely on foreign financial support, military assistance, and trade access, which can constrain the AU's negotiating flexibility. Furthermore, engagement with multiple powers risks overlapping or competing agendas, such as differing development models, governance expectations, or geopolitical alignment pressures. The AU must navigate contradictory signals, balancing Chinese infrastructure loans with European regulatory standards, US security assistance with African-led peace initiatives, and Russian military cooperation with Western political norms.

Strengths:

The AU possesses formal continental governance structures, including the AU Commission, PSC, and specialized technical bodies, which enable coordination of policy across regions. Its multipolar strategy allows Africa to extract concessions, diversify funding, and pursue competitive partnerships. Engagement with multiple powers creates opportunities for technology transfer, infrastructure investment, and capacity-building, reducing overreliance on any single actor.

Weaknesses:

Institutional capacity constraints, fragmented policy implementation, and uneven state capabilities limit the AU's ability to harmonize continental positions. Competing priorities among member states—particularly in relation to national sovereignty, domestic politics, or regional disputes—undermine the coherence of multipolar diplomacy. Financial dependencies on external partners risk policy capture or misalignment between African objectives and donor expectations.

Opportunities:

The contemporary global environment presents several strategic openings. The rise of India, Turkey, and other non-traditional actors complements EU, US, and Chinese engagement, creating a diverse menu of partnerships. AfCFTA can serve as a leverage point, positioning Africa as an integrated market rather than a fragmented set of countries, and attracting investment tied to continental rather than bilateral priorities. Africa's centrality in global energy supply chains, maritime corridors, and digital connectivity further strengthens its bargaining position.

Threats:

The major risk lies in geopolitical competition and polarization, which can pull AU members into competing blocs or generate conflicting obligations. Overlapping security commitments, debt dependencies, and infrastructure tied to external strategic agendas may compromise African agency. Additionally, persistent internal fragility, conflicts, and governance gaps reduce the AU's leverage, making it vulnerable to external pressures and selective influence from global powers.

China represents both opportunity and risk: its infrastructure financing and technology transfer support continental integration but can deepen debt exposure and create dependency on Chinese contractors. The European Union offers development funding, regulatory expertise, and trade capacity, but European proceduralism and conditionality can slow projects or constrain strategic autonomy. The United States provides security assistance and investment but often prioritizes counter-terrorism and strategic alignment over development-led outcomes. India and Turkey offer alternative development models, technology partnerships, and diplomatic attention, diversifying African options. Russia offers military cooperation and political support in global forums, but its engagement is sometimes opportunistic and politically sensitive. In all cases, the AU's challenge is to balance short-term gains with long-term autonomy, coordinating multiple partnerships without compromising the continental agenda.

In conclusion, AU multipolar diplomacy is a deliberate strategy to maximize African agency in a competitive global system, exploiting geography, demographics, and resource endowments while managing internal constraints and external pressures. Its success depends on strengthening institutional coherence, aligning member state priorities, and leveraging continental projects like AfCFTA to anchor partnerships in African-led objectives rather than external dependency. The AU's multipolar approach is inherently dynamic, reflecting both the potential and the contradictions of navigating a global system where Africa's resources, markets, and strategic position are increasingly sought after by multiple great powers.

Table

Partner	Key AU Interests	Opportunities	Risks / Challenges
China	Infrastructure development, technology transfer, continental industrialization	Massive investment in transport, energy, and digital infrastructure; financing for ports, corridors, and regional hubs; technology and industrial cooperation	Debt dependency, reliance on Chinese contractors, potential influence on policy decisions; risk of fragmented standards and governance models
European Union (EU)	Regulatory expertise, trade facilitation, development assistance, AfCFTA alignment	Technical assistance for customs, standards, and governance; development financing; partnerships for regional value chains and green transition	Procedural delays, conditionality, focus on European priorities; risk of slowing continental projects; complex bureaucracy can reduce agility
United States (US)	Security cooperation, trade and investment, democratic norms	Counter-terrorism support; private sector investment; technology partnerships; diplomatic backing in global forums	Emphasis on security over development; selective alignment with US strategic priorities; risk of conditionality or pressure on governance reforms

India	Trade diversification, technology, education, energy	Alternative investment models; IT and digital skills transfer; renewable energy and infrastructure cooperation; South–South partnerships	Limited financial scale compared to EU/China; weaker security engagement; overlapping projects with other partners may create coordination challenges
Russia	Security, defense, political influence	Military training, peacekeeping support, political support in international forums; access to arms and strategic partnerships	Engagement often opportunistic; potential for political conditionality; alignment with authoritarian regimes can conflict with AU norms
Turkey	Trade, infrastructure, soft power, logistics	Port and logistics investments; industrial cooperation; cultural and educational exchange; maritime corridor development	Regional geopolitical entanglement; risk of duplicating European or Chinese influence; limited financial scale

The AU's engagement with multiple global partners demonstrates the strategic value of diversification, allowing the continent to reduce dependence on any single actor while negotiating more favorable terms across economic, security, and political domains. Continental projects such as AfCFTA, transport corridors, and industrial hubs anchor African agency, providing bargaining power and ensuring that external partnerships advance continental rather than solely national or foreign priorities. At the same time, risk management remains central to this multipolar strategy. Overlapping agendas, debt exposure, and security dependencies must be carefully coordinated and embedded within institutional frameworks to prevent external pressures from undermining African sovereignty or cohesion. Effective multipolar diplomacy requires robust institutional capacity: coherence at the AU level, coordination through the Peace and Security Council, and alignment with regional economic communities are critical to preventing member states from being co-opted individually by external actors. Strategic sequencing further enhances leverage, as African leaders must align infrastructure development, industrialization initiatives, and security cooperation in ways that reinforce sovereignty and minimize conflicts of interest between partners. Taken together, these considerations form the foundation of an AU strategic playbook, enabling each partnership to be evaluated not only in economic or military terms, but also for its contribution to continental integration, industrialization, security, and Africa's broader position in global governance.

AU-EU YOUTH COMPACT

Youthful populations present a dual-faceted challenge and opportunity for states. On one hand, a demographic profile characterized by a high proportion of young people can serve as a catalyst for economic expansion. A large, energetic, and increasingly educated labor force has the potential to drive innovation, entrepreneurship, and industrial growth, contributing to sustained productivity gains and the creation of new markets. In regions with effective labor market integration, this so-called “demographic dividend” can translate into accelerated economic development and enhanced competitiveness in global value chains.

On the other hand, youthful populations impose substantial demands on governance structures, social institutions, and public policy frameworks. Effective management requires investments in quality education, vocational training, and skills development to ensure that young people are equipped to participate meaningfully in the economy. Moreover, sufficient employment opportunities must be generated to absorb the growing labor force, otherwise high rates of youth unemployment can exacerbate social discontent, increase vulnerability to political radicalization, and contribute to instability. Health, housing, and social services must also be scaled to accommodate demographic pressures.

The ability of a state or region to harness the potential of its youthful population is therefore contingent upon the quality and responsiveness of its institutions. Strategic planning, forward-looking education policies, inclusive governance, and investment in productive sectors are essential to convert demographic potential into tangible economic and social dividends. Failure to address these structural imperatives risks transforming a demographic asset into a source of socio-economic strain and political tension.

Youth unemployment in Africa is both a structural and socio-economic challenge, amplified in countries such as Egypt, Nigeria, Tanzania, Namibia, Morocco, and the DRC. Rapid population growth and expanding youth cohorts generate significant labor supply, yet insufficient job creation, skill mismatches, and limited access to productive sectors constrain opportunities for meaningful employment. To address this, a multi-dimensional strategy combining education reform, skills development, entrepreneurship support, and targeted economic policy is required.

Education systems must be aligned with labor market demands. Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programs, digital literacy initiatives, and STEM-focused curricula can equip young people with skills for emerging sectors, including renewable energy, information technology, agribusiness, and light manufacturing. Public-private partnerships can help bridge the gap between academic instruction and industry needs, ensuring employability and market relevance.

Entrepreneurship and innovation must be fostered through accessible financing, incubation programs, and mentorship schemes. Microfinance, start-up grants, and investment in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can empower youth to generate self-employment opportunities and drive local economic development. Regulatory reforms to reduce bureaucratic barriers for business registration, taxation, and access to markets are critical to creating an enabling environment.

Sector-specific strategies can target the unique strengths of each country. In Egypt, investment in the Suez Canal logistics, tourism, and renewable energy sectors can absorb skilled labor. Nigeria's large digital economy and agricultural potential can be leveraged through tech-enabled agribusiness and creative industries. Tanzania and Namibia can expand green energy and mining value chains, integrating youth employment in sustainable resource development. Morocco's advanced industrial zones and renewable energy initiatives, particularly solar and wind, offer pathways for youth participation, while the DRC requires focused interventions in mining formalization, infrastructure development, and governance reforms to translate resource wealth into employment.

Finally, inclusive governance and social policy are essential. Active labor market programs, targeted public employment schemes, and youth representation in policy-making can ensure that interventions address the most vulnerable populations and reduce social tensions. Regional collaboration, particularly through the African Union and economic communities, can support mobility, skills exchange, and cross-border employment opportunities.

In sum, addressing youth unemployment in these countries requires integrated policies that link education, skills development, entrepreneurship, sectoral investment, and governance. By combining short-term employment initiatives with long-term structural reforms, states can transform demographic pressures into a driver of economic growth, innovation, and social stability.

EU–AU Youth Employment Compact: Strategic Diagnosis and Response

The proposed EU–AU Youth Employment Compact is designed to convert Africa’s demographic momentum into productive economic capacity while reducing structural unemployment and socio-political stress. The compact rests on the premise that youth unemployment is not primarily a problem of labor supply, but of weak labor demand, skills mismatches, limited industrial depth, and fragmented governance. It therefore combines labor market reform with sectoral investment, skills alignment, and institutional coordination.

The compact operates across three mutually reinforcing pillars. First, it aligns education and skills systems with real economic demand by prioritising technical, vocational, and digital competencies linked to growth sectors. Second, it accelerates job creation through targeted investment in labor-absorbing sectors such as agribusiness, renewable energy, logistics, construction, and light manufacturing. Third, it strengthens governance and labor market institutions to ensure that employment gains are formal, inclusive, and politically stabilising.

The EU contributes financing, market access, regulatory expertise, and private-sector mobilisation, while the AU and national governments provide policy ownership, coordination through regional economic communities, and political legitimacy. The compact is explicitly differentiated by country context, avoiding one-size-fits-all solutions.

Table Country-Specific Youth Employment Pathways

Country	Core Youth Employment	Challenge	Priority Sectors	Key Policy Instruments	EU–AU Value Added
Egypt	Educated youth unemployment and public-sector dependency	Logistics (Suez), renewable energy, tourism, construction	TVET reform linked to private employers, apprenticeship schemes, public-private hiring incentives	EU support for green energy value chains, port logistics, and vocational certification	EU support for green energy value chains, port logistics, and vocational certification
Marrocco	Large informal youth workforce and weak	Digital services, agribusiness,	SME finance, digital skills programs,	EU-backed venture finance, export standards,	EU-backed venture finance,

	industrial absorption	creative industries, light manufacturing	agribusiness clusters, regulatory simplification	digital infrastructure partnerships	export standards, digital infrastructure partnerships
Ethiopia	Underemployment in agriculture and low productivity	Agribusiness, energy, transport, construction	Rural value-chain development, vocational training, infrastructure-linked employment	EU investment in agro-processing, energy access, and skills mobility	EU investment in agro-processing, energy access, and skills mobility
South Africa	High youth unemployment despite middle-income status	Green energy, mining services, logistics, tourism	Skills diversification, green industrial policy, SME upgrading	EU cooperation on hydrogen, renewables, and mining value-chain localisation	EU cooperation on hydrogen, renewables, and mining value-chain localisation
Tunesia	Skills mismatch and regional youth inequality	Automotive and aerospace manufacturing, renewables, services	Dual education systems, industrial zone expansion, youth mobility schemes	EU market integration, industrial upgrading, Erasmus-style vocational exchanges	EU market integration, industrial upgrading, Erasmus-style vocational exchanges
Libya	Youth exclusion, informality, and conflict-linked labor markets	Mining formalisation, infrastructure, agriculture, construction	Formalisation programs, public works, mining value-chain governance	EU support for traceability, infrastructure jobs, and post-conflict stabilization	EU support for traceability, infrastructure jobs, and post-conflict stabilization

Governance and Implementation Logic

The compact is governed through a joint EU–AU steering mechanism linked to existing AU employment frameworks and EU Global Gateway instruments. Implementation is anchored at national level but coordinated regionally to enable labor mobility, skills recognition, and cross-border value chains. Monitoring focuses not only on job numbers but on job quality, formalisation, and political stabilisation effects.

If implemented coherently, the compact reduces youth unemployment pressures, strengthens state legitimacy, and limits the risk of migration shocks, radicalisation, and social unrest. For the EU, it stabilises neighbourhoods and secures long-term economic partnerships; for African states, it transforms demographic pressure into a durable development and governance asset.

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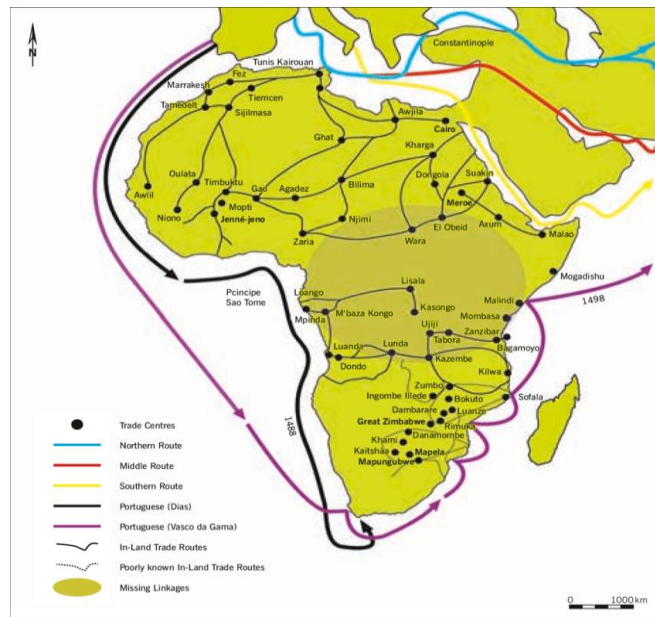
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9.0 COMPARATIVE POWER DYNAMICS AND GLOBAL ORDER

The African state system has evolved through multiple historical phases that together shape its contemporary form, characteristics, and interaction with the global international system. Prior to colonial conquest, Africa contained a wide variety of political systems, including centralized empires, kingdoms, city-states, and decentralized societies. These political formations exercised authority through kinship structures, religious legitimacy, military power, and control over trade networks. Sovereignty during this period was often overlapping and fluid rather than territorially fixed, and diplomatic practices such as alliance formation, warfare, tribute, and negotiation were well established. Although these systems did not conform to the Westphalian model of the modern nation-state, they nevertheless constituted functional international and regional political orders.

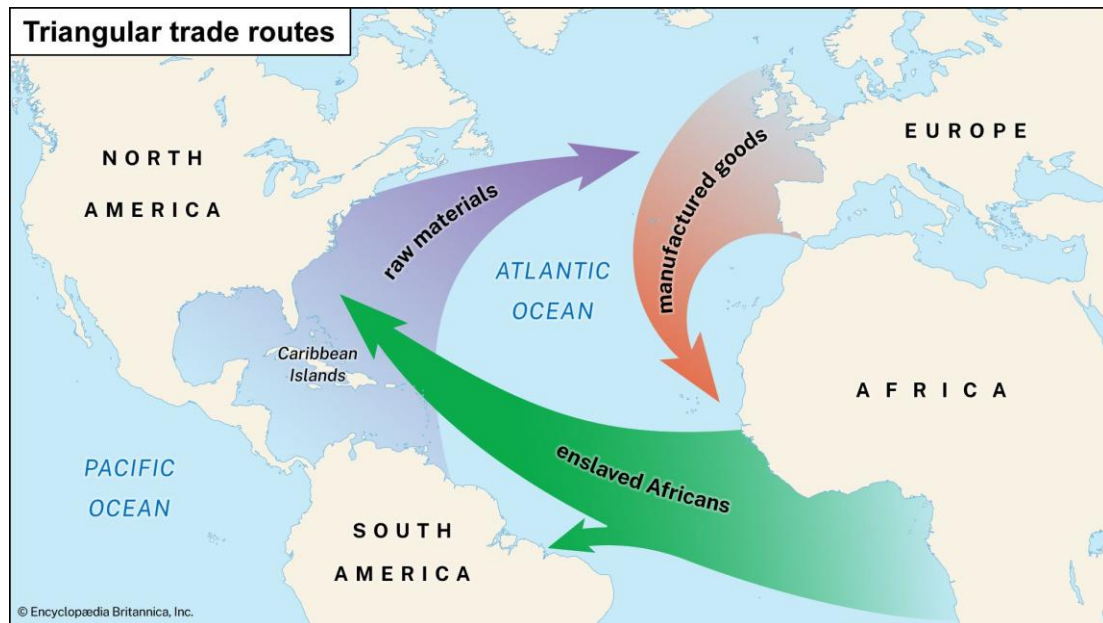
Figure



The history of the slave trade constitutes one of the foundational structural processes shaping the modern world economy, linking Africa, Europe, and the Americas into an early system of globalized exchange characterized by extreme asymmetry, coercion, and extractive accumulation. While forms of slavery existed in many societies prior to European expansion, the transatlantic slave trade that developed from the late fifteenth century onward represented an unprecedented scale, intensity, and degree of systemic integration into emerging capitalist economies. It transformed African societies, underwrote European wealth generation, and became a central pillar in the formation of global trade networks that persist, in altered form, to this day.

The transatlantic slave trade emerged in the context of European maritime expansion, beginning with Portuguese incursions along the West African coast in the mid-fifteenth century. Initially tied to small-scale trade in gold, ivory, and captives, the system expanded dramatically with the colonization of the Americas and the rise of plantation economies producing sugar, tobacco, cotton, and later coffee. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, an estimated twelve to fifteen million Africans were forcibly transported across the Atlantic, with millions more dying during raids, forced marches, and the Middle Passage itself. This trade was not marginal but central to Atlantic commerce: enslaved Africans were the single most valuable commodity traded across the Atlantic for much of the eighteenth century, exceeding the combined value of all other exports from Africa.

Figure



The volume and organization of the slave trade reshaped African economies and polities in profound ways. Rather than fostering productive investment or internal market integration, the trade incentivized militarization, predatory state formation, and political fragmentation. Many African rulers and elites were drawn into asymmetric commercial relationships in which access to European firearms and manufactured goods depended on the supply of captives. These dynamics distorted local economies, redirecting labor away from agriculture, craftsmanship, and regional trade toward raiding and warfare. Long-distance commercial networks that had previously connected the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Indian Ocean world were weakened or reoriented, while demographic losses reduced population densities, undermined food security, and constrained long-term development trajectories.

The impact on African societies was not uniform. Coastal regions of West and Central Africa were most heavily affected, while some inland polities initially benefited as intermediaries. However, even where short-term gains accrued to elites, the broader economic effects were corrosive. Human capital was systematically extracted at the very moment when labor-intensive agriculture, proto-industrial activity, and state consolidation were becoming decisive elsewhere in the world. The slave trade thus contributed not only to underdevelopment but to structural divergence, locking many African regions into externally oriented, extractive roles that would later be reinforced by colonial rule.

In Europe, by contrast, the slave trade and plantation slavery played a decisive role in wealth generation and economic transformation. Profits from slave trading voyages, plantation output, and associated commercial activities flowed into European port cities such as Liverpool, Bristol, Nantes, Bordeaux, Lisbon, and Amsterdam. These revenues financed shipbuilding, insurance markets, banking institutions, and early industrial enterprises. The triangular trade integrated European manufacturing, African labor extraction, and American plantation production into a single accumulation system, accelerating capital formation at a scale that domestic European economies alone could not have achieved.

Crucially, the slave trade did not merely enrich individual merchants but contributed to broader structural shifts. Plantation commodities lowered the cost of consumption in Europe, expanded mass markets, and stimulated demand for industrial goods. Cotton produced by enslaved labor in the Americas became the backbone of the British textile industry, one of the key engines of the Industrial Revolution. Financial instruments developed to manage the risks of long-distance slave trading—such as credit networks, futures contracts, and marine insurance—became integral components of modern capitalist finance. In this sense, slavery was not peripheral to European modernization but embedded within its institutional and economic foundations.

The slave trade also played a formative role in the early phases of globalization. It created durable transcontinental trade routes, standardized commercial practices, and synchronized production and consumption across vast distances. The Atlantic world functioned as an integrated economic space long before the term “globalization” existed, characterized by high levels of interdependence and systemic feedback loops. Price fluctuations in European markets affected plantation production in the Caribbean; wars in Europe reshaped slave trading patterns along the African coast; demographic collapse in Africa altered political equilibria with global consequences. This was globalization without inclusion, integration without reciprocity, and connectivity enforced through violence rather than mutual exchange.

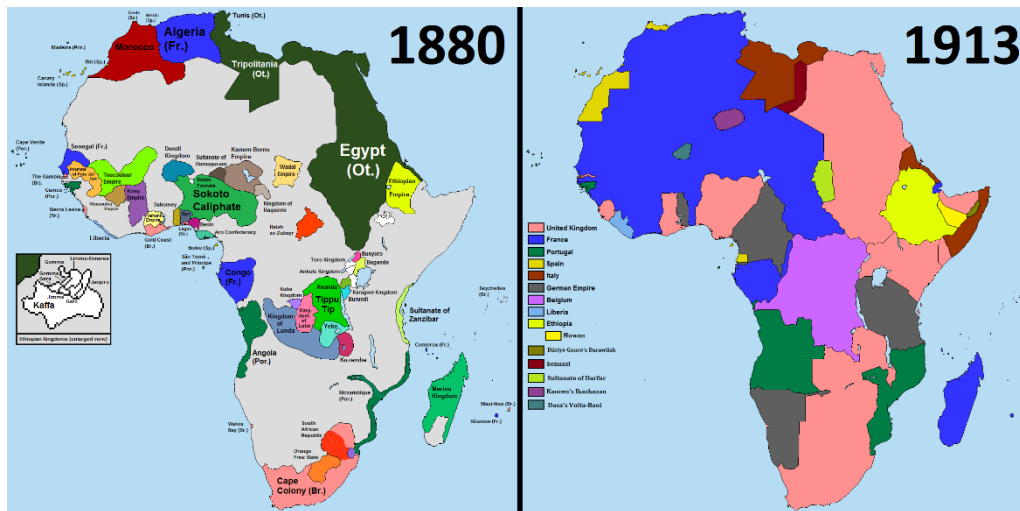
The legacies of the slave trade continue to shape global inequalities. In Africa, patterns of weak state capacity, fragmented political authority, and externally oriented economies bear the imprint of centuries of extractive engagement. In Europe and the Atlantic world more broadly, accumulated wealth, institutional maturity, and industrial capacity were built in part on coerced labor and racialized exploitation. The slave trade thus represents not only a historical injustice but a structural origin point for contemporary disparities between regions, making it central to any serious analysis of global political economy, development, and postcolonial relations.

In sum, the slave trade was a constitutive process of the modern world system. It restructured African societies through demographic loss and economic distortion, fueled European wealth accumulation and industrialization, and laid the infrastructural and institutional groundwork for globalization. Understanding its scale, mechanisms, and consequences is essential not merely for historical reckoning but for grasping the deep-rooted asymmetries that continue to define global relations today.

Colonialism

The imposition of colonial rule in the late nineteenth century fundamentally altered Africa's political landscape. Following the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, European powers established colonial states characterized by artificial borders, centralized administration, and extractive economic systems. These colonial entities were designed primarily to serve imperial interests rather than to generate domestic legitimacy or inclusive governance. Political authority was oriented outward toward metropolitan capitals, and indigenous institutions were marginalized or distorted. The colonial state thus created enduring structural weaknesses, including fragmented societies, limited institutional capacity, and legitimacy deficits that would continue into the post-independence era.

Figure Colonialism mapped



The Scramble for Africa, which unfolded between the 1880s and the early twentieth century, has been widely examined by historians such as M.E. Chamberlain and Pádraig Carmody. Their analyses emphasize that the phenomenon was not simply opportunistic expansion but rather the result of complex economic, political, and ideological forces. In the contemporary era, although formal colonialism has ended, similar patterns of competition for influence and resources in Africa persist, often described as a “new scramble for Africa.”

Chamberlain, in her seminal work *The Scramble for Africa*, argues that the origins of imperial expansion in the late nineteenth century lay in the intersection of industrial capitalism, strategic rivalries, and ideological constructions of Africa. She stresses that European powers sought access to raw materials such as gold, diamonds, and cotton, while colonies provided new markets for manufactured goods and opportunities for investment of surplus capital. At the same time, colonies were pursued as symbols of national prestige and as instruments in the balance of power among European states. Strategic control of trade routes, particularly the Suez Canal, was central to imperial logic. Chamberlain also highlights the ideological dimension, noting how the rhetoric of the civilizing mission and the influence of Social Darwinism provided legitimacy for conquest. The Berlin Conference of 1884–85 institutionalized these ambitions, establishing rules for territorial acquisition and accelerating the pace of partition. Her analysis situates these motivations within broader historiographical debates, contrasting economic interpretations with political and strategic theories, and demonstrating that the scramble cannot be reduced to a single cause but must be understood as a convergence of multiple logics.¹

Carmody, in *The New Scramble for Africa*, extends this analysis into the twenty-first century, arguing that Africa remains central to global competition. He identifies a continuity of motivations, though expressed through new mechanisms. Africa’s role as a supplier of oil, uranium, coltan, and other strategic minerals is central to his account, with China’s resource diplomacy and Western investment illustrating how external powers seek to secure access to scarce resources. Geopolitical influence is evident in the establishment of military bases, security partnerships, and diplomatic initiatives, reflecting efforts to secure political alliances and strategic footholds. The militarization of influence is exemplified by U.S. AFRICOM and China’s base in Djibouti. Unlike the nineteenth-century civilizing mission, contemporary

actors employ discourses of development, modernization, and partnership. Aid and infrastructure projects often mask deeper patterns of dependency, echoing neo-colonial logics. Carmody situates the origins of this “new scramble” in the global context of resource scarcity, rising demand from emerging economies, and Africa’s strategic geography. He argues that the logic of competition for control of Africa’s assets is structurally similar to the nineteenth-century scramble, though now involving a wider range of state and non-state actors.²

Taken together, Chamberlain’s historical analysis and Carmody’s contemporary framework reveal striking continuities. Both emphasize that Africa’s incorporation into global systems was and remains driven by external economic imperatives, strategic rivalries, and ideological justifications. The logic of domination has shifted from direct colonization to economic leverage and geopolitical positioning, yet the underlying motivations—power, wealth, and influence—remain constant. This continuity underscores the enduring significance of Africa in global politics and economics, while also highlighting the evolving forms of external engagement with the continent.

The following table highlights the continuities and transformations between the nineteenth-century scramble and contemporary dynamics:

Table

Dimension	19th Century Scramble	Contemporary Era
Economic Motives	Raw materials, markets, capital investment	Oil, rare earths, infrastructure development
Political Motives	Prestige, balance of power	Geopolitical alliances, military presence
Strategic Motives	Trade routes, naval dominance	Supply chains, maritime chokepoints
Ideological Motives	Civilizing mission, Social Darwinism	Development aid, governance models, soft power

With the wave of decolonization beginning in the late 1950s and accelerating through the 1960s, African states entered the international system as formally sovereign entities. These newly independent states retained colonial borders under the principle of *uti possidetis* in order to avoid territorial conflict, thereby prioritizing stability over historical or ethnic claims. While African states possessed juridical sovereignty and international recognition, they often lacked empirical sovereignty in terms of effective territorial control, administrative capacity, and economic autonomy. Governance during this period was frequently characterized by one-party systems, military coups, and neo-patrimonial rule, as political leaders relied on patronage networks to maintain power. Internationally, African states became embedded in Cold War rivalries, with external powers supporting regimes based on strategic alignment rather than domestic governance quality.

The end of the Cold War marked a significant transformation in the African state system. The collapse of bipolar global competition reduced Africa’s strategic importance to major powers and introduced new forms of external engagement centered on democratization, economic

liberalization, and human rights. This period witnessed both political liberalization and, in some cases, state collapse, as seen in countries such as Somalia and Liberia. International intervention expanded through peacekeeping, humanitarian action, and post-conflict reconstruction, leading to the emergence of conditional sovereignty. Institutional change was also evident in the transformation of the Organization of African Unity into the African Union, reflecting a normative shift toward collective security, constitutional governance, and non-indifference to mass atrocities.

In the contemporary period, the African state system is shaped by globalization, regional integration, and the rise of a multipolar international order. African states increasingly engage with a diverse set of external partners, including China, Russia, Gulf states, and emerging middle powers, alongside traditional Western actors. Regional organizations such as the African Union and sub-regional economic communities have become more assertive in peace and security affairs, while initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area aim to enhance economic integration. Despite these developments, many African states continue to exhibit hybrid political characteristics, combining formal democratic institutions with authoritarian practices, and remain constrained by structural economic dependency.

Across this historical evolution, African states share several defining characteristics, values, and objectives. Structurally, most states retain colonial boundaries, exhibit limited state penetration beyond urban centers, and concentrate power in strong executive institutions. Normatively, African states have emphasized principles such as sovereign equality, territorial integrity, and non-secession, particularly through continental institutions. At the same time, there has been a gradual shift toward norms of constitutional order, human security, and collective intervention against unconstitutional changes of government. The primary objectives of African states include regime survival, internal stability, economic development, international legitimacy, and regional cooperation without the loss of sovereignty.

The question of whether an African International Relations theory exists has generated significant scholarly debate. Mainstream IR theories, particularly realism and liberalism, often assume strong, cohesive states with clear internal legitimacy, assumptions that do not always align with African political realities. In response, African and postcolonial scholars have developed alternative analytical frameworks that emphasize historical inequality, external dependency, informal power structures, and the strategies through which African elites engage the international system. Concepts such as subaltern realism, neo-patrimonialism, and the politics of extraversion have become central to understanding how African states pursue security and survival within a structurally unequal global order. African International Relations therefore exists not as a completely separate theory, but as a critical revision of mainstream IR grounded in African experiences.

Power dynamics within Africa and between Africa and the global system are deeply interconnected. Internally, power is shaped by disparities among states, the presence of regional hegemons, and competition for influence within continental and sub-regional institutions. Externally, Africa's position has shifted in response to global power transformations. During the Cold War, African states were often drawn into proxy conflicts and supported by rival superpowers. In the post-Cold War era, donor conditionality and governance agendas became more prominent. In the current multipolar context, African states have gained greater

diplomatic flexibility by engaging multiple external actors, thereby increasing their bargaining power while also exposing themselves to new forms of dependency and strategic competition.

The long-term survival of certain African states illustrates how historical continuity, diplomatic orientation, and normative commitments contribute to state resilience. Ethiopia represents one of Africa's oldest continuous states and has historically emphasized sovereignty, centralized authority, and regional leadership, exemplified by its role as host of the African Union. Morocco's enduring monarchy has relied on dynastic legitimacy and pragmatic diplomacy, balancing relations with Europe, the Gulf states, and African partners to maintain regime stability. Botswana's post-independence success demonstrates how institutional strength, rule of law, and cautious foreign policy can function as survival strategies in a challenging regional environment. Egypt's long-standing state tradition and strategic location have shaped a diplomatic orientation centered on security, regional influence, and the protection of vital resources such as the Nile. Rwanda's post-genocide reconstruction highlights a model of strong centralized authority combined with strategic international engagement, prioritizing regime security and developmental objectives over liberal democratic norms.

In summary, the African state system is best understood as a historically layered and hybrid political order shaped by pre-colonial legacies, colonial disruption, post-independence challenges, and ongoing global transformations. While African states operate within a state system inherited from European imperialism, they have adapted its norms and practices to local realities and survival imperatives. African International Relations scholarship provides essential tools for analyzing these dynamics by foregrounding historical inequality, state survival strategies, and Africa's evolving role in a changing global order.

Africa's contemporary power dynamics are shaped by a combination of demographic expansion, economic transformation, and shifting geopolitical alignments. The continent's rapidly growing population positions it as a future centre of global labour supply and consumer demand. This demographic trajectory enhances Africa's structural leverage in international negotiations, particularly in areas such as migration, climate policy, and global governance reform. Economic developments, including the rise of the African Continental Free Trade Area, are gradually creating a more integrated continental market capable of influencing global trade patterns. Africa's abundant reserves of critical minerals further elevate its strategic importance in the global energy transition.

These resources attract intense interest from major powers, thereby increasing Africa's bargaining power but also exposing it to heightened geopolitical competition. The continent's political institutions, especially the African Union, are becoming more assertive in articulating collective positions on global issues. Africa's recent inclusion as a permanent member of the G20 reflects growing recognition of its systemic relevance. At the same time, regional organisations such as ECOWAS, SADC, and the EAC play increasingly influential roles in shaping political and security outcomes. Security dynamics across the continent are deeply intertwined with external actors, as global powers seek influence through military cooperation, peacekeeping, and strategic infrastructure. African states have responded by diversifying their partnerships, thereby reducing dependence on any single external actor. This diversification contributes to a broader trend of strategic non alignment, which allows African governments to navigate global rivalries with greater autonomy. Longitudinal trends such as rapid

urbanisation are reshaping Africa's economic geography and creating new centres of political and commercial power. Digital innovation is accelerating, enabling African societies to leapfrog traditional development pathways through fintech, mobile services, and emerging technology ecosystems. The continent's energy landscape is also undergoing transformation, with significant potential for renewable power generation alongside complex transitions for fossil fuel dependent economies.

Regional integration efforts continue to deepen, although unevenly, and hold the potential to reduce Africa's structural dependence on external markets. These long term trajectories collectively position Africa as an increasingly consequential actor in the emerging multipolar order. As global power diffuses, Africa's influence is likely to expand across diplomatic, economic, and normative domains. The continent's ability to shape global governance debates on climate finance, debt restructuring, and trade reform will grow accordingly. Africa's demographic and economic rise will also affect global labour markets, particularly in Europe, where ageing populations create structural demand for migration. Control over critical mineral supply chains will further enhance Africa's strategic relevance in the global competition over green technologies. The continent's maritime and logistical corridors, including the Red Sea, Gulf of Guinea, and Indian Ocean, will become increasingly central to global trade flows. These developments collectively suggest that Africa will play a pivotal role in defining the contours of the future global order.

Within this broader continental landscape, the relationships among Ethiopia, Egypt, South Africa, and Nigeria illustrate the complex interplay of regional leadership, national interests, and continental diplomacy. Ethiopia and Egypt have long been engaged in a tense and strategically significant dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which has become a focal point for questions of sovereignty, water security, and regional power. This dispute highlights the challenges of balancing national development ambitions with transboundary resource governance. South Africa, as one of the continent's most institutionally developed states, often positions itself as a mediator in continental disputes, including those involving Ethiopia and Egypt. Nigeria, with its demographic weight and economic potential, similarly seeks to shape continental diplomacy, although domestic challenges sometimes constrain its external engagement. The interactions among these four states reveal both cooperation and competition, as each aspires to influence the direction of African regionalism.

Ethiopia's growing economic and military capabilities have strengthened its claim to regional leadership in the Horn of Africa. Egypt, with its historical diplomatic networks and strategic control of the Suez Canal, remains a central actor in North African and Middle Eastern geopolitics. South Africa's role in the BRICS grouping enhances its global profile and provides a platform for advancing African interests in multilateral forums. Nigeria's leadership within ECOWAS and its status as Africa's largest population centre give it significant influence in West African affairs. The interplay among these states shapes continental debates on security, development, and institutional reform. Their cooperation is essential for the effective functioning of the African Union, particularly in areas such as peace and security architecture. At the same time, their divergent interests can impede consensus on issues of continental importance. The evolving relationships among Ethiopia, Egypt, South Africa, and Nigeria therefore reflect the broader dynamics of African power distribution. As these states navigate their respective regional ambitions, their interactions will significantly influence Africa's

collective capacity to shape the global order. Their ability to coordinate positions on climate finance, trade negotiations, and global governance reform will be especially consequential. Ultimately, the balance of cooperation and competition among these four states will help determine the extent to which Africa can act as a coherent and influential actor in the emerging multipolar world.

Africa's evolving power dynamics are beginning to reshape the global order in ways that are subtle now but will become increasingly decisive over the coming decades. The continent's demographic expansion, economic potential, and strategic geography are transforming it from a peripheral actor into a central arena of global competition and cooperation. As Africa's population approaches one quarter of the world's total, its labour force and consumer markets will become indispensable to global economic stability. This demographic weight will give African states greater leverage in negotiations on migration, climate policy, and global governance reform. At the same time, Africa's vast reserves of critical minerals—essential for batteries, renewable energy, and digital technologies—position the continent at the heart of the global energy transition. Control over these resources will shape the balance of power among major economies, making African partnerships strategically indispensable.

Africa's political institutions are also becoming more assertive, with the African Union's permanent membership in the G20 signalling a shift toward greater global representation. As regional organisations such as ECOWAS, SADC, and the EAC strengthen their roles, Africa's collective diplomatic influence is likely to grow. This institutional consolidation supports a broader trend of strategic non alignment, as African states increasingly resist pressure to choose sides in global rivalries. Such autonomy contributes to a more multipolar world in which influence is distributed across a wider set of actors. Africa's digital transformation, driven by rapid adoption of mobile technologies and fintech innovation, further enhances its global relevance by creating new economic models that may influence other emerging regions. Meanwhile, the continent's urbanisation is generating new megacities that will become hubs of global commerce and culture. These long term structural shifts collectively position Africa as a key determinant of future global economic and political trajectories.

The relationships among Ethiopia, Egypt, South Africa, and Nigeria illustrate how intra African dynamics will shape the continent's global role. Ethiopia and Egypt's dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam demonstrates how resource competition can influence regional stability and international diplomacy. South Africa's institutional strength and its role in BRICS give it a platform to articulate African perspectives in global forums. Nigeria's demographic scale and economic potential make it a pivotal actor in West Africa and a significant voice in continental affairs. The interplay among these four states—each with distinct regional spheres of influence—will shape Africa's ability to act cohesively on global issues. Their cooperation, or lack thereof, will determine whether Africa can present unified positions on climate finance, trade reform, and global governance restructuring. If these states align their interests, Africa could emerge as a coherent geopolitical pole capable of influencing the rules and norms of the international system. If they remain fragmented, external powers will continue to shape African outcomes more than African actors themselves.

Africa's rising influence will therefore contribute to a more complex, multipolar global order in which power is negotiated rather than imposed. As the continent becomes more central to

global supply chains, energy transitions, and demographic trends, its choices will increasingly shape the strategic calculations of major powers. I can also map these dynamics onto specific global scenarios if you want a sharper sense of how Africa's rise might alter future geopolitical alignments.

Rationale for an AU–Transparency International Anti Corruption Partnership

An African Union partnership with Transparency International and AU member states on anti corruption is grounded in both governance necessity and strategic development objectives. Corruption undermines public trust, diverts resources from essential services, distorts markets, and weakens institutions that are central to democratic accountability and state legitimacy. The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), published annually by Transparency International, provides a globally recognised benchmark of perceived public sector corruption that can serve as a common monitoring framework for AU member states. At the continental level, such a partnership would support the AU's governance agenda by providing independent data, methodological expertise, and civil society engagement that complement state driven measures. Transparency International's global experience in anti-corruption best practices can help AU institutions and member states to design stronger legal frameworks, integrity systems, and enforcement mechanisms, enhancing public sector transparency and accountability. A joint AU–TI initiative would reinforce continental frameworks such as Agenda 2063 and the African Peer Review Mechanism by aligning anti-corruption benchmarks with long term continental development goals. Partnership with Transparency International would also bring international credibility and comparative analysis that can help AU member states identify policy gaps and measure progress over time. It would create opportunities for civil society and public sector stakeholders to engage in monitoring and reform processes, strengthening domestic accountability ecosystems. For the AU, this kind of cooperation would build normative convergence and peer pressure among member states to adopt and implement robust anti corruption measures, reducing the political space for impunity and illicit financial flows that erode development gains.

The performance of AU member states in the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index illustrates the wide variation in governance outcomes across the continent. Seychelles leads Africa with a score of 72 out of 100, ranking among the least perceived corrupt public sectors globally, a reflection of stronger prosecution of corruption cases and improved financial transparency. Cape Verde similarly performs relatively well with a score of 62, and countries such as Botswana and Rwanda, each with scores of 57, display comparatively better governance frameworks and anti corruption efforts. Mauritius registers a score of 51, indicating stronger performance in public sector transparency, while mid range performers like Namibia, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Senegal, with scores around the mid 40s to high 40s, show moderate performance with room for further improvement. These higher scoring countries can serve as models and peer leaders within AU regional frameworks and peer review mechanisms, offering insights into anti corruption institutional design and implementation.

At the other end of the spectrum, several AU members exhibit significant governance challenges. South Sudan has one of the lowest CPI scores globally, reflecting prolonged conflict, weak institutions, and pervasive public sector corruption. Somalia similarly scores extremely low, consistent with longstanding state fragility and governance breakdown. Eritrea

and Equatorial Guinea also rank among the lowest, indicating severely constrained transparency and accountability mechanisms, while countries such as Libya and others with scores in the teens or low twenties illustrate the challenges of transitional governance and institutional weakness. A number of additional AU states, including Kenya, Angola, Nigeria, Uganda, and Togo, occupy lower mid CPI ranges, signalling significant perceived corruption that undermines public confidence and development outcomes.

The CPI provides a comparative, internationally recognised measure that can be integrated into AU policy frameworks to track progress and identify priority areas for reform. When combined with peer review instruments like the African Peer Review Mechanism and domestic anti corruption commissions, CPI benchmarking helps contextualise national performance in a continental context and highlights relative strengths and weaknesses. By focusing on both lead performers and laggards, the AU can tailor capacity building support, promote best practices, and create incentives for reform through targeted technical assistance, regional anti corruption networks, and enhanced accountability standards in continental funding and cooperation programs.

An AU–Transparency International partnership anchored in CPI analysis would not only elevate transparency norms but would also contribute to strengthening judicial independence, public financial management, and civic engagement, all of which are essential for sustainable governance and democratic resilience. By combining independent benchmarking with African led institutional frameworks, the partnership would enhance institutional capacity, support evidence based policy reforms, and foster shared standards of transparency across AU member states, contributing to greater political stability, improved investment climates, and sustainable development.

AHSI

The African Union and European Union can develop a joint strategy on the African Human Security Index (AHSI) in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Angola that centers on people-focused resilience and development. This strategy would adopt a human security approach that places individuals and communities at the center of analysis and intervention, recognizing that peace, economic opportunity, governance, health, and environmental sustainability are deeply interconnected. The AHSI provides a continent-wide framework to guide these efforts and monitor progress toward Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals.

A core element of the strategy involves institutionalizing human security assessment and policy integration by designing and operationalizing national AHSI frameworks in each country through inter-ministerial human security task forces. These bodies would integrate AHSI indicators into national planning, early warning systems, and policy frameworks covering peace and security, social protection, public health, livelihoods, and governance. The EU would support capacity building, data system upgrades, and analytic tools that enable disaggregated, timely human security data at community levels and for vulnerable groups.

Strengthening continental and regional partnerships is essential. AHSI implementation should align with the African Peace and Security Architecture, including the Continental Early

Warning System, to ensure that human security indicators inform regional conflict anticipation and responses. This would involve technical exchange programs between the EU, AU, and Regional Economic Communities to harmonize indicators, early warning mechanisms, and policy responses, avoiding fragmented human security governance approaches.

The strategy should also integrate AHSI data into peace operations, demobilization programs, and community reconciliation initiatives. In conflict-affected areas such as eastern DRC and northern Mozambique, EU-AU cooperation would channel AHSI insights into conflict prevention, restorative justice, community safety planning, and reintegration schemes that prioritize local agency and trauma-informed approaches. Economic and social development interventions would leverage AHSI assessments to guide community-level programming in economic security, food and health security, and environmental resilience. In Nigeria and Angola, aligning AHSI insights with EU development funds and AU economic policy instruments could support job creation for youth and women, strengthen agricultural value chains, and improve sustainable resource governance, addressing root causes of insecurity while expanding economic opportunity.

Governance and rule of law enhancement would use the human security framework to strengthen accountability, transparency, and citizen engagement. Building on EU governance programs and AU democratic governance frameworks, the strategy would support legal reforms, anti-corruption initiatives, and inclusive civic participation mechanisms to enhance public trust and protect civil liberties, directly mitigating political insecurity. Health and environmental security would also be embedded in the approach, with partnerships to strengthen disease surveillance, health infrastructure, and climate adaptation planning. EU contributions to pandemic preparedness, digital health platforms, and environmental sustainability initiatives could strengthen human security outcomes in all four countries.

EU-AU cooperation would operate through joint governance mechanisms, including a Human Security Board composed of senior representatives from both unions, national governments, civil society, and technical experts to oversee implementation, monitor impact, and adapt methods. This board would connect with summit outcomes such as the AU-EU summit on peace, security, and prosperity, ensuring high-level political backing. Funding would pool resources from EU instruments, such as Global Europe and the European Peace Facility, with AU funding mechanisms to co-finance national AHSI initiatives, covering data systems, policymaker training, and programs addressing structural vulnerabilities as well as immediate security risks. Local partnerships with civil society organizations, research institutes, and traditional authorities would ensure that human security measurements and interventions are locally grounded, culturally relevant, and responsive to lived realities.

The strategy's success would be defined by measurable improvements in human security dimensions, including reductions in violent crime, improved access to health and education services, enhanced governance scores, and greater economic resilience. Metrics could draw from AHSI, African Peace and Security Architecture safety indicators, and complementary governance indices to provide a multidimensional performance assessment over short, medium, and long timeframes. By institutionalizing AHSI frameworks at national and regional levels, building data-informed policy systems, coordinating peace and development interventions, and fostering inclusive governance, this strategy can translate the vision of

Agenda 2063 into tangible human security gains for citizens in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Angola.

External actors

EU–AU Partnership: Objectives, Values, and Strategic Engagement

The European Union engages the African Union with multiple strategic objectives in mind. Economically, the EU seeks to promote trade, investment, and regional stability that benefit European and African stakeholders alike. Politically, the EU aims to reinforce democratic governance, human rights, and rule of law norms across Africa, aligning with its external policy principles. Security cooperation addresses counter-terrorism, conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and maritime security, stabilizing regions whose instability can have global repercussions. Environmental collaboration is increasingly central, particularly around climate action and sustainable resource management, consistent with both the Paris Agreement and the EU Green Deal. Strategically, the EU recognizes Africa's rising geopolitical significance and seeks to maintain influence amid global multipolar competition involving China, India, Russia, and the United States.

The African Union's core objectives similarly encompass the promotion of peace and security through the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), continental integration via the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), sustainable development through Agenda 2063, and the strengthening of governance and democratic norms among member states. The AU emphasizes African agency, sovereignty, and solidarity among states, reflecting the continent's historical struggle against colonialism and fragmented governance.

The Joint Africa EU Strategy (JAES) explicitly articulates the shared values and objectives underpinning this partnership. The strategy frames the relationship as a "people centred partnership" based on "joint political concern" rather than a traditional donor recipient dynamic. As the EU notes, "Africa and Europe are bound together by history, culture, geography, a common future, as well as by a community of values: the respect for human rights, freedom, equality, solidarity, justice, the rule of law and democracy." This normative framing reflects the overlapping ambitions of both unions: promoting peace, security, governance, economic integration, and sustainable development, while respecting the sovereignty and agency of African states. The renewed vision for 2030 further underscores this shared commitment, noting a common ambition "to develop a shared vision for EU Africa relations in a globalised world," encompassing peace and security, economic cooperation, migration and mobility, and a rules-based multilateral order. The European Commission has emphasized that "Africa and Europe are bound by geography and a common destiny. The EU Africa partnership is of utmost importance to shape our future." The AU similarly underscores principles of unity, interdependence, ownership, joint responsibility, respect for human rights, and the right to development, demonstrating a strong alignment of values across the partnership.

Figure South East African Gepard



In practice, the EU engages Africa through multilateral, bilateral, and subregional frameworks. Multilateral engagement includes the EU–AU Partnership, the JAES, and collaborations within the UN and G20, providing a platform for continental coordination. Bilateral engagement remains substantial, reflecting partnerships with individual states such as Nigeria, Ethiopia, and South Africa across trade, development, and security initiatives. Subregional engagement focuses on organizations like ECOWAS, SADC, and IGAD, supporting regional economic projects, peacekeeping, and infrastructure development. While multilateral frameworks like the EU–AU partnership establish collective coordination, the majority of EU funding and operational activity continues to flow through bilateral and subregional channels, though exact proportions vary by sector.

To strengthen its engagement with the AU, the EU could focus on aligning more systematically with continental frameworks rather than primarily with individual states or subregional bodies. Deepening support for AfCFTA implementation, standardizing customs procedures, harmonizing regulations, and building regional infrastructure would enhance intra-African trade while respecting African agency. Security cooperation could be more tightly coordinated with APSA and PSC-led missions to ensure African leadership in peace operations while achieving EU objectives. Investing in institutional capacity at the AU Commission level, through technical assistance, digital tools, and sustainable financing, could reinforce long-term planning and continental coherence. Multilateral coordination mechanisms, such as joint EU–AU task forces on climate, migration, industrialization, or security, would allow European resources to support African-led priorities rather than replace them. Streamlining decision-making and communication would further ensure that the AU functions as the primary interlocutor for continental initiatives, reinforcing legitimacy and effectiveness.

Taken together, these objectives, shared values, and frameworks demonstrate that the EU–AU partnership is not merely transactional but represents a strategic, normative, and long-term political relationship. Anchored in JAES principles, the partnership promotes joint responsibility, mutual respect, and collaboration on challenges of continental and global significance. By integrating multilateral coordination with support for bilateral and subregional engagements, the EU can reinforce African agency, enhance governance, and strengthen both security and development outcomes across the continent.

China's Strategy in Africa

China remains Africa's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade estimated at around \$295 billion in 2024. The Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) functions as the main multilateral platform for political and economic engagement and is tightly linked to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which includes infrastructure financing and projects in dozens of African countries. China's approach emphasizes large scale infrastructure (roads, railways, ports), industrial investment, and state led financing through banks and state owned enterprises. Chinese engagement is often seen as responsive to African priorities for infrastructure and development, and Beijing seeks to maintain influence by framing its cooperation as non interference in domestic politics and aligned with African leadership's priorities. However, there are concerns about debt sustainability and the long term value captured by African economies versus Chinese firms and lenders.

China's strategy in Africa has undergone a profound evolution over the past three decades, moving from scattered bilateral aid projects to a highly institutionalized framework of political and economic engagement. In the 1990s, Chinese involvement was largely symbolic, focused on the construction of stadiums, hospitals, and government buildings that signaled solidarity with African states. By the early 2000s, however, Beijing began to pursue a more ambitious and systematic approach, emphasizing large-scale infrastructure projects financed through state-owned enterprises and banks such as the Export-Import Bank of China. This marked a decisive shift from soft diplomacy to hard economic statecraft, with railways, highways, ports, and energy projects becoming the centerpiece of China's African engagement.

The establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 institutionalized this new phase. FOCAC created a multilateral platform through which China could coordinate its commitments and African states could articulate their priorities. Over successive summits, the scope of cooperation expanded from concessional loans and technical assistance to comprehensive packages of trade, investment, and industrial development. The most recent FOCAC Beijing Action Plan (2025-2027) illustrates the maturity of this framework, explicitly linking African development priorities to China's Belt and Road Initiative. The document outlines measures in infrastructure connectivity, industrial modernization, financial cooperation, and governance, while reaffirming the principle of non-interference in domestic politics. This policy architecture reflects Beijing's effort to frame its engagement as aligned with African leadership's priorities and distinct from Western conditionality.

The impact of this strategy on African economies has been significant. Infrastructure projects such as the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway, Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway, and port expansions in Tanzania and Nigeria have reduced transport costs, improved regional connectivity, and stimulated trade. Industrial parks financed by Chinese capital have created employment opportunities and encouraged local manufacturing. Bilateral trade between China and Africa reached approximately \$295 billion in 2024, consolidating China's position as Africa's largest trading partner. For many African governments, the scale and speed of Chinese financing initially came as a shock, particularly when compared to the slower, conditional flows of aid from Western donors. Development ministries accustomed to lengthy negotiations with institutions such as the World Bank suddenly found themselves confronted with rapid disbursement of funds and turnkey infrastructure projects. This responsiveness to African

priorities was welcomed, though it also raised concerns about debt sustainability and whether long-term value accrues more to African economies or to Chinese firms and lenders.

China's Africa strategy thus represents a state-led, infrastructure-centered model of development cooperation. It has undeniably helped African economies by addressing critical infrastructure gaps, while also reshaping the geopolitical landscape of the continent. At the same time, it has generated debates about dependency, debt, and the balance of benefits. What began as a shock to African development ministries has now become a central feature of their planning, requiring careful negotiation to maximize local gains. The evolution of China's approach demonstrates both continuity and innovation: continuity in the pursuit of influence and access to resources, and innovation in the institutional frameworks and financing mechanisms through which these goals are pursued.

China's Africa strategy, as we discussed, is built around large-scale infrastructure, industrial investment, and state-led financing. In contrast, Western donors such as the World Bank, the European Union, and bilateral agencies like USAID have historically emphasized governance reforms, institutional strengthening, and conditionality tied to liberal economic policies. Where China offers rapid disbursement of funds and turnkey projects, Western institutions often require lengthy negotiations, feasibility studies, and compliance with governance benchmarks before financing is approved.

This difference in logic has profound implications. African ministries initially found China's approach shocking because it bypassed the traditional development aid model, delivering visible results in roads, railways, and ports within a short timeframe. Western donors, by contrast, framed development as a long-term process of institutional reform, often criticized for being slow and misaligned with immediate African priorities. China's emphasis on non-interference and respect for sovereignty further distinguished its model, appealing to governments frustrated by Western conditionality.

The outcomes of these contrasting strategies are mixed. China's infrastructure-led model has undeniably helped African economies by reducing transport costs, improving connectivity, and stimulating trade. However, concerns about debt sustainability and the balance of benefits remain, as Chinese firms often capture a significant share of the value. Western approaches, while slower, have sometimes produced more durable institutional reforms, though they have struggled to deliver the kind of transformative infrastructure African leaders demand.

In practice, many African governments now pursue a hybrid strategy, leveraging China's speed and scale for infrastructure while continuing to engage Western donors for governance, health, and education programs. This dual engagement reflects both the opportunities and challenges of navigating a multipolar development landscape.

United States Strategy in Africa

U.S. engagement with Africa has historically been shaped by the broader currents of American foreign policy, oscillating between periods of strategic neglect and moments of heightened interest tied to global geopolitical shifts. During the Cold War, Africa was often viewed through the prism of ideological competition, with Washington supporting regimes or movements aligned against Soviet influence. This engagement was frequently framed in terms

of security and ideological containment rather than developmental partnership. In the post-Cold War era, U.S. policy shifted toward democratization, governance reform, and economic liberalization, reflecting the ascendancy of neoliberal development paradigms. Initiatives such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) and Power Africa embodied this approach, combining trade incentives and energy development with governance conditionality.

Recent policy shifts, however, reflect a more transactional and competitive orientation, particularly under the “America First” strategy. Africa is increasingly seen through the lens of U.S. economic and strategic interests, with emphasis on securing critical minerals, ensuring supply chain resilience, and supporting American businesses in African markets. The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy recasts Africa’s role in global geopolitics but often situates it within a broader competitive context, especially vis-à-vis China. This framing underscores Africa’s importance as a supplier of energy resources and rare earth minerals, but it also reduces engagement to a function of global rivalry rather than a sustained developmental partnership.

Critics argue that this orientation has led to a shrinking U.S. diplomatic and aid footprint. The termination of long-running initiatives such as Power Africa exemplifies the retreat from multilateral, long-term development programs in favor of bilateral and transactional partnerships. This shift has weakened the governance-focused dimension of U.S. engagement, which historically sought to strengthen institutions, promote transparency, and support civil society. The emphasis on short-term economic gains and strategic competition risks undermining the credibility of U.S. commitments to democratic governance and sustainable development.

Nonetheless, there remain areas of continuity and opportunity. Commercial diplomacy and infrastructure partnerships, such as the Lobito Corridor supported by the G7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, demonstrate that U.S. engagement is not wholly absent from Africa’s developmental landscape. These initiatives suggest that Washington still recognizes the importance of African connectivity and industrialization, even if framed within a competitive geopolitical logic. The challenge lies in reconciling transactional priorities with governance commitments, ensuring that U.S. engagement contributes not only to securing resources and markets but also to strengthening African institutions and long-term development outcomes.

This historical trajectory reveals both depth and discontinuity: from Cold War ideological competition, to post-Cold War governance and development, to contemporary transactionalism. The results have been mixed. While U.S. initiatives have at times bolstered governance and institutional reform, the current competitive framing risks narrowing Africa’s role to that of a resource supplier and strategic arena. For African governments, this requires careful negotiation to balance opportunities for infrastructure and trade with the need to preserve autonomy and ensure that external engagement supports rather than undermines domestic development priorities.

China’s evolving strategy in Africa and the United States’ shifting engagement reveal two distinct but overlapping trajectories of external involvement on the continent. China’s approach has moved from symbolic aid projects in the 1990s to a highly institutionalized framework under the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), now tightly linked to the Belt and

Road Initiative (BRI). This strategy emphasizes large-scale infrastructure, industrial investment, and state-led financing, framed by principles of non-interference and alignment with African priorities. The result has been rapid disbursement of funds and visible projects such as railways, ports, and industrial parks, which initially shocked African development ministries accustomed to slower, conditional Western aid. While concerns about debt sustainability remain, China's model has undeniably addressed critical infrastructure gaps and stimulated trade, with bilateral trade reaching \$295 billion in 2024.

By contrast, U.S. engagement has historically varied with political administrations in Washington, reflecting broader shifts in American foreign policy. During the Cold War, Africa was viewed largely through the prism of ideological competition, with Washington supporting regimes aligned against Soviet influence. In the post-Cold War era, U.S. policy emphasized democratization, governance reform, and economic liberalization, embodied in initiatives such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) and Power Africa. These programs sought to strengthen institutions and promote transparency, but often delivered slower and less visible results compared to China's infrastructure-led model.

Recent policy shifts under the "America First" strategy have recast Africa's role in global geopolitics in more transactional terms. The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy situates Africa within a broader competitive context, emphasizing critical minerals, energy security, and supply chain resilience. This orientation has led to a shrinking diplomatic and aid footprint, exemplified by the termination of long-running initiatives like Power Africa, and a move toward bilateral, transactional partnerships rather than deep multilateral engagement. Critics argue that this undermines the governance-focused dimension of U.S. policy, narrowing Africa's role to that of a resource supplier and strategic arena. Nonetheless, there remain opportunities for commercial diplomacy and infrastructure partnerships, such as the Lobito Corridor supported by the G7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, which demonstrate that Washington still recognizes Africa's importance for connectivity and industrialization.

Taken together, the comparison highlights both continuity and divergence. China's model prioritizes speed, scale, and infrastructure, framed as non-political cooperation, while the U.S. approach has historically emphasized governance, institutions, and conditionality, but now increasingly reflects transactional competition. The results are mixed: China has delivered transformative infrastructure but raised debt concerns, while the U.S. has contributed to governance reforms but struggled to match China's visible impact. For African governments, the challenge lies in balancing these external engagements—leveraging China's infrastructure financing while ensuring that governance and sustainability concerns, often emphasized by Western donors, are not neglected.

India's Strategic Engagement

India's engagement with Africa has a long historical lineage, rooted in cultural, commercial, and political connections that predate contemporary strategic competition. During the colonial period, Indian merchants and laborers were active across East and Southern Africa, creating diasporic communities that continue to serve as bridges between the two regions. In the post-independence era, India positioned itself as a partner in the Global South, supporting African

liberation movements and advocating for decolonization in international forums. This solidarity laid the foundation for India's contemporary diplomatic and economic outreach, which has accelerated in the twenty-first century as Africa's market potential and strategic location in the Indian Ocean have become increasingly important.

Exports account for approximately 4% of India's GDP, with a significant 60% of this trade passing through the Red Sea corridor, highlighting the strategic importance of Afro-Asian maritime routes for Indian commerce. The African coastline represents a major growth frontier for Indian merchants, offering expanding markets, investment opportunities, and trade linkages that could diversify India's export base while strengthening its geopolitical and economic presence along key maritime routes.

India's modern strategy in Africa is characterized by a dual emphasis on maritime security cooperation and economic engagement. Joint naval exercises with African states, particularly along the Indian Ocean littoral, reinforce India's role as a regional security partner and reflect its ambition to balance China's growing footprint in the same waters. This maritime dimension is critical, as the Indian Ocean serves as a vital corridor for global trade and energy flows, and African ports and coastal states are central to securing these routes. India's naval diplomacy thus complements its broader strategic interest in maintaining freedom of navigation and countering piracy, while also projecting itself as a reliable partner in regional security.

On the economic front, India trails China significantly in trade volume, with China–Africa trade reaching approximately \$307 billion in 2024 compared to India's more modest figures. Yet India's engagement is not without significance. It has focused on sectors such as pharmaceuticals, information technology, and small-scale industrial investment, areas where Indian firms have competitive advantages and where African economies seek diversification. India's development cooperation, often framed through concessional credit lines and capacity-building programs, emphasizes human capital and institutional ties rather than the large-scale infrastructure projects that dominate China's model. This approach resonates with African states that value technology transfer, education, and healthcare partnerships alongside physical infrastructure.

The market potential of Africa for India lies not only in raw materials but also in consumer markets and industrial cooperation. As Africa's population grows and urbanizes, demand for affordable pharmaceuticals, IT services, and educational opportunities aligns closely with India's strengths. Initiatives such as the India–Africa Forum Summit have institutionalized this engagement, providing a platform for dialogue and cooperation. India's longstanding cultural and diplomatic connections, reinforced by its diaspora communities, give it a unique soft power advantage that complements its economic and security initiatives.

In comparative perspective, India's strategy differs from China's in both scale and emphasis. While China dominates in trade volume and infrastructure financing, India positions itself as a preferred security partner and a provider of human capital development. This reflects a broader ambition to deepen ties with Africa based on strategic security interests and cultural affinity, rather than purely transactional economic engagement. For African states, India offers an alternative model of partnership—less overwhelming in financial scale but potentially more sustainable in terms of governance, institutional development, and balanced cooperation.

Russia's Strategy

Russia's renewed engagement in Africa must be understood as part of a broader strategy to reassert itself as a global power, particularly in regions where Western influence has waned or become contested. Unlike China's infrastructure-led model or India's emphasis on maritime security and human capital, Moscow's approach is heavily oriented toward security cooperation, defense industry exports, and political alignment with regimes that seek alternatives to Western conditionality. This orientation reflects both historical continuities and contemporary innovations. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union positioned itself as a champion of anti-colonial struggles, providing arms, training, and ideological support to liberation movements. In the post-Soviet era, Russia largely withdrew from Africa due to domestic economic collapse, but under Vladimir Putin it has returned with a strategy that prioritizes military partnerships and resource extraction.

The evolution of mercenary groups such as Wagner, and now the Russia-controlled Africa Corps, illustrates the hybrid nature of Moscow's engagement. Operating in countries such as Mali and the Central African Republic, these groups provide security services, training, and direct military support, often in exchange for mining concessions or political influence. This model allows Russia to circumvent Western sanctions and embed itself in fragile states where Western actors are either absent or constrained by governance concerns. Arms deliveries and defense industry exports further consolidate these relationships, positioning Russia as a supplier of military hardware to regimes that value sovereignty and non-interference over democratic reform.

Russia's presence is politically appealing to some African governments because it offers an alternative to Western influence, particularly in contexts where Western aid is tied to governance reforms, transparency, or human rights. By framing its engagement as pragmatic and non-ideological, Moscow has cultivated partnerships that reinforce regime security rather than institutional development. Yet this raises significant concerns about long-term stability and democratic governance. The reliance on mercenary groups and arms transfers may provide short-term security, but it risks entrenching authoritarianism, exacerbating conflict dynamics, and undermining state institutions.

Reports of proposed bases and expanded military infrastructure, such as Sudan's offer of a Russian naval base on the Red Sea, underscore Moscow's broader ambitions to secure strategic positions in Africa. Control of maritime chokepoints and access to warm-water ports would enhance Russia's global military reach, allowing it to project power into the Indian Ocean and beyond. This ambition reflects a continuity with Soviet-era strategy, when naval bases and military alliances were central to Moscow's global posture.

Turkey's Engagement in Africa

Turkey's Africa policy has undergone a notable historical evolution, reflecting shifts in Ankara's foreign policy priorities and its ambition to position itself as a rising middle power. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Turkey's engagement with Africa was limited, largely symbolic, and focused on humanitarian outreach and cultural diplomacy. The turning point came in 2005, when Turkey declared the "Year of Africa" and was designated a strategic

partner of the African Union. This marked the beginning of a more systematic approach, characterized by the opening of embassies across the continent, the expansion of Turkish Airlines routes, and the institutionalization of relations through Turkey–Africa summits. Over the following two decades, Ankara steadily broadened its presence, combining trade, investment, humanitarian work, educational programs, and military cooperation into a multidimensional strategy.

The main drivers of this policy are both economic and strategic. Economically, Turkey views Africa as a market with immense potential, particularly in construction, textiles, consumer goods, and defense exports. Turkish firms have become active in infrastructure projects, while Ankara has promoted trade agreements and investment opportunities to diversify its economic partnerships beyond Europe and the Middle East. Strategically, Africa offers Turkey an arena to project influence, build alliances, and reinforce its claim to global middle-power status. Humanitarian and cultural diplomacy, coordinated through agencies such as TİKA, as well as scholarships and broadcasting in African languages, have been deployed to cultivate goodwill and strengthen Turkey's image as a partner attentive to local needs. Security cooperation has also become increasingly prominent, with defense agreements signed with Nigeria and military training operations in Somalia, underscoring Ankara's ambition to be seen as a reliable security partner.

The impact of this policy has been significant. Turkey has positioned itself as an alternative partner for African states, offering multifaceted cooperation that contrasts with the infrastructure-heavy model of China and the security-centric approach of Russia. By emphasizing soft power alongside economic and military ties, Ankara has differentiated itself as a middle power that seeks partnership rather than domination. This has allowed Turkey to gain traction in regions where African governments value diversified relationships and autonomy in external engagement.

At the same time, Turkey's growing presence in Africa has implications for rivalry with Russia and the European Union. Russia's return to Africa has been heavily oriented toward security cooperation, arms exports, and political alignment with regimes seeking alternatives to Western conditionality. Turkey's approach, while also incorporating defense cooperation, is broader and more balanced, combining cultural diplomacy, trade, and humanitarian initiatives. This creates a competitive dynamic in countries such as Somalia and Nigeria, where both Ankara and Moscow seek influence through military partnerships. The European Union, meanwhile, views Turkey's Africa policy with ambivalence. On one hand, Ankara's engagement supports development and connectivity, but on the other, it challenges the EU's traditional dominance in aid and governance programs. Turkey's emphasis on non-conditional cooperation appeals to African states frustrated with EU conditionality, thereby complicating Brussels' efforts to maintain influence.

In sum, Turkey's Africa policy has evolved from symbolic outreach to a multidimensional strategy driven by economic opportunity, strategic ambition, and soft power. Its impact lies in offering African states a diversified partnership model, while its rivalry with Russia and the EU underscores the shifting geopolitical landscape of the continent. For Africa, this creates both opportunities and challenges, as external actors compete to shape its developmental trajectory and strategic orientation.

China's Africa strategy has evolved from symbolic aid to a highly institutionalized framework under FOCAC and the Belt and Road Initiative, prioritizing infrastructure, trade, and state-led financing. The United States historically emphasized governance and democratization, but recent strategies have become more transactional, focusing on critical minerals, supply chains, and strategic competition. Russia's return to Africa is dominated by security cooperation, arms exports, and mercenary deployments, offering regime protection but raising concerns about long-term stability and governance. India builds on historical diasporic ties and cultural affinity, emphasizing maritime security in the Indian Ocean, pharmaceuticals, IT, and education, positioning itself as a softer alternative to China. Turkey has pursued a multidimensional policy since the late 1990s, combining trade, humanitarian aid, cultural diplomacy, and selective defense cooperation, presenting itself as a middle power partner. These diverse strategies reflect different historical trajectories: China and Russia as major powers seeking influence, the U.S. as a governance-oriented actor now shifting to competition, and India and Turkey as rising powers carving niches. The rivalry among external actors intensifies Africa's geopolitical importance, with China and Russia challenging Western dominance, while Turkey and India diversify the landscape. For African states, this competition creates opportunities to leverage multiple partnerships for infrastructure, security, and human capital, but also risks dependency and fragmented development.

Table

Partner	Strategic Instruments	Main sectors of Engagement	Implications for African Agency
European Union (EU)	Joint Africa–EU Strategy (JAES), AfCFTA support, multilateral programs, EU funding mechanisms, technical assistance	Governance, peace & security, trade & economic integration, climate, development	Reinforces African agency through multilateral engagement; emphasizes normative alignment; supports continental integration; requires capacity-building to prevent bureaucratic bottlenecks
China	Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), state loans, state-owned enterprises	Infrastructure, transport corridors, energy, industry, trade	Provides large-scale investment and rapid infrastructure development; risk of debt dependency; less emphasis on governance or African-led planning; largely bilateral and state-focused
United States (US)	Bilateral trade agreements, development programs (e.g., Power Africa), strategic security partnerships, G7/PGII initiatives	Security, energy, critical minerals, trade, investment	Transactional approach; supports African security and investment but often aligns with US strategic priorities; less engagement at continental multilateral level
India	Bilateral partnerships, maritime cooperation, defense exercises, capacity-building programs	Maritime security, trade, defense, IT & digital skills	Offers alternative security and economic partnerships; smaller scale than China; focuses on Indian Ocean security and South–South cooperation; generally

			supportive of African-led agendas
Russia	Defense cooperation, arms exports, security contracts (e.g., Wagner group), political support in international forums	Military/security, resource access, political influence	Provides security support and alternative alliances; risk of entrenching authoritarian regimes; can undermine governance; tends to operate bilaterally with selective states
Turkey	Bilateral agreements, trade missions, cultural diplomacy, development and education programs, military cooperation	Trade, logistics, soft power, education, security	Offers multi-dimensional partnerships combining soft power and development; alternative middle-power engagement; complements EU or Chinese presence; moderate scale and influence

The table highlights how each external actor balances opportunity and risk for African states. The EU's engagement is uniquely anchored in multilateral frameworks and normative alignment, reinforcing continental mechanisms like AfCFTA and APSA. China provides scale and speed, but often prioritizes bilateral deals that may reduce African leverage over long-term development outcomes. The US, India, and Turkey offer strategic and security partnerships with selective focus areas, while Russia emphasizes security and political leverage, sometimes at the cost of governance norms.

For Africa, the challenge is to coordinate these diverse engagements through continental structures, ensuring external competition is leveraged for integration, industrialization, and institutional capacity building. The EU–AU partnership, particularly if deepened along AfCFTA, APSA, and joint infrastructure corridors, can serve as a platform for harmonizing external influence in ways that strengthen African agency.

Africa's sovereignty and governance models are being tested in unprecedented ways as external actors intensify their competition for influence across the continent. The implications of this dynamic are profound because the strategies pursued by China, the United States, Russia, India, and Turkey often prioritize their own geopolitical and economic interests rather than the long-term institutional strengthening of African states. This external engagement frequently comes with trade-offs: while infrastructure projects, military cooperation, and investment flows can deliver immediate benefits, they may also entrench dependency, weaken democratic accountability, and undermine the autonomy of African decision-making. Sovereignty is challenged not only by the sheer scale of external involvement but also by the asymmetry of power, where African governments must negotiate from positions of relative vulnerability against actors with far greater financial, military, and diplomatic resources.

The governance implications are equally significant. When external powers emphasize short-term gains—such as resource extraction, arms sales, or rapid infrastructure delivery—local institutions often struggle to keep pace. Weak regulatory frameworks can lead to exploitative contracts, opaque debt arrangements, and corruption, eroding the foundations of democratic governance. In some cases, external actors deliberately bypass governance structures, working directly with ruling elites or security apparatuses to secure influence. This undermines institutional development and risks reinforcing authoritarian tendencies, as regimes may prioritize external backing over domestic accountability. The rise of mercenary groups, military

bases, and transactional partnerships illustrates how external engagement can reshape governance models, privileging regime security over inclusive development.

At the same time, Africa's challenge is not simply to resist external influence but to harness it strategically. Immediate gains from foreign engagement—such as roads, ports, energy projects, or defense cooperation—are undeniably valuable for development and stability. Yet the long-term sustainability of these benefits depends on how African states manage debt, negotiate contracts, and integrate external projects into broader national development strategies. If external competition is leveraged effectively, it can provide opportunities for diversification, bargaining power, and accelerated growth. African governments can play external actors against one another, securing better terms and ensuring that investments align with domestic priorities. However, if external engagement is accepted uncritically, it risks locking states into cycles of dependency, where authoritarian regimes are propped up, debt burdens become unsustainable, and sovereignty is compromised.

The broader implications extend beyond economics and governance to Africa's place in the global order. As external actors compete for influence, Africa becomes a strategic crossroads in the emerging multipolar world. This competition can empower African states to assert themselves as active players rather than passive recipients, but only if they develop coherent strategies that balance short-term benefits with long-term institutional resilience. The continent's future will depend on whether external engagement contributes to inclusive growth, democratic consolidation, and sustainable development, or whether it reinforces authoritarianism, entrenches debt dependency, and perpetuates vulnerability to external manipulation.

In essence, Africa stands at a critical juncture. The influx of external powers offers both opportunities and risks, testing sovereignty and governance models in ways that will shape the continent's trajectory for decades to come. The challenge is to transform external competition into a catalyst for institutional strengthening and inclusive growth, rather than allowing it to erode governance and entrench dependency. The stakes are high: Africa's ability to balance immediate gains with long-term sustainability will determine whether external engagement becomes a driver of empowerment or a new form of subordination in the global system.

Comparative Strategic Themes Across Partners

The EU–AU partnership differs from these approaches in several respects. The EU frames engagement around shared values like human rights, democracy, and rule of law, anchored in formal frameworks such as the Joint Africa EU Strategy that emphasize multilateral cooperation and normative alignment. While bilateral and subregional engagement remains significant, the EU's multilateral engagement with the AU is designed to reinforce African agency and continental integration (e.g., support for AfCFTA and APSA). In contrast, China's and Russia's engagement models are often state centric and driven by large infrastructure or security deals, with less insistence on normative governance conditions. The U.S. approach has become more transactional and bilateral, reflecting strategic priorities rather than deep integration with continental frameworks. India and Turkey emphasize security and diversified multipolar engagement, offering alternative partnerships without the scale of China or the institutional depth of the EU–AU relationship.

Implications for Africa and the AU–EU Partnership

For the African Union, these diverse strategies provide both opportunities and strategic dilemmas. Multipolar engagement allows African states to leverage competition among external powers to secure investment, security cooperation, and political support, reinforcing African agency in diplomatic negotiation. However, divergent external agendas can also fragment African priorities unless coordinated through continental mechanisms such as AfCFTA, APSA, and joint diplomatic channels. The EU–AU partnership, grounded in shared normative frameworks and multilateral engagement, can serve as a platform for structuring external competition in ways that support African integration goals, industrialization, and institutional strengthening. Improved alignment with continental priorities in areas like infrastructure connectivity, technology transfer, and governance can help shape a multipolar environment that advances both African and shared global objectives.

Africa is the world's youngest and fastest-growing continent, with a population estimated at around 1.48 billion in 2025 and projected to reach nearly 2.5 billion by 2050. The median age is approximately nineteen years, reflecting a demographic landscape dominated by youth, in stark contrast to Europe's aging population. Urbanization is advancing rapidly, with nearly half of Africans now residing in cities, a proportion expected to exceed sixty percent by mid-century. Population growth varies across the continent, with Nigeria, Ethiopia, Egypt, and the Democratic Republic of Congo experiencing the largest increases. High fertility rates, combined with rising life expectancy, have produced a significant youth bulge that presents both immense opportunity and considerable challenges.

For Africans themselves, these demographic realities are deeply consequential. A youthful population offers the potential to drive economic growth, innovation, and entrepreneurial energy, provided there is sufficient investment in education, skills development, and employment opportunities. Urbanization presents the promise of industrialization, expanded service sectors, and modern infrastructure, yet it also risks overstressing social services, housing, and health systems. Without careful management, population growth could exacerbate unemployment, inequality, and social tension, while migration pressures may increase both within and beyond the continent's borders.

The African Union faces these dynamics as central to its strategic planning. Youthful demographics underscore the importance of continental trade integration through mechanisms such as the African Continental Free Trade Area, the harmonization of education and skills development across member states, and coordinated efforts to prevent conflict and strengthen governance. Effective health and social policies are critical to managing rapid urbanization, migration, and environmental sustainability. At the diplomatic level, Africa's population growth enhances its weight in international forums, increasing the AU's bargaining power in negotiations with the European Union and other global actors.

For the European Union, Africa's demographics carry both strategic challenges and opportunities. Population growth and urbanization are likely to influence migration patterns, requiring proactive policies for managed mobility and skill-based migration. Africa's expanding consumer base and labor force present attractive opportunities for European investment and trade, particularly in manufacturing, infrastructure, and digital economies.

Demographics also have implications for regional stability; a young and engaged population can be a source of innovation and resilience, but without inclusive governance and economic opportunity, it could exacerbate instability that reverberates across the Mediterranean and beyond. Climate adaptation, urban planning, and health initiatives are further areas where European support can align with African priorities while advancing global development goals.

To harness the potential of its demographics, Africa must focus on education and skills development, creating employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, expanding access to health and social services, and ensuring that youth are included in governance and civic life. Managed mobility within Africa, combined with strategic engagement in global migration, can also maximize the benefits of a growing population.

Navigational signposts for Africa's future suggest prioritizing integrated industrial corridors, education-to-employment pathways, youth-centered entrepreneurship, and urban planning that anticipates demographic shifts. External partners, including the EU, China, the United States, India, Russia, and Turkey, can engage collectively by aligning investments and security cooperation with AU-led frameworks, ensuring that infrastructure, trade, and governance initiatives reinforce continental integration. Bilateral engagements remain valuable, particularly when targeted to local needs, but should be harmonized through multilateral AU platforms to prevent fragmented approaches. By supporting AfCFTA implementation, APSA peace and security missions, and regional digital and industrial hubs, partners can synchronize efforts to maximize both African agency and their own strategic interests. Coordinated engagement reduces overlap, mitigates risk of dependency, and amplifies impact, while fostering African-led monitoring and accountability. Partnerships should be adaptive, recognizing regional diversity, demographic trajectories, and sector-specific needs, allowing each external actor to contribute expertise and resources where it is most effective. Multilateral policy forums, joint task forces, and AU-mediated dialogues can serve as platforms for negotiation, alignment, and collective problem-solving. Ultimately, the combination of youth-driven opportunity, continental coordination, and strategic external partnership can transform Africa's demographic energy into a foundation for sustainable development, global influence, and shared prosperity.

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For the European Union, partnership with Africa should prioritize education, workforce development, and industrial cooperation linked to regional integration, alongside investment in sustainable urbanization, infrastructure, and the digital economy. Managed migration programs, health and social investments, and initiatives to support innovation and entrepreneurship can translate demographic growth into a shared advantage. Crucially, all European engagement must respect African agency and align with continental frameworks, enabling the AU to coordinate efforts across the continent rather than leaving African states to navigate disparate bilateral agreements.

Africa's demographic trajectory is therefore both a challenge and an opportunity. For Africans, it demands foresight, investment, and inclusive policies to convert a youthful population into a demographic dividend. For the African Union, it provides the rationale for deepened integration, coordinated governance, and proactive diplomacy. For the European Union, Africa's demographics offer avenues for mutually beneficial cooperation, but only if programs are designed to support African-led priorities, foster sustainable development, and reinforce

the continent's agency on the global stage. When approached with strategic clarity and partnership, the demographic vitality of Africa can become a foundation for peace, prosperity, and continental influence in the twenty-first century.

An African High Speed Train

The Global Gateway in Africa is part of the European Union's broader strategy to promote sustainable and strategic investment across the continent, providing an alternative to other large-scale initiatives. It has mobilized significant funding for infrastructure, renewable energy, digital connectivity, health systems, and education, with many projects still under development or early implementation. Key initiatives include the Africa–Europe Green Energy program, which supports renewable energy deployment and the green transition, and partnerships with South Africa to advance connectivity, industrial development, and sustainable economic growth. The EU has also invested in health manufacturing and local production capacity, as well as programs in space cooperation and digital transformation. While these investments include both public funds and mobilized private investment, many are being implemented over several years, emphasizing sustainable, inclusive, and governance-focused development. Overall, the Global Gateway demonstrates the EU's commitment to Africa as a partner in growth, resilience, and regional integration.

The development of high speed rail (HSR) systems in Africa under a global gateway framework offers a transformative opportunity to reshape continental mobility, strengthen regional integration, and enhance long distance economic connectivity. Five major corridors illustrate how such an initiative could be structured. The first is a North–South Trans African HSR corridor extending from Cairo through Khartoum, Addis Ababa, Nairobi, Dodoma, Lusaka, and Harare to Johannesburg. This line would function as a continental spine, linking major population centers and industrial hubs from the Mediterranean to Southern Africa. It would also reinforce integration across COMESA, the East African Community, and the Southern African Development Community, while aligning with the long term objectives of the African Union's Agenda 2063.

Figure Africa-Europe Tunnel



Source: <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2025/06/213753/morocco-spain-tunnel-bridging-continents-for-euro-african-integration/>

The proposed EU-Morocco (Spain-Morocco) railway tunnel is a massive underwater, high-speed rail project linking Punta Paloma (Spain) and Malabata (Morocco) across the Strait of Gibraltar. A December 2025 study confirmed it is technically feasible, aiming for completion by 2035–2040 rather than 2030, with estimated costs of over €8.5 billion. The EU has provided early-stage funding for feasibility studies and technical design through NextGenerationEU and related instruments. Long-term financing is expected to combine Spanish and Moroccan national budgets, EU investment tools, and public-private partnerships. The project is not yet formally part of TEN T Europe or the Mediterranean corridor, though it would connect to existing EU networks at Algeciras. Future EU involvement may increase if the tunnel aligns with broader Mediterranean connectivity and interregional transport priorities. The Pact for the Mediterranean mentions the extension of the TNT-T infrastructure to a trans-mediterranean road and train network, most which would be oriented towards coastal infrastructure projects then in the context of the south-south euro med FTA's. Marrocco intends to expand its high speed network and the EU already cooperates with the AU through the Global Gateway program, dovetailing with overall objectives and values in Africa.

A second proposal envisions a West African Coastal HSR line connecting Dakar, Banjul, Bissau, Conakry, Freetown, Monrovia, Abidjan, Accra, Lomé, Cotonou, and Lagos. This corridor would serve one of the continent's most densely populated and economically dynamic coastal regions, facilitating rapid movement of people and services while linking multiple deep water ports and emerging megacities. Its implementation would significantly strengthen ECOWAS integration and support the development of regional value chains.

A third corridor, the Central African Economic Belt HSR, would link Douala, Yaoundé, Brazzaville, Kinshasa, Kisangani, Bangui, and N'Djamena. This line would address the longstanding infrastructural isolation of Central Africa by providing high speed connectivity between inland resource rich regions and coastal export gateways. It would also stimulate industrialization in landlocked states and improve access to the Congo Basin, a region with substantial economic potential but limited transport infrastructure.

The fourth proposal focuses on the Great Lakes region through an East African HSR loop connecting Kigali, Bujumbura, Goma, Kampala, Juba, Addis Ababa, and Nairobi. This corridor would integrate a region characterized by high population density, rapid urbanization, and strong cross border economic ties. By linking inland agricultural and manufacturing zones with regional markets, it would support the East African Community's broader multimodal transport vision.

Finally, the Southern Africa Platinum Corridor HSR would connect Johannesburg with Gaborone, Windhoek, and Walvis Bay. This line would enhance the competitiveness of Southern Africa's mining and manufacturing sectors by providing a high speed route to the Atlantic coast, thereby reducing dependence on congested eastern ports. It would also reinforce regional value chains within the Southern African Development Community.

Together, these corridors illustrate how a global gateway style initiative could advance Africa's infrastructure agenda by emphasizing cross border connectivity, sustainable financing, and the integration of transport, energy, and digital systems. They align closely with the African Union's Agenda 2063, the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa, and the trade

facilitation objectives of the African Continental Free Trade Area. By establishing a coherent network of high speed rail lines, Africa would be positioned to reduce logistics costs, accelerate regional integration, and support long term economic transformation.

Expanding the Global Gateway in Africa into a high-speed rail system would be a massive but transformative endeavor. It requires coordination across multiple technical, financial, political, and social dimensions. The key requirements would include:

A comprehensive continental strategy would be needed to identify corridors with the highest economic, trade, and passenger potential, taking into account population density, industrial hubs, port access, and regional integration goals. Detailed feasibility studies would need to assess geological, climatic, and engineering challenges, as well as projected ridership and freight volumes.

High-speed rail spans multiple countries and regions, requiring strong governance structures. Coordination between the African Union, regional economic communities, and national governments is critical to harmonize technical standards, regulatory frameworks, border procedures, and financing arrangements. Political stability and long-term commitment are essential to prevent delays or corridor disruptions. High-speed rail is capital-intensive, requiring billions in initial investment and long-term maintenance funding. Expanding the Global Gateway to support this would likely involve blended finance: EU public funds, African national contributions, concessional loans, and private sector investment. Clear mechanisms for risk-sharing and revenue generation (e.g., freight tariffs, passenger fares, public-private partnerships) are crucial.

Developing high-speed rail networks requires advanced engineering expertise, manufacturing capacity for tracks and rolling stock, and local workforce training. Technology transfer programs would be essential to build African capacity in high-speed rail construction, maintenance, and operations. Projects must adhere to strict environmental standards to avoid damaging ecosystems or communities, and include land acquisition plans that are fair and socially responsible. Integration with existing urban transport, ports, and logistics hubs will maximize sustainability and economic impact.

High-speed rail should not be standalone infrastructure; it must connect industrial zones, ports, logistics corridors, and economic clusters, while supporting regional trade and mobility goals of the African Continental Free Trade Area. Large infrastructure projects in Africa face risks from political instability, local conflicts, and natural hazards. Security planning, insurance schemes, and contingency strategies would be needed to protect assets and operations.

In short, expanding into high-speed rail under the Global Gateway would require multilateral coordination, massive financial resources, technical expertise, environmental and social safeguards, and integration with regional development strategies. With careful planning, it could transform continental connectivity, trade, and mobility, but it would be a generational-scale project.

10.0 THE SUB-REGIONALS-AU NEXUS

Subregionalism refers to cooperative arrangements among geographically proximate states within a broader regional framework. Empirically, subregionalism manifests in varied forms depending on objectives, institutionalization, and external influences. It can take the form of economic cooperation, such as trade facilitation, customs unions, or infrastructure corridors, as seen in ASEAN subgroups, Mercosur blocs, or European regional clusters. Security-focused subregionalism involves joint peacekeeping, maritime security, and cross-border policing, exemplified by NATO's northern initiatives or the ECOWAS Monitoring Group in West Africa. Functional or issue-based cooperation can include environmental management, energy grids, and disaster response. Across regions, subregional arrangements often complement broader regional organizations. Comparative observation shows that geography and connectivity strongly influence subregional dynamics, states with asymmetrical capacities frequently lead subregional projects, external actors often catalyze or constrain initiatives, and institutionalization varies from formal treaties to informal policy coordination.

Within APSA debates, subregionalism is discussed as a research lens for governance, international relations, and comparative political economy. APSA panels increasingly explore integration, peacebuilding, and institutional design at subregional levels. Comparative frameworks linking Africa to other regions, including Europe, Asia, and Latin America, are used to understand patterns of convergence and divergence. Scholars highlight the tension between continental aspirations, such as those led by the African Union, and subregional pragmatism, exemplified by ECOWAS, SADC, or IGAD, analyzing the political, economic, and social implications. Subregionalism thus provides both a lens for comparative study and a pragmatic tool for governance, enabling the study of how proximate states navigate shared challenges, coordinate policies, and enhance regional resilience.

This has to be compared to the actual workings of the sub-regionals of Africa, their strengths and weaknesses and threats and opportunities and their relationship with the African Union.

SADC

Strengths: Strong political integration frameworks; experience with regional infrastructure and energy projects; relatively stable institutional secretariat; SADC Tribunal experience provides legal precedent.

Weaknesses: High dependence on South Africa and resource-rich states; neo-patrimonial politics affect decision-making; inconsistent compliance by member states; limited financial autonomy.

Threats: Climate change impacts (drought, water scarcity); economic asymmetry among members; external geopolitical competition (China, EU, US); cross-border security challenges.

Opportunities: Regional energy and transport corridors; harmonized trade policies; AU alignment on peace and security; EU partnerships for modernization and infrastructure development.

ECOWAS

Strengths: Strong institutional frameworks for conflict prevention (ECOWAS Standby Force); extensive experience in peacekeeping and mediation; supranational trade agreements (ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme).

Weaknesses: Weak enforcement of rule of law; fiscal instability in some states; clientelism and patronage in election and budgetary processes; reliance on external funding for operations.

Threats: Persistent insecurity from terrorism (Sahel), coups, and border conflicts; economic volatility; climate-related shocks; regional political fragmentation.

Opportunities: Expansion of cross-border trade; coordination with AU Peace and Security Council; EU security sector reform and development programs; potential leadership in West African industrial corridors.

EAC

Strengths: Rapidly growing economic integration; progressive customs union; strong donor-supported development corridors; relatively cohesive institutional framework.

Weaknesses: National-level clientelism hinders infrastructure and trade integration; asymmetries between member economies; limited enforcement of compliance mechanisms; dependence on donor-led initiatives.

Threats: Political instability in some member states; infrastructure bottlenecks; regional migration and security risks; external economic shocks.

Opportunities: Expansion of integrated market and industrial zones; harmonization of regulatory frameworks; AU and EU support for digital customs and transport modernization; cross-border policy learning.

ECCAS

Strengths: Strategic geopolitical position (Congo Basin); natural resource endowment; AU recognition for conflict mediation and regional security; existence of frameworks for environmental and trade cooperation.

Weaknesses: Fragile state membership; weak institutional capacity; high prevalence of neo-patrimonial politics; low compliance with regional agreements; limited financial and technical autonomy.

Threats: Armed conflicts and resource-driven instability; environmental degradation (deforestation, mining); heavy dependence on external powers (EU, France, China).

Opportunities: Central role in AU-led Congo Basin stabilization; sustainable resource management; EU-AU partnerships for environmental conservation and peacebuilding; regional infrastructure projects.

Union du Maghreb Arabe (UMA)

Strengths: Strategic location linking Africa and Europe; shared language and cultural ties facilitate cooperation; potential for trade integration and migration management.

Weaknesses: Political fragmentation and lack of institutional cohesion; persistent bilateral disputes; clientelistic domestic politics; very limited implementation of protocols.

Threats: Geopolitical insecurity; irregular migration flows; terrorism risks; EU externalization policies affecting integration; economic competition from external actors.

Opportunities: AU linkage for North African initiatives; EU partnerships for migration, trade, and energy; harmonization of legal standards; regional market integration potential.

Figure

State of Play of African Subregional Organizations: SWOT Analysis					
	Strengths	Weaknesses	Threats	Threats	Opportunities
 SADC	- Strong political integration frameworks - Experience with regional infrastructure/energy projects	- High dependence on resource-rich states - Persistent w/siek state compliance - Neo-patrimonial politics	- Climate change impacts Economic asymmetry - Exxrum², crrmor - crose-stiarder (Sarel, ts, China)	- Terrorism, coups, border conflicts - Economic volatility - Regional political fragmentation	- Regional corridors - Modernization projects - AU alignment on peace & security
 ECOWAS	- Strong institutional conflict prevention - Peacekeeping & mediation experience	- Weak rule-of-law enforcement - Clientelism in election, fiscal processes - External funding reliance	- Terrorism, coups, border conflicts - Economic volatility - Regional partner	- Member-state instability - Regional economic fragmentation	- Expand cross-border trade - AU security alignment - EU-support development
 EAC	- Strong institutional conflict prevention - Peacekeeping & mediation - Supranational trade agers	- National-level clientelism - Enforcement gaps - Donor dependency	- Member state instability - Enforcement gaps - Donor dependency	- Armed conflict & resource-driven instability - External dependency	- Integrated market - Regulatory harmonization - AU/EU transport support
 ECCAS	- Growing economic integration - Natural resouition - AU & irnan pon peace & security	- Fragile state membership - Weak institutional capacity - High neo-patrimonialism	- Fragile state membership - Weak institutional capacity - Donor dependency	- Armed conflict External economic shocks - External gebendency	- Congo Basin, stabilization - EU-AU conservation - Regional infrastructure projects
	Strengths - Strengths - Weaknesses - Pooting new team U Dynamics	Weaknesses - People cost tocus - Clientelistic politics - Failed regional cooperation	Threats - Beak concern gaps - Donor dependency - Puc Crop	Opportunities - Integrated market - Regulatory harmonization - EU- AU transport en	Opportunities - EU migration, trade, Energy Initiatives - Shared economic legal starlards

The matrix captures the current state of play of Africa's five principal subregional organizations: SADC, ECOWAS, EAC, ECCAS, and UMA. Together, they constitute the operational backbone of African regional governance beneath the African Union. SADC displays relative institutional maturity and experience in infrastructure and energy cooperation. Its effectiveness, however, is constrained by economic asymmetries and uneven compliance by member states. ECOWAS stands out for its strong security mandate and intervention capacity, particularly in peacekeeping and mediation. Yet persistent coups, terrorism, and fiscal fragility continue to undermine its authority. The EAC has made significant progress toward market integration and customs harmonization. Its momentum is threatened by national-level clientelism and political instability in some member states. ECCAS occupies a strategically critical position in the Congo Basin, linking security, resources, and environmental governance. Weak state capacity and pervasive neo-patrimonialism severely limit its institutional

performance. UMA remains the least integrated subregional organization, largely due to unresolved political disputes and limited institutional cohesion. Despite this, its geographic proximity to Europe gives it strategic relevance. Across all subregionals, strengths lie in accumulated institutional experience and AU recognition. Weaknesses consistently relate to enforcement deficits, financial dependence, and domestic political interference. Threats stem from insecurity, climate change, geopolitical competition, and economic volatility. Opportunities arise from AU alignment, continental integration agendas, and structured partnerships with the EU. Subregional organizations provide platforms for translating continental norms into operational policies. Their effectiveness depends on managing domestic constraints while leveraging external support. Strengthening subregional authority enhances AU implementation capacity. Improved governance at subregional level reduces fragmentation across Africa's regional architecture. Ultimately, the matrix illustrates that Africa's subregionals are indispensable but uneven pillars of continental governance.

Aligning the sub-regionals with African IR and EU comparative regionalism

From the perspective of African IR, Subaltern Realism can be defined as a lens that emphasizes the primacy of insecurity, survival imperatives, and structural vulnerability in shaping state behavior. States and subregional organizations operate in an environment of weak institutions, historical legacies of conflict, and limited capacity, which constrains their autonomy and strategic choices. Neo-patrimonialism describes the coexistence of formal bureaucratic institutions with informal, personalistic networks of patronage and clientelism, which dominate decision-making and resource allocation at both domestic and subregional levels. Extraversion, as formulated by Bayart, refers to the strategic use of external actors, aid, and international networks by African states to consolidate domestic authority, access resources, and project legitimacy, often mediating internal governance dynamics.

A common denominator across these three lenses is that state and subregional behavior is shaped by the interplay between internal fragility, personalistic politics, and external dependency, creating a context where formal authority is often mediated through networks of loyalty, patronage, and strategic engagement with external powers. This shared denominator emphasizes the limits of formal institutionalism and the need to account for both domestic and external drivers when assessing governance and authority.

When combined with themes from comparative regionalism, such as those adumbrated by Tanja Börzel, Tobias Lenz, and Thomas Risse, the analysis highlights how subregional governance, institutional capacity, norm diffusion, and authority structures are central to effective regional cooperation. Subregional organizations function as semi-autonomous arenas where domestic constraints (neo-patrimonial networks, insecurity) intersect with external pressures (donor aid, EU engagement) and institutional rules (treaties, protocols). Governance, authority, and compliance at the subregional level thus become critical levers for implementing AU strategies and continental norms.

Table

Parameter	Subaltern Realism	Neo-patrimonial Theory	Extraversion Theory
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Core analytical focus	Survival and security of weak states in an anarchic international system	Internal power reproduction through personalized rule and informal institutions	Strategic use of external resources, actors, and norms to sustain domestic power
Primary level of analysis	Systemic–state level (with emphasis on asymmetry)	Domestic political economy and elite networks	Interface between domestic elites and international system
View of the state	Rational but constrained actor with limited autonomy	Fragmented state captured by patron–client relations	State as broker or gatekeeper of external rents
Conception of power	Relative power and vulnerability vis-à-vis stronger states	Control over resources, loyalty, and distribution	Power derived from access to and mediation of external flows
Role of institutions	Weak, instrumental, often security-oriented	Formal institutions hollowed out by informal practices	Institutions shaped to facilitate external engagement and rent capture
Relationship to sub-regional organizations (ECOWAS, EAC, SADC, etc.)	Sub-regional bodies seen primarily as security buffers or constraint mechanisms	Sub-regional institutions penetrated by patronage networks and elite bargains	Sub-regional platforms used to scale up bargaining power vis-à-vis donors and great powers
Variation across sub-regions	Explains variation mainly through threat environment (conflict-prone vs stable regions)	Explains variation through depth and configuration of patronage systems	Explains variation through differential access to external partners and rents
External link-up mechanisms	Military alliances, security assistance, peacekeeping mandates	Aid flows, budget support, selective institutional reforms	Aid, trade preferences, debt, climate finance, security partnerships
Agency of domestic elites	Limited but strategic under severe constraints	High, but oriented toward regime survival rather than public goods	High, especially in agenda-setting and framing for external audiences
Treatment of dependency	Structural condition imposed by the system	Consequence of internal governance failure	Actively produced and managed as a political strategy
Capacity to explain regime persistence	Moderate	Strong	Strong
Capacity to explain policy incoherence	Weak–moderate	Strong	Strong
Normative stance (implicit)	Order and survival over transformation	Critical but often descriptive	Critical and explicitly political
Policy implications	Security guarantees and regime stabilization	Governance reform must target informal power	External actors must change incentive structures and conditionalities

Main blind spots	Underplays domestic politics	Risks cultural determinism and pessimism	Underplays coercion and material constraints
Best applied when	Analyzing security behavior of weak states	Explaining state failure or institutional dysfunction	Analyzing aid, trade, and diplomacy in post-colonial contexts

Subaltern realism, neo-patrimonial theory, and extraversion offer complementary but distinct lenses for understanding African state behaviour and regional politics. Subaltern realism foregrounds the structural vulnerability of weak states operating in an anarchic international system, where survival imperatives, asymmetric power relations, and external security threats shape decision-making. Neo-patrimonial theory shifts the focus inward, explaining political outcomes through personalized rule, patron–client networks, and the coexistence of formal institutions with dominant informal practices. Extraversion bridges the domestic and the international by showing how political elites actively mobilize external actors, resources, and norms to stabilize regimes and reproduce power.

While subaltern realism explains why room for manoeuvre is constrained, neo-patrimonialism explains how authority is exercised internally, and extraversion explains how dependency is strategically managed rather than passively endured. Differences across sub-regions are interpreted differently by each framework: subaltern realism emphasizes variation in threat environments, neo-patrimonialism highlights divergent configurations of elite bargains, and extraversion points to unequal access to donors, markets, and security partners. Sub-regional organizations are therefore not neutral arenas but are read either as security buffers, patronage-penetrated institutions, or platforms for scaling up external bargaining power. External link-ups are likewise theorized differently, ranging from security alliances and peacekeeping mandates to aid conditionalities, trade preferences, debt instruments, and climate finance. Taken together, the three theories illuminate why governance reform, regional integration, and external partnerships often produce uneven and contradictory outcomes. Their combined use allows analysts to avoid both structural determinism and overly voluntarist accounts of elite agency.

Designing African subregional institutions to strengthen governance, provide security guarantees, and stabilize regimes requires a multi-layered and context-sensitive approach. First, governance reform must engage not only formal state structures but also **informal power networks**, including traditional authorities, local elites, and community-based institutions that often mediate social order and access to resources. Ignoring these networks risks leaving governance reforms ineffective or creating new sources of friction.

Second, security guarantees at the subregional level should combine **collective defense mechanisms with preventive diplomacy**. This means building interoperable security arrangements, shared early-warning systems, and rapid deployment capacities that can deter destabilizing actions while respecting sovereignty. Subregional frameworks should also align with continental instruments, such as the African Union’s Peace and Security Architecture, to ensure coherence and legitimacy.

Third, external actors—including the EU, US, China, and multilateral partners—must **rethink incentive structures and conditionalities** in ways that promote long-term stability rather than short-term compliance. Aid, investment, and security cooperation should support the consolidation of accountable institutions, encourage inclusive political settlements, and avoid exacerbating elite capture or conflict over resources. By integrating these approaches, subregional frameworks can provide both the structural capacity and the legitimacy needed to stabilize regimes, enhance security, and foster sustainable governance reforms across Africa.

This multi-layered approach is the precondition for tackling overlay conflicts effectively, providing both the structural capacity and legitimacy needed to stabilize regimes, enhance security, and foster sustainable governance reforms across Africa.

Implications for the AU–EU partnership:

First, the AU–EU partnership must recognize that African agency is real but operates under asymmetric systemic constraints rather than assuming either dependence or full autonomy. Second, security cooperation framed only through subaltern realism risks stabilizing regimes without addressing the internal political logics that undermine institutional effectiveness. Third, governance reforms that ignore neo-patrimonial dynamics are likely to be absorbed into informal power structures with limited transformative impact. Fourth, EU funding instruments can unintentionally reinforce extraversion by rewarding external compliance rather than domestic accountability. Fifth, differentiated sub-regional strategies are essential, as ECOWAS, EAC, and SADC mediate external engagement in structurally distinct ways. Sixth, AU institutions should be treated as agenda-setting actors rather than mere conduits for EU priorities to reduce performative alignment. Seventh, Team Europe approaches need to align incentives across security, development, and trade to avoid fragmented external signals. Eighth, conditionality should shift from formal institutional benchmarks to political-economy-aware indicators of change. Ninth, long-term partnership credibility depends on reducing rent-seeking opportunities embedded in aid and project financing structures. Tenth, a mature AU–EU partnership must explicitly manage the tension between stability, sovereignty, and transformation rather than masking it in technocratic language.

By tuning these lenses into AU dynamics, one can see that subregional organizations act as transmission belts for continental policies and objectives. Subregionals provide localized enforcement of AU directives while mediating between member states' domestic priorities and continental goals. AU–subregional linkages enable the diffusion of norms, standardization of rules, and harmonization of policy frameworks, creating feedback loops where successful subregional governance informs AU-level strategies and vice versa. Extraversion ensures that subregionals can access external resources while maintaining alignment with AU priorities, neo-patrimonial awareness informs the design of safeguards and depersonalized decision-making, and subaltern realism reminds policymakers to ground interventions in the structural and security realities of member states.

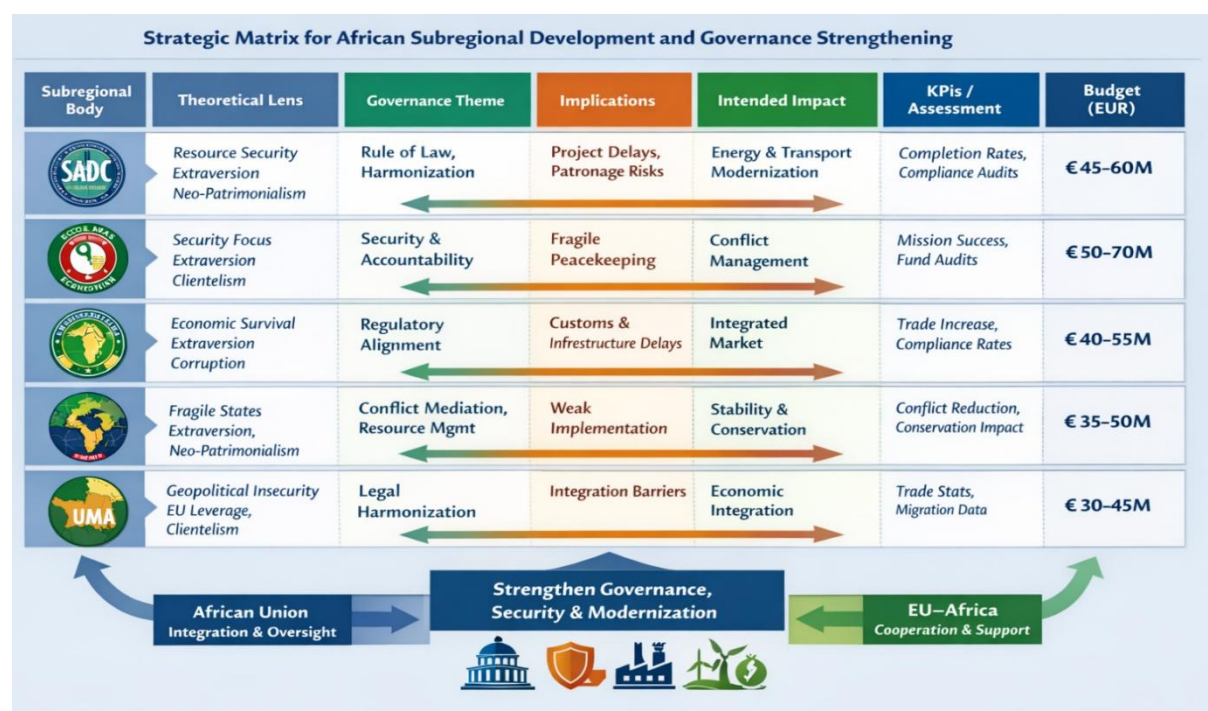
In practice, this integrated perspective suggests that strengthening subregional governance and authority is both a prerequisite for effective AU implementation and a way to dovetail African

states' internal survival strategies with continental modernization objectives. Authority is reinforced not by imposing uniformity, but by building capacity, promoting compliance, enhancing transparency, and leveraging both internal and external incentives. The combination of these three lenses with governance and authority themes offers a framework for policy design that is realistic, context-aware, and harmonized with AU-wide objectives, including peace and security, trade integration, institutional modernization, and African agency in global affairs.

In short, subaltern realism, neo-patrimonialism, and extraversion converge around the recognition that African governance and authority are shaped by internal fragility, informal networks, and external engagement, and when analyzed alongside comparative regionalism governance themes, they provide actionable insights for strengthening subregional organizations, linking them effectively to the AU, and aligning them with broader continental modernization and EU–Africa partnership goals.

Subaltern Realism emphasizes that African states and subregional organizations operate under persistent insecurity and structural constraints, which shape their survival-driven strategies and limit institutional autonomy. Neo-patrimonialism highlights the coexistence of formal bureaucracies with informal, personalized networks of patronage and clientelism that dominate decision-making and resource allocation. Extraversion illustrates how states and subregions strategically engage external actors, such as the EU or China, to access resources, enhance legitimacy, and stabilize domestic political authority. Subregional governance and authority frameworks, informed by comparative regionalism, focus on institutional capacity, rule compliance, policy learning, and norm diffusion across member states.

Figure



These four dimensions converge around the recognition that internal fragility, personalistic politics, and external dependencies jointly shape state and subregional behavior. Subaltern Realism grounds this understanding in the reality of structural insecurity, ensuring that policies are feasible and context-sensitive. Neo-patrimonial awareness informs the design of safeguards, depersonalized procedures, and accountability mechanisms within subregional institutions. Extraversion provides pathways to leverage external support without undermining AU-aligned objectives or subregional autonomy. Subregional governance frameworks operationalize authority, translating AU directives into locally implementable policies while mediating between domestic politics and continental norms.

The integration of these four dimensions allows subregional organizations to function as effective intermediaries, strengthening AU oversight, enhancing compliance, and promoting modernization. By combining these lenses, policymakers can design interventions that are realistic, context-aware, and aligned with both continental goals and external partnership opportunities.

The matrix provides a comprehensive framework for strengthening governance across five African subregional organizations: SADC, ECOWAS, EAC, ECCAS, and UMA. Each subregional body is analyzed through three theoretical lenses: Subaltern Realism, Extraversion, and Neo-Patrimonialism, offering a multidimensional understanding of the dynamics affecting institutional effectiveness. Subaltern Realism highlights how insecurity and survival imperatives shape state behavior and subregional interactions. In SADC, the focus on resource security and regime survival guides policy choices and project prioritization. ECOWAS operates under a security-driven logic, responding to coups, terrorism, and cross-border conflicts, reflecting survival-oriented decision-making. EAC member states navigate economic asymmetries and regional disparities, requiring policies that address both domestic stability and inter-state equity. ECCAS encompasses fragile Congo Basin states, where weak institutions and resource dependence shape subregional governance capacity. UMA, representing North African states, contends with geopolitical insecurity, migration pressures, and integration barriers.

Extraversion illustrates how states leverage external actors to bolster legitimacy and resources. SADC engages the EU, China, and South-South partners to support energy projects, trade corridors, and infrastructure development. ECOWAS utilizes multilateral diplomacy and donor engagement to strengthen peacekeeping capacity and enhance political legitimacy. EAC relies on donor-led integration initiatives and development corridors to accelerate economic cohesion. ECCAS depends on France, the EU, UN, and China for security operations and developmental support, often tied to natural resource access. UMA leverages European engagement in trade, migration management, and institutional reforms to advance regional economic and governance objectives.

Neo-Patrimonialism explains how informal networks, patronage, and clientelism can undermine formal institutions. In SADC, patronage affects energy and trade projects, leading to inefficiencies and potential delays. ECOWAS experiences clientelism in fiscal transfers, election management, and peacekeeping contributions, impacting accountability. EAC faces clientelistic interference in customs union operations and infrastructure project implementation. ECCAS struggles with the diversion of mineral rents and bureaucratic

inefficiency, weakening subregional policy effectiveness. UMA is affected by clientelism limiting economic integration and harmonization of legal standards, slowing modernization efforts.

Governance themes drawn from the work of Tanja Börzel, Tobias Lenz, and Thomas Risse emphasize rule of law, institutional capacity, multi-level governance, policy learning, and norm diffusion. In SADC, regulatory harmonization and inter-state compliance are essential for energy and transport modernization. ECOWAS emphasizes security enforcement, accountability, and robust joint decision-making to strengthen peacekeeping and democratic oversight. EAC focuses on cross-border regulatory alignment, dispute resolution, and compliance monitoring to achieve integrated markets. ECCAS requires multi-level governance structures and conflict mediation mechanisms to improve stability and environmental management. UMA prioritizes legal harmonization, institutional capacity building, and policy diffusion to enhance economic integration and migration management.

Implications of these dynamics include potential project delays, fragile peacekeeping operations, customs and infrastructure inefficiencies, weak implementation of policies, and barriers to regional integration. Intended impacts target energy and transport modernization, strengthened conflict management, integrated regional markets, stability, conservation, and economic integration. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are defined for each subregional context. For SADC, KPIs include project completion rates, compliance audits, and reduction in resource diversion. ECOWAS tracks mission success, fund audits, and effectiveness of cross-border dispute resolution. EAC monitors trade volume increases, customs compliance rates, and reductions in project corruption. ECCAS evaluates conflict reduction, conservation impact, and project implementation efficiency. UMA assesses trade statistics, migration data, and compliance with legal harmonization efforts.

Division of labor is structured to maximize efficiency and accountability. Subregional secretariats provide strategic coordination, oversight, and reporting functions. Member states implement projects, manage local administrative responsibilities, and ensure compliance with subregional decisions. The African Union offers continental oversight, facilitates integration, and ensures alignment with AU-wide frameworks. The EU and external partners provide technical support, knowledge transfer, and financial assistance, enhancing capacity building and modernization initiatives. Coordination between secretariats, member states, AU institutions, and EU partners ensures that projects adhere to governance, security, and modernization objectives.

Estimated budgets vary by subregional context, reflecting scope and complexity of interventions. SADC programs are allocated €45–60 million over three years, targeting energy, transport, and governance projects. ECOWAS initiatives receive €50–70 million over three years for peacekeeping, election monitoring, and institutional strengthening. EAC projects are budgeted at €40–55 million over three years to modernize infrastructure, customs, and market integration. ECCAS programs are allocated €35–50 million over three years, focusing on conflict management, conservation, and capacity building. UMA receives €30–45 million over three years for legal harmonization, migration management, and regional economic integration. Budgets are structured to ensure efficient use of resources while allowing flexibility for adaptive project management.

The strategic integration of theoretical lenses with governance themes enables a nuanced understanding of subregional opportunities and constraints. Subaltern Realism explains why states may prioritize security and survival over institutional development, guiding realistic policy design. Extraversion identifies opportunities for external engagement that can enhance legitimacy, resource access, and modernization support. Neo-Patrimonialism highlights risks associated with informal networks and patronage, informing the design of safeguards, audits, and depersonalized governance mechanisms. Governance themes provide practical tools to enhance compliance, institutional capacity, and norm diffusion across subregional organizations. KPIs allow measurable tracking of progress and project outcomes. Budgets provide clarity on financial requirements and enable planning for resource allocation. Division of labor ensures that responsibilities are clearly defined across secretariats, member states, AU bodies, and external partners.

This matrix framework aligns subregional initiatives with African Union objectives, reinforcing continental integration and policy coherence. It simultaneously strengthens EU–African cooperation by linking modernization, governance, and security objectives with financial and technical support. Subregional organizations are positioned as strategic nodes for achieving broader AU and EU goals, ensuring that local priorities are addressed while promoting continental and global cooperation. The framework facilitates monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive management, increasing the likelihood of successful policy implementation. It underscores the importance of addressing domestic informal politics while leveraging external support to accelerate institutional modernization. By integrating theory, governance, KPIs, budget planning, and division of labor, the matrix provides a comprehensive roadmap for sustainable subregional development. It supports long-term objectives such as energy modernization, integrated markets, stability, environmental conservation, legal harmonization, and migration management. The framework emphasizes the interdependence of security, governance, and economic development across Africa. It illustrates how theoretical insights can directly inform policy design and implementation. It highlights the necessity of multi-level coordination across subregional secretariats, member states, AU institutions, and EU partners. By linking KPIs and budgets to concrete projects, it provides accountability and transparency. The matrix anticipates and mitigates risks from neo-patrimonial practices and clientelism. It encourages institutional learning and norm diffusion across borders. The framework reinforces AU oversight, ensuring that continental policies guide subregional actions. EU support is harnessed strategically to strengthen governance, institutional capacity, and modernization. The approach ensures that investments are impactful and measurable. It provides a replicable model for subregional governance strengthening across Africa. The matrix balances domestic political realities with external engagement opportunities. It enhances subregional capacity to implement AU mandates and international commitments. Overall, the framework positions subregional organizations as effective agents of governance, security, and modernization, contributing to the broader goals of African integration and EU–Africa cooperation.

Subregional organizations serve as the primary operational arms of the African Union on the ground, translating continental policies into actionable programs. Effective AU–subregional linkages ensure harmonization of security, trade, and governance initiatives across the continent. SADC, ECOWAS, EAC, ECCAS, and UMA coordinate with AU institutions to align regional projects with AU strategic frameworks such as Agenda 2063. These linkages

facilitate joint planning, resource mobilization, and standardized monitoring of program implementation. The AU provides oversight to ensure subregional compliance with continental norms on rule of law, human rights, and conflict resolution. Subregional secretariats act as intermediaries, communicating AU directives while adapting them to local political and socio-economic contexts. Coordination mechanisms include joint task forces, reporting protocols, and shared digital platforms for data and KPI tracking. AU support strengthens subregional capacity to negotiate with external partners, including the EU, while maintaining continental cohesion. These linkages allow lessons learned in one subregion to be diffused across others, enhancing policy learning and norm harmonization. Ultimately, robust AU–subregional coordination reinforces Africa’s collective voice, institutional modernization, and the successful implementation of shared continental and global objectives.

11.THE EU-UN-AU

The relationship between the European Union, the United Nations, and the African Union has evolved over several decades, shaped by decolonisation, regional integration, and successive transformations of the global order. What began as largely asymmetric and development-centred interactions has gradually developed into a more complex, institutionalised, and strategic partnership framework.

In the early post-independence period, relations were primarily bilateral between European states and newly independent African countries, with the United Nations acting as the principal multilateral arena for development assistance, peacekeeping, and norm-setting. Europe’s engagement with Africa was initially framed through aid, trade preferences, and development cooperation, while the UN provided legitimacy and coordination through its development agencies and peace operations. Africa’s collective voice at this stage was limited, reflected in the relatively weak institutional capacity of the Organisation of African Unity.

The creation of the European Union and the deepening of European integration in the late twentieth century gradually reshaped Europe’s external role. At the same time, African states increasingly sought stronger regional coordination, leading to the transformation of the Organisation of African Unity into the African Union in 2002. This marked a critical shift from a sovereignty-focused organisation to one with ambitions in peace and security, economic integration, and continental governance. The AU’s emergence provided a credible regional counterpart to both the EU and the UN.

During the 2000s, cooperation between the EU, AU, and UN intensified, particularly in peace and security. The EU became a major financial and logistical supporter of African-led peace operations operating under UN mandates, while the UN increasingly recognised the AU as a key regional security actor. This period established a pattern of triangular cooperation, especially visible in crisis management in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Great Lakes region.

From the 2010s onward, the partnership broadened beyond security to encompass development, climate change, migration, digitalisation, and global governance reform. The AU–EU Joint Strategy and successive summits institutionalised political dialogue, while UN frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals provided a shared normative

reference. Africa's growing demographic, economic, and geopolitical weight, combined with the rise of multipolar competition, further elevated the strategic importance of coordinated EU–AU–UN engagement.

Today, the relationship is best understood as an evolving trilateral architecture rather than a set of parallel bilateral ties. It reflects a gradual move from donor–recipient dynamics toward negotiated partnership, albeit with persistent asymmetries. In a more fragmented and competitive world order, the historical evolution of EU–AU–UN relations underscores both the progress made and the necessity of deeper harmonisation, mutual recognition, and shared ownership of global governance outcomes.

This has to be compared to some niggling conflicts of geopolitical nature. Africa's high exposure to conflict is best understood as the cumulative result of historical legacies, structural vulnerabilities, and contemporary global pressures rather than any single cause. Colonial rule imposed artificial borders that fragmented societies and fused rival groups into weakly integrated states, leaving behind governance systems designed for extraction rather than inclusion. After independence, many states inherited limited institutional capacity, politicised security forces, and economies narrowly dependent on primary commodities, making them highly sensitive to price shocks and elite capture. Rapid demographic growth, urbanisation, and climate stress—especially water scarcity, desertification, and land degradation—have intensified competition over resources and sharpened centre–periphery tensions. External interventions and proxy dynamics, from the Cold War to today's multipolar rivalries, have frequently internationalised local disputes and distorted incentives for peaceful settlement. Weak regional economic integration and uneven development further reinforce conflict traps by limiting employment, mobility, and shared prosperity. At the same time, the persistence of conflict should not obscure Africa's strong traditions of local mediation and regional peace operations, nor the fact that violence is highly concentrated in specific zones rather than continent-wide. Addressing conflict therefore requires long-term investment in institutions, inclusive growth, climate resilience, and genuinely balanced partnerships with actors such as the AU, UN, and EU that prioritise African agency over short-term security fixes.

Africa's geopolitical conflicts are not random; they cluster around territory, resources, state fragility, and external power competition. Colonial borders, climate stress, and the global scramble for minerals intensify these tensions. At the same time, Africa's strategic geography—connecting the Mediterranean, Atlantic, and Indian Ocean—makes it a key arena for great power rivalry.

Table

Type of Geopolitical Conflict	How It Appears in Africa	Underlying Drivers	Examples (Analytical, Not Exhaustive)
Territorial Conflicts	Disputes over land, borders, and strategic zones	Colonial boundary legacies, ethnic overlap, resource access	Western Sahara dispute; Ethiopia–Sudan border tensions
Border Conflicts	Poorly demarcated or contested	Arbitrary colonial lines; lack of demarcation;	Cameroon–Nigeria (Bakassi); Kenya–

	borders create friction	cross-border communities	Somalia maritime dispute
Resource Conflicts	Competition over oil, gas, minerals, water, and fertile land	Global demand for critical minerals; climate stress; weak governance	DRC mineral zones; Nile Basin water tensions
Power-Projection Conflicts	External powers compete for influence, bases, and access	China, Russia, EU, US, Gulf states seeking strategic footholds	Red Sea militarisation; Sahel influence competition
State-Collapse Conflicts	Weak or failing states become arenas for armed groups and foreign intervention	Fragile institutions; corruption; economic shocks	Libya fragmentation; Somalia instability
Identity & Governance Conflicts	Clashes over political legitimacy, ethnicity, religion, or governance models	Exclusion, authoritarianism, contested elections	Ethiopia (Tigray); South Sudan political-ethnic conflict
Maritime & Trade-Route Conflicts	Competition over sea lanes, ports, and chokepoints	Control of Suez, Bab el-Mandeb, Gulf of Guinea	Piracy zones; Red Sea tensions
Climate-Security Conflicts	Environmental stress fuels displacement and violence	Drought, desertification, shrinking resources	Sahel farmer–herder conflicts

Africa's geopolitical conflicts are not random; they cluster around territory, resources, state fragility, and external power competition. Colonial borders, climate stress, and the global scramble for minerals intensify these tensions. At the same time, Africa's strategic geography—connecting the Mediterranean, Atlantic, and Indian Ocean—makes it a key arena for great power rivalry.

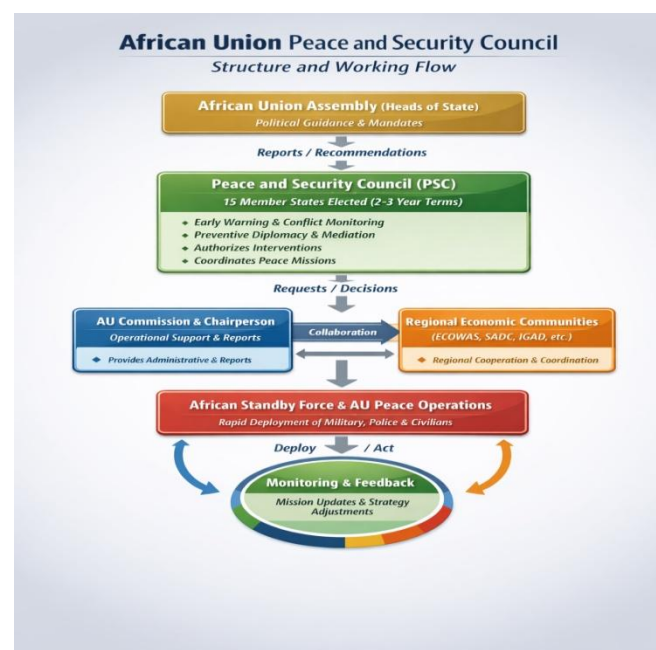
This cross tab shows why the AU–EU partnership must engage Africa not only as a development partner but as a geopolitical actor whose conflicts have continental and global implications. The EU's partnership with Africa must engage the continent not merely as a development recipient but as a geopolitical actor, recognising that African conflicts and governance challenges have both continental and global implications. Africa hosts some of the world's fastest-growing populations, key strategic waterways, and critical mineral resources, making stability—or instability—there highly consequential for global trade, energy, and security. Conflicts in regions such as the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Great Lakes do not remain local; they generate refugee flows, transnational terrorism, and organised crime that ripple across borders and continents. Moreover, Africa's increasing role in multipolar diplomacy—engaging China, the US, India, the Gulf, and Europe simultaneously—means that EU policies must account for African agency rather than assuming passive compliance with European priorities. In practice, this requires the EU to integrate peace, security, and governance support with its development, trade, and climate agendas, fostering institutional capacity and conflict prevention mechanisms that empower African actors. It also entails strategic coordination with the AU and UN, recognising Africa as a co-architect of solutions to

crises that affect global stability. By framing the partnership this way, the EU moves from a donor-centric approach to a shared responsibility model, aligning European interests with African leadership, resilience, and influence on the global stage.

The African Peace and Security Council's Continental Approach

The African Peace and Security Council (PSC) is a key organ of the African Union (AU), tasked with maintaining peace, security, and stability across the African continent. It is also a symbolic structure that translates African worldviews into forms intelligible or at least perceptible to modern consciousness. This should not so much be taken literal but is more about how ways of being and knowing are carried across cultures and epochs. This is the place where the Africans move between different worlds: participatory, embodies and enacted ritually. As post colonial societies that will never become great powers except through continental unification, the AUPSC is the place to intervene to move to ensure the failed modernization process or incomplete reenchantment is achieved progressively through technology transfer and addressing Africas true development needs.

Figure



It was established in 2002 under the framework of the African Union's Constitutive Act and operationalized through the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union, which came into force in 2004. The creation of the PSC marked a significant step in Africa's efforts to develop a continental mechanism for conflict prevention, management, and resolution, reflecting lessons learned from the failures of earlier regional and continental responses to crises such as the Rwandan genocide (1994) and the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

The primary purpose of the PSC is to enable the AU to anticipate, prevent, and respond to conflicts on the continent, in alignment with the AU's vision of an integrated, peaceful, and

secure Africa. Specifically, the PSC is responsible for promoting peaceful settlement of disputes, preventive diplomacy, peacebuilding, and humanitarian coordination, while also authorizing interventions when necessary to halt mass atrocities or restore stability. It serves as both a decision-making and early-warning body, providing strategic guidance for AU missions and operations.

The African Union Assembly, composed of Heads of State, serves as the supreme authority within the Union. It provides overarching political guidance to the Peace and Security Council (PSC). The Assembly also approves interventions and mandates, ensuring legitimacy and collective decision-making. The PSC, as the central organ for peace and security, consists of 15 member states elected for two to three-year terms. Membership reflects regional representation from all five African regions, ensuring inclusivity and balance.

The PSC convenes regularly and responds urgently when crises emerge across the continent.

Its core responsibilities include early warning, conflict monitoring, and preventive diplomacy.

Mediation and negotiation are central tools employed by the PSC to avert escalation.

The Council also authorizes interventions and coordinates peacekeeping missions when necessary.

The AU Commission, led by its chairperson, provides administrative and technical support to the PSC. It prepares reports on emerging crises and facilitates coordination with international partners. Regional Economic Communities (RECs), such as ECOWAS, SADC, IGAD, ECCAS, and AMU, contribute regional early warning and response capacity.

RECs collaborate closely with the PSC in peacekeeping and mediation efforts, ensuring localized engagement.

The African Standby Force (ASF), comprising military, police, and civilian components, is prepared for rapid deployment. ASF executes PSC-mandated interventions, while the PSC monitors operations, reports outcomes to the Assembly, and adjusts strategies based on intelligence feedback.

In terms of working methods, the PSC operates on a collective, multilateral basis, with 15 member states elected for three-year and two-year terms, ensuring representation across Africa's five regions. The Council meets regularly in both public and private sessions to discuss emerging crises, review reports from the Chairperson of the AU Commission, and coordinate with regional economic communities (RECs), such as ECOWAS, SADC, and IGAD, as well as international partners. The PSC relies heavily on peace support missions, mediation teams, and preventive diplomacy mechanisms, drawing upon the AU's African Standby Force (ASF) for rapid deployment when necessary.

The PSC was established because African leaders recognized the need for an African-led security architecture capable of addressing conflicts proactively, rather than relying exclusively on external actors such as the United Nations or former colonial powers. The devastating humanitarian consequences of intra-state wars in the 1990s highlighted the limitations of ad

hoc interventions, prompting the AU to institutionalize a formal, legally empowered body that could coordinate both political and military responses to security challenges. The PSC thus embodies a shift toward regional ownership of peace and security, emphasizing Africa's right and responsibility to manage its own conflicts while engaging the international community as a partner rather than the primary actor.

The African Peace and Security Council (PSC) represents the core institutional mechanism through which the African Union seeks to manage peace, security, and stability across the continent. Its approach is explicitly continental rather than purely national, reflecting the AU's foundational understanding that African conflicts are rarely confined within state borders and are instead embedded in regional and transnational dynamics. The PSC therefore operates on the premise that peace and security must be addressed through collective responsibility, regional coordination, and preventive engagement.

At the conceptual level, the PSC is anchored in the principle of non-indifference, marking a clear departure from the earlier norm of non-interference associated with the Organization of African Unity. This shift acknowledges that sovereignty cannot be invoked to shield mass atrocities, unconstitutional changes of government, or systemic instability that threaten regional order. The PSC's continental mandate thus legitimizes collective action when peace and security risks escalate beyond national capacity or intent.

Institutionally, the PSC functions as a standing decision-making body empowered to authorize diplomatic initiatives, sanctions, mediation efforts, and peace support operations. Its continental scope is operationalized through close coordination with the AU Commission, the Panel of the Wise, the Continental Early Warning System, and the African Standby Force. Together, these components form the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), which is designed to provide an integrated framework for conflict prevention, management, and post-conflict reconstruction across Africa.

A defining feature of the PSC's approach is its multi-layered regional logic. While the PSC retains continental authority, it systematically relies on Regional Economic Communities and Regional Mechanisms as first responders. ECOWAS, IGAD, SADC, EAC, and others are treated as integral pillars of continental security governance, reflecting the belief that proximity enhances legitimacy, contextual knowledge, and rapid response. The PSC therefore does not replace regional security arrangements but seeks to coordinate, authorize, and upscale them within a continental framework.

The PSC's approach is also preventive and structural, rather than purely reactive. Through early warning assessments, governance monitoring, and engagement on unconstitutional changes of government, the Council increasingly addresses the political and institutional roots of conflict. Elections, constitutional order, civil-military relations, and resource governance are treated as security issues because of their demonstrated capacity to trigger instability. This broadened understanding reflects a continental security doctrine that links peace to governance, development, and legitimacy.

Operationally, the PSC has prioritized African-led peace support operations, often conducted with external financial or logistical support but under African political leadership. Missions in

Somalia, the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin, and the Horn of Africa illustrate the PSC's emphasis on regional stabilization efforts that combine military, political, and civilian components. While capacity constraints persist, the strategic objective remains clear: to ensure that African crises are addressed first and foremost through African institutions.

In continental terms, the PSC also plays a norm-setting role. By condemning coups, suspending unconstitutional regimes, and endorsing transitional roadmaps, it seeks to establish predictable rules of political conduct across the continent. This normative dimension is central to the AU's long-term vision of continental stability, as it aims to reduce the recurrence of cyclical conflict driven by governance breakdowns.

In sum, the African Peace and Security Council approaches the continent as a single but internally differentiated security space. Its model combines continental authority with regional implementation, preventive diplomacy with crisis response, and normative governance with operational action. While effectiveness varies across contexts, the PSC embodies a distinctly African approach to peace and security—one that treats instability as a shared continental challenge requiring coordinated, institutional, and politically grounded solutions.

Strengthening Governance and Delivery at the African Peace and Security Council

Strengthening governance and delivery at the African Peace and Security Council requires addressing the gap between the Council's ambitious continental mandate and its uneven operational performance. This gap is not primarily normative or legal, but institutional, political, and administrative. The PSC already possesses a strong legal basis under the AU Constitutive Act and the PSC Protocol; the central challenge lies in translating authority into timely, coordinated, and credible action.

At the governance level, the PSC's effectiveness depends heavily on the political quality and continuity of its membership. Although the rotation principle ensures regional balance, it often produces short-termism, limited institutional memory, and uneven diplomatic capacity among PSC members. Strengthening governance therefore requires clearer eligibility standards for PSC membership, including minimum diplomatic staffing, crisis-management expertise, and commitment to collective positions. Longer or staggered terms could improve continuity and strategic planning, allowing the PSC to move from reactive crisis management toward anticipatory governance.

Decision-making procedures within the PSC would also benefit from greater predictability and transparency. While consensus-based decision-making preserves unity, it can delay responses during rapidly escalating crises. Establishing clearer procedural thresholds for urgent action—particularly in cases of coups, mass atrocities, or cross-border destabilization—would enhance responsiveness without undermining collective legitimacy. Greater use of standing decision templates for recurrent crises, such as unconstitutional changes of government, could reduce politicization and reinforce norm consistency.

Delivery capacity is inseparable from the institutional strength of the AU Commission, particularly the Peace and Security Department. The PSC depends on the Commission for analysis, planning, and implementation follow-through, yet administrative fragmentation and staffing constraints limit performance. Strengthening delivery therefore requires

professionalizing the Secretariat function supporting the PSC, including better integration of political analysis, early warning data, and operational planning. Clearer tasking lines between the PSC, the Commission, and field missions would reduce duplication and delays.

The relationship between the PSC and Regional Economic Communities and Regional Mechanisms is another decisive factor for delivery. While RECs are formally recognized as first responders, coordination remains uneven and often ad hoc. Governance can be strengthened by formalizing joint planning cycles, shared situation assessments, and standardized reporting formats between the PSC and regional bodies. This would allow the PSC to exercise continental oversight while respecting regional operational leadership, creating a more coherent security governance chain from local to continental levels.



Source: <https://peaceau.org/en/news?p=201>

Financial governance remains one of the PSC's most critical constraints. Reliance on external funding for peace operations undermines autonomy and predictability. Strengthening delivery therefore requires stabilizing African financing mechanisms, including the AU Peace Fund, and linking PSC decisions more directly to secured funding streams. Budget discipline, performance-based financing, and clearer financial accountability for missions would improve credibility with both African publics and external partners.

Another governance priority is strengthening the PSC's preventive and political role, not only its crisis response capacity. This means institutionalizing regular engagement with electoral bodies, constitutional courts, and civil society actors across the continent. Early political engagement, quiet diplomacy, and mediation should be treated as core delivery functions, supported by dedicated staffing and political backing, rather than as ad hoc interventions triggered only after violence erupts.

Finally, the PSC's authority depends on legitimacy and communication. Decisions that are poorly explained or inconsistently enforced weaken normative power. Strengthening governance thus requires a more systematic strategic communication function, clarifying why decisions are taken, how they align with continental norms, and what pathways exist for

compliance and reintegration. Transparency does not undermine sovereignty; it reinforces collective accountability.

In sum, strengthening governance and delivery at the PSC is less about creating new mandates and more about consolidating institutional capacity, political coherence, and operational discipline. By improving membership continuity, decision procedures, Secretariat support, regional coordination, financial autonomy, preventive engagement, and communication, the PSC can evolve from a crisis-reactive body into a strategic continental security manager. This transformation is essential if the AU's ambition of African-led peace and security is to become a sustained reality rather than an episodic aspiration.

Strengthening PSC Governance and Delivery: A Reform Roadmap

Short-term (0–2 years): Fix decision flow and delivery bottlenecks

In the short term, reforms should focus on improving decision quality, speed, and follow-through without treaty change. The PSC should standardize decision-making procedures for recurrent crises, particularly unconstitutional changes of government, electoral violence, and cross-border insurgencies. Clear procedural triggers would reduce politicization and ensure consistency across cases.

At the same time, the Secretariat supporting the PSC within the AU Commission should be reinforced as a strategic coordination hub, not merely an administrative unit. This includes integrating early warning analysis directly into PSC deliberations, ensuring that recommendations are actionable and time-bound. Stronger internal tasking mechanisms would help ensure that PSC decisions translate into concrete mandates for mediation, sanctions, or peace support operations.

Immediate gains can also be achieved by formalizing structured consultation cycles with Regional Economic Communities. Regular joint briefings and shared situation assessments would improve alignment between continental decision-making and regional operational realities.

Medium-term (2–5 years): Consolidate institutional authority and autonomy

In the medium term, the priority is to strengthen the institutional and political authority of the PSC. Membership criteria should be clarified to emphasize diplomatic capacity, continuity, and commitment to continental norms. Longer or staggered terms would reduce volatility and enhance institutional memory.

Financial governance is central at this stage. The AU Peace Fund must be more tightly linked to PSC decisions so that mandates are backed by predictable financing. This requires clearer budget rules, performance benchmarks for missions, and transparent reporting to both AU member states and external partners.

Delivery capacity should also be strengthened by professionalizing mediation, sanctions monitoring, and post-conflict follow-up functions. The PSC should institutionalize preventive

diplomacy as a core activity, engaging earlier with political crises before they escalate into armed conflict.

Long-term (5–10 years): Transform the PSC into a strategic continental security manager

Over the long term, the PSC should evolve into a fully strategic continental security authority, capable of shaping Africa's security environment rather than merely reacting to crises. This requires embedding peace and security more deeply into continental governance by systematically linking the PSC with development planning, infrastructure corridors, climate security strategies, and governance reform agendas.

The relationship between the PSC and RECs should mature into a stable division of labor, where regions act as operational leaders and the PSC provides strategic direction, authorization, and continental legitimacy. This would reflect Africa as a single security space with differentiated regional dynamics.

Ultimately, the PSC's authority will rest on its ability to uphold norms consistently. Predictable enforcement of decisions, credible pathways for reintegration after sanctions, and transparent communication with African publics will be essential for long-term legitimacy.

Linking PSC Reform to EU–AU Interregional Governance

From an interregional perspective, PSC strengthening should be treated as a core pillar of EU–AU partnership, not merely a technical assistance issue. The EU's role should focus on enabling African institutional leadership rather than substituting it.

In the short term, the EU can support PSC delivery by aligning its funding instruments with PSC mandates and timelines, reducing fragmentation and parallel structures. Technical support should be embedded within AU systems, particularly in early warning analysis, mission planning, and sanctions monitoring.

In the medium term, EU–AU cooperation should focus on institutional co-development, including support for the AU Peace Fund, joint scenario planning, and structured PSC–EU Political and Security Committee dialogue. This would reinforce region-to-region governance and reduce ad hoc crisis responses.

In the long term, a strengthened PSC enables the EU–AU partnership to operate as a true interregional security arrangement, where African-led decision-making sets priorities and external partners contribute predictably and transparently. This would mark a shift from donor-driven security engagement toward co-managed continental stability.

Strengthening governance and delivery at the PSC is not about expanding mandates, but about making authority usable. With targeted procedural reforms, institutional consolidation, financial autonomy, and interregional alignment, the PSC can become the backbone of African.

Figure



Integrated Policy Oversight

The dashboard allows AU decision-makers to see all major security domains in one view, linking forward-looking initiatives with monitoring and assessment mechanisms. By visualizing Conflict Prevention, Coups, Peacekeeping, Counterterrorism, Mediation, Human Security, Governance, and Security Sector Reform, the Council can quickly identify areas of progress, gaps, or emerging risks. This supports evidence-based policymaking and ensures that strategic decisions are grounded in real-time assessments.

Each domain highlights forward-looking projects and cooperation initiatives. This allows leaders to prioritize resources toward interventions likely to generate high impact, such as AI-enhanced early warning systems or AU-led mediation programs. Color-coded progress indicators help allocate attention and funding efficiently, ensuring that scarce resources target both immediate crises (like coups or regional conflicts) and long-term stabilization objectives (like governance and modernization).

The dashboard integrates conflict reduction metrics, including potential hotspots, coup attempts, and civilian casualty trends. This provides a risk visualization tool that can trigger early interventions. By quantifying risks in terms of percentages or relative threat levels, the

dashboard allows the AUPSC to anticipate crises before escalation, enabling rapid-response mediation, preventive diplomacy, or targeted peacekeeping operations.

By including autocracy/democracy metrics, such as electoral integrity, civil liberties, and political inclusivity, the dashboard links security to governance. This helps AU leaders identify states at risk of political instability or democratic erosion, and coordinate preventive actions like civic education programs, electoral support, and anti-corruption initiatives. It positions state-building and democratization as core components of continental security strategy.

The dashboard tracks modernization metrics, including police/military professionalization, security sector tech adoption, and operational capacity. This allows the AUPSC to measure progress in state capability and ensure interventions are not only reactive but also build institutional resilience over time. Leaders can identify which countries or sectors require capacity-building support, aligning AU and international assistance with clear benchmarks.

As a visual tool, the dashboard simplifies complex datasets for internal and external communication. It can be used to brief AU member states, RECs, or international partners (e.g., UN, EU) on continental security priorities, progress metrics, and emerging risks. The color-coded and domain-organized design facilitates quick understanding for policymakers, diplomats, and operational staff, enhancing buy-in and coordination.

The dashboard explicitly links initiatives to cross-sectoral, AU/REC, and AU/UN partnerships. This enables the AU to coordinate multi-level interventions, avoiding duplication of efforts and ensuring that regional or international partners contribute to agreed priorities. It becomes a strategic reference framework for alignment, joint operations, and donor coordination.

By visualizing progress, risk, and capacity metrics across all domains, the dashboard establishes a baseline for performance monitoring. AU leaders can track whether interventions are yielding measurable improvements, whether coups are prevented, peacekeeping missions stabilize regions, or governance reforms reduce autocratic trends. This supports accountability to AU member states, citizens, and international partners.

In short, the dashboard serves as a strategic decision-making, monitoring, and communication platform. It allows the African Union to integrate security, governance, and modernization priorities, coordinate continental and international efforts, anticipate crises, and track measurable progress across all critical domains for peace and stability.

Summary

The AU Security Dashboard integrates all major continental security domains in a single view. It covers Conflict Prevention, Coups, Peacekeeping, Counterterrorism, Mediation, Human Security, Governance, and Security Sector Reform. Each domain links forward-looking projects with monitoring mechanisms. The dashboard uses color-coded indicators for conflict reduction, governance quality, and modernization. It allows AU leaders to quickly assess progress and identify gaps. Forward-looking projects are mapped to expected outcomes and resource needs. Monitoring mechanisms track early warning, intervention success, and operational readiness. Conflict reduction metrics measure stability improvements and hotspot mitigation. Democracy and autocracy metrics monitor political inclusivity and electoral

integrity. Modernization metrics assess state capacity, security sector reform, and technology adoption. The scenario-planning layer simulates crises like coups or insurgencies. It models intervention responses and predicts potential cascading effects. Leaders can compare alternative strategies side by side. The dashboard helps prioritize interventions and allocate resources efficiently. It strengthens decision-making for preventive diplomacy and rapid response. Simulation outputs support accountability to member states and partners. The tool also aids training and capacity-building through scenario exercises. Interdependencies between governance, security, and social factors are visualized. Overall, it transforms monitoring into proactive strategic planning. It enables the AU to balance stability, democracy, and modernization in real time.

Conflicts in Africa

Africa experiences a wide range of conflicts, which can be broadly categorized according to their underlying causes and dynamics. Interstate conflicts, which occur between two or more sovereign states, have historically included the Ethiopia–Eritrea war from 1998 to 2000, as well as intermittent clashes along the Sudan–South Sudan border. Intrastate or civil conflicts, on the other hand, occur within national boundaries and often involve government forces confronting rebel movements. Notable examples include the prolonged instability in Libya following 2011, the insurgency of Al-Shabaab in Somalia, and the ongoing violence in the eastern regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Ethnic and communal conflicts also persist across the continent, arising from competition or tension between different ethnic, tribal, or religious groups. Such disputes have been particularly evident in Nigeria's Middle Belt region, in Ethiopia between the Oromo, Amhara, and Tigray populations, and in Kenya around election periods. Closely related are separatist and secessionist conflicts, where groups seek independence or increased autonomy from central governments. The Anglophone crisis in Cameroon, the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia, and the insurgency in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province illustrate this phenomenon.

Terrorism and extremist insurgencies further complicate Africa's security landscape. Groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin, Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Kenya, and Islamic State affiliates in Mozambique and the Sahel region employ violence to achieve political or religious objectives. Resource and environmental conflicts also generate significant instability, as competition over minerals, arable land, water, and grazing areas frequently escalates into violence. These dynamics have been evident in the mineral-rich eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo, in disputes over oil and land along the Sudan–South Sudan border, and around the shrinking waters of Lake Chad.

Figure



Finally, political power struggles, including contested elections, regime change, and military coups, represent a recurrent source of conflict. Mali, Guinea, Sudan, Burkina Faso, and Niger have all witnessed such upheavals in recent years, highlighting the fragility of certain governance structures. Importantly, many African conflicts are multi-dimensional, combining elements of civil war, ethnic tension, secessionist ambitions, terrorism, and resource competition, as exemplified by the Tigray crisis in Ethiopia or the complex security situation in Nigeria. These interwoven conflict types underscore the intricate and evolving nature of insecurity across the continent.

Implications

Partnership between the African Union and the European Union elevates the legitimacy and effectiveness of both organizations. The AU brings intimate regional knowledge and authority,

while the EU contributes technical expertise, financial resources, and diplomatic leverage, creating a synergy that strengthens conflict resolution efforts across the continent. Together, they enable integrated early warning systems that can detect emerging crises, political instability, or humanitarian emergencies, allowing timely and coordinated responses. Peace and security efforts gain coherence as AU-led mediation, peacekeeping, and counterterrorism operations are reinforced by EU support, combining political strategy, operational capacity, and development-oriented solutions.

The partnership also places civilian protection and humanitarian outcomes at its core, ensuring that responses address immediate needs while reducing the long-term risks of displacement and social disruption. EU technical assistance and capacity-building enhance the AU's ability to mediate, monitor governance, and sustain peace operations, creating enduring frameworks for stability. Shared conflict monitoring metrics allow both partners to assess political transitions, ethnic tensions, resource disputes, and security threats, guiding informed policy and adaptive strategies.

By aligning on democratic norms, anti-coup protocols, and human rights standards, the partnership strengthens governance and reinforces accountability, while simultaneously leveraging EU influence to encourage compliance. Addressing the intersection of development and security, EU resources combined with AU-led initiatives target the root causes of instability, from resource scarcity to fragmented social cohesion. Cross-border threats, terrorism, and regional disputes are managed collaboratively, reducing the risk of spillover and safeguarding trade, migration, and investment. Ultimately, the AU–EU partnership amplifies policy coherence and international influence, presenting a unified voice in multilateral fora and ensuring that peace, security, and prosperity advance hand in hand.

THE AUSPC AND THE AFRICAN BIG NATIONS

Egypt prioritizes stability in the Nile Basin, the Horn of Africa, and North-East Africa, viewing the AUPSC as a tool to mediate conflicts that could affect water security, counter-terrorism, and regional power projection. It emphasizes a strong centralized AU mandate for preventive diplomacy and conflict management, often supporting intervention frameworks that protect state sovereignty. Compared to other members, Egypt is more focused on geostrategic security and regional leadership rather than development-driven conflict prevention. Nigeria sees the AUPSC as critical for maintaining stability in West Africa and the Sahel, addressing cross-border terrorism such as Boko Haram and political crises. It favors robust, intervention-capable mechanisms, including peacekeeping and regional force deployment, leveraging its military and leadership role in ECOWAS.

Unlike Egypt, Nigeria emphasizes military readiness and proactive intervention as a priority. South Africa's interest lies in promoting political stability, democratic norms, and mediation in Southern Africa and across the continent. It prioritizes diplomatic solutions, institutional strengthening, and preventive diplomacy, often acting through SADC and AU channels. Compared with Nigeria and Egypt, South Africa focuses more on normative governance, multilateral diplomacy, and continental legitimacy rather than direct military intervention.

The Democratic Republic of Congo views the AUPSC as essential for regional security and internal stability, particularly in the Great Lakes region, where cross-border armed groups and humanitarian crises are prevalent. The DRC advocates for AU support to national security forces and international collaboration, emphasizing coordination with UN missions. Its approach is more focused on capacity building and stabilization support, reflecting ongoing domestic vulnerabilities. Ethiopia is concerned with regional stability in the Horn of Africa, border disputes, and internal security challenges, viewing AUPSC mechanisms as a way to legitimize AU-led mediation. Ethiopia supports politically nuanced interventions and prefers preventive diplomacy over heavy-handed peace enforcement, emphasizing regional leadership in mediation rather than military dominance.

Niger prioritizes counter-terrorism and Sahel security, relying on the AUPSC to coordinate African-led stabilization missions against jihadist groups. It emphasizes regional security frameworks and rapid response forces, often working closely with ECOWAS and G5 Sahel initiatives. Niger's approach is operational and security-driven, focusing on immediate threats rather than broader political mediation. Zimbabwe sees the AUPSC as a mechanism to support regional stability and uphold Southern African political influence, particularly through SADC. It favors diplomatic intervention and mediation, sometimes using its influence to protect allied regimes or support negotiated settlements. Its approach combines political loyalty, regional influence, and mediation, rather than robust enforcement. Tanzania emphasizes peaceful dispute resolution, regional cooperation, and humanitarian stability in East Africa and the Great Lakes. It prioritizes preventive diplomacy, capacity building, and coordination with regional mechanisms such as the East African Community. Tanzania's focus is more normative and developmental, rather than security-heavy or interventionist.

In summary, security- and military-driven approaches are most prominent among Nigeria, Niger, and the DRC, which prioritize peace enforcement, rapid response, and counter-terrorism. Diplomacy- and norm-driven approaches are central for South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, which emphasize mediation, preventive diplomacy, and institutional legitimacy. Egypt and Ethiopia focus on geostrategic and leadership roles, emphasizing regional power projection, strategic influence, and conflict prevention in key areas. Each member's stakes in the AUPSC are shaped by geography, security threats, economic capacity, and political ambitions, explaining why priorities—from military intervention to mediation and development—differ significantly across the continent.

To strengthen AU partnerships and maximize the effectiveness of the AUPSC, key pathways include the development of structured engagement frameworks with international partners, such as the EU, UN, and regional economic communities, to ensure coherent support for African-led initiatives. Promoting joint capacity-building programs, particularly in logistics, intelligence, and rapid deployment, can enhance the operational readiness of AU missions. The AU can also expand diplomatic and technical coordination platforms to harmonize the responses of member states, share best practices, and align external assistance with African priorities. Finally, fostering financial and institutional partnerships will help sustain peace operations, enhance early warning systems, and ensure that interventions reflect both continental norms and localized realities, creating a credible and autonomous African security architecture.

What more needs to be done?

According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies' infographics and related analysis — to address Africa's deeply scarred security landscape and the trends identified in 2025:

Comprehensive and sustained conflict resolution is urgently required. Many conflicts — from the fragmentation in Sudan to militant Islamist group offensives across the Sahel and the heightened violence in eastern DRC — continue to expand, showing that existing peace processes, ceasefires, and regional security arrangements are insufficient without deeper political negotiation, disarmament frameworks, and inclusive governance solutions that legitimately address the grievances driving violence.

Strengthening governance, accountability, and democratic norms remains critical. The trend of impunity and abuses of power — including elections that are not free and fair and the consolidation of power by military juntas — highlights the need for stronger democratic institutions, credible electoral processes, and mechanisms that compel governments to respect constitutional order and human rights.

Countering the expanding footprint of external strategic actors is an emerging imperative. The growing influence of external powers such as China, Russia, and Gulf state actors in security, infrastructure, and military sectors requires African states and regional organizations to invest in sovereign strategic planning that balances external engagement with long-term continental interests, transparency, and security autonomy.

Addressing technological proliferation, especially in warfare, is increasingly necessary. The spread of drones and evolving warfare technologies has altered conflict dynamics, making urban areas more vulnerable and extending the reach of both state and nonstate armed actors. Robust regulatory frameworks, monitoring systems, and conflict specific technology governance are still needed.

Urban security and youth inclusion must be elevated in strategy. Rapid urbanization and the rising role of youth protests and frustrations underscore the importance of urban security approaches, employment and opportunity creation, and accountable governance that can channel youthful demand for services, participation, and reform into peaceful engagement rather than instability.

Humanitarian crises and displacement require more integrated regional responses. The compounding effect of conflicts driving forced displacement — already affecting tens of millions — calls for greater coordination among AU member states, regional economic communities, and international partners to ensure protection, durable solutions, safe return, and socio economic reintegration of displaced communities.

Finally, advancing continental frameworks such as Agenda 2063 remains a long term task. Despite progress in some infrastructure and economic areas, much work remains to align peace, security, development, and governance reforms with the aspirations of Agenda 2063, including reducing the gap between regions of stability and instability and building resilience against future shocks.

In sum, the Africa Center's infographics depict a security environment where prevention, governance reform, strategic autonomy, technology governance, urban and youth focused strategies, humanitarian coordination, and continental long term planning remain priorities for effective action.

Table Pact for Africa

Persistent and expanding armed conflicts	Unresolved Challenge	Strategic Gap	AU (Collective African Lead)	EU (Collective Partner Role)	EU (Individual Lead Functions)	United States (Strategic Partner)	China (Systemic Actor)
Democratic erosion and coups	Fragmented mediation, weak follow-through	Political legitimacy, mediation mandates, peace support authorization	Financing, diplomatic backing, operational support	Conflict mediation support, peace operation funding, monitoring missions	High-level diplomacy, pressure leverage, security guarantees	Infrastructure leverage shaping post-conflict incentives	Infrastructure leverage shaping post-conflict incentives
Violent extremist expansion	Enforcement deficit of constitutional norms	Norm-setting, sanctions, peer accountability	Political conditionality, electoral assistance	Election observation, institutional reform support	Democracy signaling, sanctions, diplomatic pressure	Non-interference stance, regime engagement	Non-interference stance, regime engagement
External strategic penetration	Security–governance disconnect	Regional coordination, legitimacy in counterterrorism	Training, stabilization funding	Civilian protection frameworks, security sector reform	Intelligence, counterterrorism operations	Limited security role, indirect via state capacity	Limited security role, indirect via state capacity
Technological escalation of warfare	Uncoordinated external engagements	Framing African strategic autonomy	Regulatory standards, transparency	Screening of partnerships, governance safeguards	Strategic competition, alliance building	Long-term infrastructure, security presence expansion	Long-term infrastructure, security presence expansion
Urban insecurity and youth exclusion	Regulation lags behind conflict tech	Norm articulation, confidence-building	Technical regulation capacity	Drone governance, civilian harm monitoring	Advanced military tech, ISR dominance	Rapid diffusion of affordable military tech	Rapid diffusion of affordable military tech
Displacement and humanitarian	Security policy blind	Political inclusion frameworks	Urban governance support	Youth employment,	Civil society and	Infrastructure-driven	Infrastructure-driven

Urban stress	to urban dynamics			urban resilience programs	governance funding	urban expansion	urban expansion
Long-term resilience and prevention	Humanitarian-political disconnect	Regional coordination, return frameworks	Humanitarian funding, resilience	Durable solutions, reintegration programs	Emergency relief, stabilization support	Infrastructure in host and origin areas	Infrastructure in host and origin areas
	Weak operationalization of Agenda 2063	Strategic vision and ownership	Long-term financing	Climate-security, governance integration	Strategic foresight, crisis prevention	Development model shaping growth paths	Development model shaping growth paths

The African Union remains the indispensable political anchor, without which legitimacy collapses. The European Union functions most effectively as a system-integrator, translating political objectives into sustained financing, regulation, and monitoring. Individual EU leadership is most credible where rules, institutions, and civilian protection are central rather than coercive.

The United States operates primarily as a strategic pressure and security actor, shaping incentives through diplomacy, intelligence, and deterrence, but with limited tolerance for long-term institutional stewardship. China, by contrast, is a systemic shaper rather than a crisis manager, influencing conflict environments indirectly through infrastructure, state capacity, and regime relationships, while largely avoiding normative engagement.

What remains to be done, therefore, is not to harmonize values across partners — which is unrealistic — but to structure coexistence. The AU–EU axis is best placed to provide continuity, monitoring, and governance coherence, while the US and China are managed as powerful but asymmetric variables within a shared African-led strategic frame.

Lead African partners can be differentiated by geography, political weight, and functional capacity, creating a distributed leadership model anchored in continental ownership. South Africa emerges as a lead partner for mediation architecture, democratic norm-setting, and institutional capacity-building, particularly in Southern and continental forums. Egypt plays a central role in North and Red Sea security, interstate mediation, and military-to-military coordination, while also acting as a bridge to Middle Eastern dynamics. The Democratic Republic of Congo functions as a critical focal state for resource governance, conflict–economy monitoring, and stabilization learning in complex intrastate conflicts. Tanzania provides a stabilizing anchor in East Africa, with comparative strengths in preventive diplomacy, refugee hosting, and regional cooperation through the EAC and SADC interfaces. Niger, despite political fragility, remains structurally central to Sahel security dynamics, border monitoring, and counterterrorism coordination, requiring calibrated engagement rather than isolation. Libya occupies a dual role as both conflict theatre and gatekeeper for Mediterranean security, migration, and energy corridors, making it a necessary—if difficult—partner in any coherent framework.

At the fringes, Brazil contributes strategic value through South–South cooperation, peacekeeping experience, and development-security integration models that resonate with African priorities without colonial legacies. Mexico complements this by offering expertise in civilian security reform, judicial strengthening, and the governance of violence, particularly relevant for urban insecurity and organized crime spillovers. Together, these African lead partners, supported at the margins by Brazil and Mexico, allow the AU–EU partnership to operate through differentiated leadership rather than uniform intervention, aligning legitimacy, capability, and geography into a coherent policy map.

Persistence and Root Causes of Warlordism, State Fragility, and Economic Underdevelopment in Africa

The persistence of warlordism, state fragility, and economic underdevelopment in Africa is best understood as the outcome of long-term structural processes rather than as a product of cultural, ethnic, or purely contemporary political failures. These phenomena are mutually reinforcing and evolve through historical, political, economic, and international dynamics that have shaped African state systems over centuries.

Historically, African political authority developed through diverse and often decentralized systems in which legitimacy rested on control of people, trade routes, or resources rather than fixed territorial sovereignty. Precolonial governance structures were frequently flexible and network-based, well adapted to mobility and commerce. Colonial rule disrupted these systems by imposing territorially fixed states designed primarily for extraction and control, not for building inclusive political communities or productive economies. The colonial state centralized coercive power while neglecting institutional legitimacy, creating political entities that survived through force and external support rather than domestic consent. This legacy remains central to understanding postcolonial fragility.

Following independence, many African states inherited weak institutional foundations and economies oriented toward exporting raw materials. Political authority was often consolidated through patronage networks rather than institutionalized rule of law. In this context, warlordism emerged not as an aberration but as an alternative mode of political organization, particularly in peripheral regions where state presence was thin or contested. Warlords filled governance vacuums by providing security, regulating trade, and controlling resources, often blending coercion with local legitimacy. Over time, these actors became embedded in regional and transnational economic networks, particularly in conflict commodities such as minerals, timber, and hydrocarbons.

State fragility persists because many African governments face a structural mismatch between formal sovereignty and actual governing capacity. International recognition grants states legal authority, but internal administrative reach, fiscal capacity, and monopoly over violence remain limited. This creates environments in which non-state armed actors can coexist with or challenge state authority. External interventions, while often necessary to stabilize crises, have sometimes reinforced fragility by substituting for domestic institutions rather than strengthening them, unintentionally reducing incentives for long-term state-building.

Economic underdevelopment is deeply intertwined with these political dynamics. Colonial economies were designed to extract value rather than generate diversified domestic production. After independence, limited industrialization, dependence on commodity exports, and vulnerability to external price shocks constrained growth. Weak infrastructure, fragmented markets, and limited access to capital further reduced the capacity for inclusive economic transformation. In fragile states, insecurity discourages investment and disrupts production, while underdevelopment, in turn, fuels competition over scarce resources, reinforcing cycles of violence.

International and regional dynamics have also played a critical role in sustaining these patterns. During the Cold War, external powers often supported authoritarian or militarized regimes for strategic reasons, entrenching coercive governance structures. In the post-Cold War era, global demand for strategic resources and illicit markets has continued to provide revenue streams for armed groups and predatory elites. Regional spillovers, porous borders, and weak coordination among states allow conflicts and war economies to persist across national boundaries.

Social factors further compound these challenges. Rapid population growth, urbanization without employment creation, and youth marginalization have increased the pool of individuals vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups. Where states fail to deliver security, justice, and economic opportunity, alternative authorities—warlords, militias, or criminal networks—gain credibility. Identity-based mobilization, while often emphasized, typically acts as a mobilizing instrument rather than a root cause, enabling elites to legitimize violence within structurally fragile environments.

The persistence of warlordism, state fragility, and economic underdevelopment is therefore best seen as a self-reinforcing system. Fragile institutions allow armed actors to emerge; war economies undermine state authority and economic diversification; underdevelopment fuels grievance and competition; and external economic and political forces stabilize these dynamics rather than disrupt them. Breaking this cycle requires long-term strategies that link political legitimacy, security provision, and economic transformation, rather than isolated interventions focused on one dimension alone.

In conclusion, these challenges persist in Africa not because of an absence of governance traditions or economic potential, but because historical disruptions, extractive political economies, weak institutionalization, and adverse international structures have combined to produce durable patterns of fragility. Understanding these root causes is essential for designing policies—at national, regional, and continental levels—that move beyond crisis management toward sustainable peace and development.

Strategic Framework for Improving African Countries' SDG Rankings under a UN–EU–AU Partnership

African countries currently exhibit a wide range of performance on the Sustainable Development Goals, with notable disparities between high performers such as Morocco, Tunisia, and Mauritius, and low performers such as South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Chad, and Somalia. To improve SDG rankings, countries must focus on the areas where progress is both urgent and achievable, addressing structural bottlenecks while leveraging

regional and international partnerships. Analysis of SDG performance indicates that the highest-priority areas for intervention include poverty reduction, health and well-being, education, infrastructure and industrialization, climate action and environmental sustainability, and governance and institutional strengthening. Extreme poverty, pervasive inequality, and social exclusion remain central obstacles, limiting economic participation and constraining human capital. Health systems are underdeveloped in many low- and middle-ranking countries, with maternal and child mortality, infectious diseases, and limited healthcare access undermining development gains. Educational deficits, particularly in secondary and vocational training, restrict the workforce's ability to engage in emerging industries and digital economies. Weak infrastructure in energy, transport, and ICT prevents effective market integration and limits resilience to both economic and climate shocks. Environmental degradation, climate vulnerability, and unsustainable resource use threaten long-term economic stability, while fragile governance, corruption, and conflict perpetuate institutional weakness and hinder policy implementation. Prioritizing interventions in these areas will yield the highest impact on SDG Index performance and create durable development outcomes.

Improving performance requires a strategically integrated approach across social, economic, environmental, and governance dimensions. Expanding social safety nets, including universal health coverage and targeted cash transfer programs, is essential for alleviating extreme poverty and reducing inequality. Investments in quality education, with particular emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, vocational training, and digital literacy, will build the human capital necessary for industrialization and innovation. Gender equality must be actively promoted, not only in education but across labor markets and political participation, to maximize human potential and equitable growth. Economically, countries need to prioritize sustainable industrialization through special economic zones, local value chain development, and renewable energy projects, which can simultaneously foster employment, economic diversification, and climate resilience. Modernizing transport and digital infrastructure is critical to facilitate trade, innovation, and connectivity while strengthening regional integration. Climate-smart agriculture and food security initiatives will enhance resilience and provide sustainable livelihoods. Environmental and climate interventions should include robust renewable energy strategies, ecosystem protection, community-based natural resource management, and comprehensive climate adaptation measures, including early-warning systems and disaster risk management frameworks. Governance reforms are equally important; rule-of-law initiatives, anti-corruption mechanisms, and data-driven policy making can increase state effectiveness, accountability, and policy impact. Promoting regional coordination through AU frameworks ensures cross-border infrastructure, trade, and environmental policies are harmonized and mutually reinforcing.

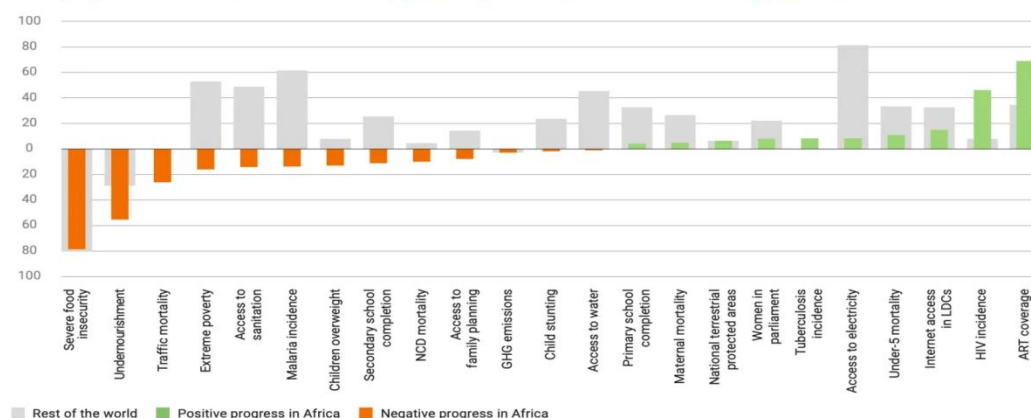
The organizational backbone of such an initiative under a UN–EU–AU partnership is critical for effective implementation. The United Nations brings technical expertise, normative guidance, and capacity-building support, particularly through agencies such as UNDP, WHO, and UNESCO, ensuring international standards and best practices are integrated into national strategies. The European Union contributes policy guidance, financial leverage, and technology transfer, mobilizing funding through instruments such as the European Development Fund, NDICI, and PESCO-linked mechanisms to co-finance priority SDG projects. The African Union provides regional coordination, political legitimacy, policy harmonization, and conflict-sensitive frameworks, facilitating peer learning, continental standards, and cross-border

development programs. A functional structure would include a Continental SDG Council, composed of UN, EU, and AU representatives to provide strategic oversight, ensure policy alignment, and monitor progress. At the national level, SDG Implementation Units embedded in finance or planning ministries would coordinate multisectoral program delivery, while Data and Monitoring Hubs, supported by UN and EU technical assistance, would provide real-time analytics and dashboards to guide policy adjustments. Private sector and civil society networks would be mobilized for innovation, local project execution, and community engagement, ensuring participatory and inclusive development processes.

FIGURE 13

AFRICA'S ESTIMATED SDG PROGRESS, 2015-2023, COMPARED TO THE REST OF THE WORLD

While progress has been made in some areas, specifically in health, other indicators are lagging behind



Source: Kharas, Homi, John W. McArthur, and Odera Onyechi. "How Is the World Doing on the SDGs? Four Tests and Eight Findings" (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, July 17, 2024). <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-is-the-world-doing-on-the-sdgs-four-tests-and-eight-findings/>.

Source: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-well-is-africa-doing-across-the-sustainable-development-goals/>

Financing the SDG agenda requires a blended and innovative approach. Domestic resource mobilization should be strengthened through improved tax collection, reallocation of subsidies, and reduction of illicit financial flows, ensuring sustainable and predictable funding. Official Development Assistance from the UN and EU can target social protection, health, climate adaptation, and infrastructure, providing catalytic support for national programs. Public-private partnerships should be leveraged for infrastructure, energy, education, and health projects, creating avenues for private investment and expertise while sharing risk. Regional funding instruments led by the AU can support cross-border initiatives such as transport corridors, industrial hubs, and trade-facilitating infrastructure, enhancing continental integration. Innovative financing mechanisms, including green and SDG bonds, diaspora bonds, and results-based financing, can provide additional capital while linking investments to measurable development outcomes. All funding allocations should be tied to clearly defined SDG targets and monitored through robust accountability frameworks to ensure efficiency, impact, and transparency.

The strategic pathway for improving SDG performance in African countries under this partnership involves a combination of high-priority interventions, integrated cross-sectoral policies, strong organizational coordination, and innovative financing. By concentrating on the

most critical SDG dimensions—poverty, health, education, infrastructure, climate, and governance—countries can achieve rapid, measurable progress. The UN–EU–AU partnership provides the technical, financial, and political scaffolding necessary to support national efforts while enhancing regional coherence and accountability. With well-defined implementation units, real-time monitoring systems, and participatory governance mechanisms, African countries can leverage these resources to close development gaps, build resilient societies, and significantly elevate their SDG Index rankings. This approach is not only transformative in achieving the 2030 Agenda but also foundational for building sustainable, equitable, and prosperous societies across the continent.

The highest-performing African countries on the SDG Index include Tunisia, Morocco, and Mauritius. Tunisia holds the top position in Africa with a score around 72.0, reflecting strong progress in education, health, and governance. Morocco follows closely with a score of approximately 71.7, benefiting from coordinated policy planning and socio-economic development. Mauritius also performs strongly, scoring about 70.3, with notable achievements in governance and human development. These countries demonstrate consistent policy alignment with SDG targets and typically have better infrastructure, social services, and governance frameworks than many peers.

Countries with moderate SDG performance include Egypt, Algeria, Botswana, and Namibia. Egypt has a solid score of around 68.1, supported by improvements in infrastructure and social services. Algeria scores about 70.1, leveraging resource-backed development. Botswana and Namibia are generally above the African average, balancing human development with governance stability. Middle performers typically have moderate capacities in health, education, and economic sectors but still face structural challenges such as inequality, unemployment, or uneven regional development.

The lowest-performing African countries include South Sudan, the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, Somalia, Niger, and Madagascar. South Sudan has one of the lowest SDG Index scores globally due to ongoing conflict and weak institutions. CAR performs very poorly, reflecting human security and development deficits. Chad also struggles with structural development constraints. Somalia experiences extremely low SDG progress due to persistent instability and limited state capacity. Niger and Madagascar rank near the bottom among African countries, affected by overlapping crises such as conflict, extreme poverty, weak institutions, climate-related pressures, and limited access to basic services.

Top performers like Tunisia, Morocco, and Mauritius show stronger governance, health, education, and coordinated SDG planning. Middle performers such as Egypt, Algeria, Botswana, and Namibia make moderate progress but still face structural challenges. Low performers including South Sudan, CAR, Chad, Somalia, Niger, and Madagascar are constrained by conflict, fragility, and weak infrastructure.

The SDG Index is scaled 0–100 and reflects overall progress toward achieving all 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Rankings shift over time, but the general pattern remains: North African countries perform relatively better, while fragile, conflict-affected states lag behind.

Table

Country	SDG Index Score (2025)	Approximate Regional Rank
Morocco	66.08 (highest in Africa)	Highest performer in Africa
Tunisia	65.88	Very high performer in Africa
Mauritius	64.04	Among Africa's highest SDG scores
Algeria	63.95	Strong North African SDG performance
Ghana	62.45	Mid-range African performer
Cabo Verde	63.36	Mid-range performance
Egypt	60.70	Middle tier Africa SDG score
(Africa average)	~53.9	Broad continental average (not country) (
Madagascar	51.0	Among lower performers (bottom 10 globally)
Niger	50.3	Very low performance globally & Africa
Somalia	46.1	Among the lowest SDG scores globally)
Chad	46.0	One of Africa's lowest SDG scores
Central African Republic	45.2	Extremely low performers
South Sudan	41.6	Lowest SDG Index score globally & Africa

Low Performers

Madagascar – 51.0 (among lower performers)

Madagascar struggles with poverty, weak institutions, and environmental vulnerability. Priority SDGs are SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 13 (climate action), and SDG 16 (strong institutions). Organizational focus should be on strengthening governance at local and national levels, disaster preparedness, and community-based natural resource management, with UN and EU technical support.

Niger – 50.3 (very low performance globally & Africa)

Niger faces chronic poverty, weak infrastructure, and climate vulnerability. SDG priorities include SDG 1, SDG 2, SDG 4 (education), and SDG 7 (energy). Interventions should integrate social protection programs, educational access initiatives, and off-grid renewable energy deployment, coordinated via AU-led regional programs.

Somalia – 46.1 (among the lowest SDG scores globally)

Somalia's SDG deficits are largely due to ongoing conflict, fragile governance, and institutional collapse. Priority SDGs include SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions), SDG 1, and SDG 3 (health). UN-led capacity-building, EU-supported development programs, and AU-facilitated peacebuilding are critical for enabling baseline SDG progress.

Chad – 46.0 (one of Africa's lowest SDG scores)

Chad struggles with poverty, food insecurity, and institutional fragility. SDG priorities include SDG 1, SDG 2, SDG 16, and SDG 13. Strategic interventions require integrated social protection, climate-adapted agriculture, and governance reforms, with multilateral support to stabilize systems and improve institutional functionality.

Central African Republic – 45.2 (extremely low performers)

CAR faces extreme poverty, ongoing conflict, and severe governance deficits. Priority SDGs include SDG 16, SDG 1, SDG 3, and SDG 4. Interventions must focus on peacebuilding, rebuilding state institutions, establishing basic health and education infrastructure, and promoting community-level resilience.

South Sudan – 41.6 (lowest SDG Index score globally & Africa)

South Sudan is the lowest-ranked African country, with development hampered by protracted conflict, governance collapse, and humanitarian crises. Priority SDGs are SDG 16, SDG 1, SDG 2, and SDG 3. Interventions require immediate stabilization, UN peacekeeping and governance support, humanitarian relief, and phased reconstruction with EU and AU coordination.

Summary

Countries with scores above 60 (Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritius, Algeria, Cabo Verde, Ghana, Egypt) show relative institutional stability, functional governance, and moderate infrastructure, suggesting that improvements can be achieved through targeted policy reforms, social investments, and strategic partnerships. Middle performers have clear entry points in infrastructure, employment, and climate adaptation. Low performers are constrained by conflict, weak institutions, and severe poverty, requiring foundational stabilization and capacity-building interventions before substantive SDG progress can occur.

A UN–EU–AU partnership provides the structural scaffolding for tailored interventions. High performers benefit most from innovation, regional coordination, and scaling climate-smart policies. Middle performers need capacity-building, financing, and governance strengthening to accelerate growth. Low performers require conflict-sensitive development, emergency support, and institutional reconstruction. Across all tiers, blended finance, data-driven monitoring, and integration of civil society and private sector actors are crucial for sustaining SDG gains and improving continental performance.

Lagos, Johannesburg, and Cairo are all capable of issuing euro-denominated green bonds, but their suitability varies based on financial infrastructure, market depth, regulatory frameworks, and investor confidence. Lagos, as Nigeria's financial hub, has a growing investor base and a

national green bond framework, making it suitable for regionally significant projects, though currency volatility and evolving regulations require hedging and strong legal safeguards. Johannesburg, home to the largest and most sophisticated African exchange, offers deep liquidity, robust institutional participation, and internationally aligned regulations, making it ideal for large-scale euro-denominated green bond issuance targeting both African and European investors. Cairo benefits from strategic regional positioning and emerging sustainable finance initiatives, making it suitable for mid-sized issuances, although market liquidity and regulatory frameworks are still developing. Lagos and Cairo may need external guarantees or structured risk management to attract significant international capital. Johannesburg's established legal and regulatory environment reduces issuance risk and enhances investor confidence. The three cities offer different strategic advantages: Lagos connects West Africa, Cairo bridges Africa and the Middle East, and Johannesburg provides scale and market sophistication. Foreign exchange management is critical in Lagos and Cairo due to potential volatility in the Nigerian naira and Egyptian pound. For maximum impact, bond structures in Lagos and Cairo should incorporate credit enhancements and institutional partnerships to meet euro-denominated investor expectations. Overall, Johannesburg emerges as the strongest hub for large-scale international green bond issuance, while Lagos and Cairo serve as effective platforms for regional or mid-sized projects.

The African Free trade Area and the United Nations

Here is the revised version with no bold text, no numbering, followed by a comparative table that situates the global free trade order, AfCFTA, the AU–EU partnership and other free trade areas in a single analytical frame.

The global free trade order emerged from the post-war multilateral system centred on GATT and later the WTO, promoting non-discrimination, tariff reduction and common dispute settlement. While this system facilitated globalisation, its rule-making and enforcement capacities have weakened over time. In response, states and regions have increasingly relied on preferential and regional free trade areas, resulting in a fragmented but layered global trade architecture rather than a single multilateral core.

AfCFTA represents Africa's strategic consolidation within this evolving global order. Rather than challenging the principle of free trade, it seeks to internalise it at the continental level by reducing intra-African trade barriers, harmonising rules of origin and creating a sufficiently large market to support industrialisation. AfCFTA thus strengthens Africa's bargaining power externally while preserving policy space internally.

The construction of AfCFTA interacts with an already dense landscape of regional economic communities and bilateral trade agreements. These arrangements function as partial building blocks but also generate regulatory overlap and fragmentation. AfCFTA aims to discipline this complexity by providing a continental framework that aligns regional agreements with shared rules, making African trade integration more legible to global partners.

The AU–EU partnership operates at the interface between continental and global trade regimes. For the EU, AfCFTA offers a coherent African counterpart that simplifies engagement and reduces the asymmetries inherent in bilateral negotiations. For the AU, the partnership provides

access to regulatory experience, market scale and investment while avoiding premature liberalisation. This interaction gradually shifts cooperation from market access toward regulatory coordination and value-chain development.

Free trade in this context extends beyond tariffs. The AU–EU partnership increasingly addresses standards, sustainability, digital trade, competition policy and industrial upgrading. AfCFTA provides the internal coherence required for Africa to absorb and adapt such rules selectively, rather than importing them wholesale. This reinforces development-oriented integration rather than extractive openness.

Tensions remain between multilateralism and preferential trade. Regional and bilateral agreements risk undermining WTO principles, yet they also compensate for stalled multilateral reform. AfCFTA and the AU–EU partnership together can stabilise this tension by aligning regional integration with WTO norms while advancing a more development-sensitive interpretation of free trade.

Taken together, AfCFTA and the AU–EU partnership reflect a broader shift in the global trade order toward managed openness. Free trade areas are increasingly constructed as strategic instruments combining trade liberalisation, industrial policy and resilience. Africa’s continental integration, supported but not dominated by Europe, has the potential to rebalance global trade governance by reinforcing regional blocs as pillars of a renewed multilateral system.

Dimension	WTO / Global Trade Order	AfCFTA	AU–EU Partnership	Other FTAs (EU FTAs, CPTPP, RCEP)
Core logic	Multilateral non- discrimination and tariff reduction	Continental market-building and intra- regional trade	Inter-regional partnership linking trade, development and regulation	Preferential liberalisation among selected members
Geographic scope	Global	African continent	Europe– Africa	Regional or cross-regional
Primary objective	Open global markets	Industrialisation and African economic integration	Value-chain integration and regulatory cooperation	Market access and competitiveness
Institutional strength	Weakening dispute settlement and rule- making	Emerging institutions and phased implementation	Political coordination with operational instruments	Strong among members, fragmented globally
Development focus	Indirect and uneven	Central to design	Explicitly embedded	Varies, often secondary
Treatment of asymmetries	Formal equality	Explicit differentiation	Managed asymmetry and capacity building	Limited or negotiated

Role in global governance	Norm-setting framework	Collective African agency	Bridge between regional and global systems	Parallel regimes shaping fragmentation
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Implications for the AU–EU partnership and pathways for added value

The interaction between the global free trade order, AfCFTA and multiple regional trade regimes fundamentally reshapes the AU–EU partnership. The partnership is no longer primarily about preferential access to European markets but about how Europe engages with a consolidating African economic space. AfCFTA creates a single continental reference point, allowing the AU–EU relationship to shift from fragmented bilateralism toward structured inter-regional cooperation.

One key implication is a rebalancing of negotiating asymmetries. AfCFTA strengthens African bargaining power by aggregating markets, rules of origin and regulatory priorities. For the EU, this reduces transaction costs and increases predictability. For the AU, it enables engagement with Europe on rule-setting rather than rule-taking, particularly in areas where global trade governance is fragmented or stalled.

Added value emerges when the partnership moves beyond tariffs toward productive integration. The AU–EU framework can support regional value chains by aligning European investment, trade finance and standards with AfCFTA implementation. This includes supporting cross-border infrastructure, customs modernisation and industrial clustering that allow African firms to scale within the continental market before competing globally.

Another implication concerns regulatory convergence without regulatory capture. The EU's experience in deep integration offers templates in competition policy, digital trade, environmental standards and consumer protection. The added value lies in selective adaptation rather than wholesale transplantation, with AfCFTA providing the filter through which European norms are assessed, sequenced and localised.

The partnership also gains strategic value as a stabiliser of the global trade order. By aligning AfCFTA with WTO principles and embedding sustainability and development considerations, the AU–EU partnership can act as a bridge between multilateral norms and regional realities. This positions both actors as defenders of an open but managed global trading system.

Finally, added value depends on institutionalisation. Regular AU–EU coordination on AfCFTA implementation, joint support platforms involving the UN system, and measurable commitments on technology transfer, skills and local value addition can transform the partnership from a funding relationship into a co-development framework. In this configuration, the AU–EU partnership becomes not only compatible with AfCFTA but a catalyst for its success and for a more balanced global trade architecture.

Global Challenges: UN, AU & EU

The alignment between the EU, the AU and the UN under the third objective rests on a clear division of labour that links political strategy, regional ownership and multilateral execution.

The EU contributes regulatory frameworks, financing capacity and global policy leadership in areas such as climate action, the green transition, health security and food systems. The AU provides political legitimacy, regional coordination and the articulation of African development priorities, ensuring that cooperation reflects continental strategies rather than fragmented national or donor-driven agendas. The UN anchors the partnership in multilateral norms and provides the operational and technical machinery that translates shared objectives into implementable programmes.

In practical terms, the UN aligns EU climate and green transition instruments with African-owned pathways by embedding them in globally agreed frameworks such as the SDGs, the Paris Agreement and international biodiversity and health regimes. This alignment reduces asymmetry by shifting cooperation away from bilateral conditionality toward shared commitments and measurable global targets. It also allows EU resources to be channelled through AU-endorsed plans while maintaining consistency with international standards.

The division of labour becomes particularly important in managing cross-sectoral challenges. UN agencies integrate climate, energy, biodiversity, health and food security into coherent interventions, bridging gaps between EU sectoral funding instruments and AU policy coordination mechanisms. This prevents siloed projects and supports long-term capacity building rather than short-term extraction or crisis management.

Greasing the partnership, the UN also plays a de-risking and convening role. By blending EU finance with multilateral funds and applying UN safeguards on human rights, labour and environmental protection, investments are made more attractive, more predictable and more development-oriented. This helps ensure that technology transfer, local value creation and resilience building remain central outcomes.

At the global level, this alignment enables the EU and AU to act together within UN forums, reinforcing strategic coherence in climate negotiations, global health governance and food system reform. The result is a partnership that operates simultaneously as a political alliance, a development framework and a platform for joint agenda-setting in global governance.

Here's an expanded and UN- and global-institution-focused version of the explanation of the fourth objective, integrating multilateral institutions like the UN system, IMF, G20, WTO, FAO, WFP, and interactions with developed countries:

The fourth objective emphasizes strengthening institutions, governance, and multilateral coordination, not only within Africa but in the context of the broader global system. The AU-EU partnership recognizes that durable development, stability, and Africa's strategic influence require robust continental and regional institutions capable of engaging effectively with international organisations and developed-country partners. Capacity-building for AU institutions and African regional economic communities enhances their ability to design, implement, and monitor policies while coordinating across multiple countries. This includes financial management, regulatory oversight, trade facilitation, and infrastructure governance, ensuring African institutions can meet both domestic and international standards.

Support for democratic governance, the rule of law, and accountable public administration remains central. The partnership provides assistance in strengthening electoral systems, judicial

independence, legislative oversight, anti-corruption frameworks, and human rights monitoring. These measures ensure that African institutions are resilient and credible partners in interregional and global affairs, reducing reliance on ad hoc external interventions.

Multilateral coordination is a core component of this objective. The AU and EU work closely to align positions in international forums, including the UN General Assembly, the Security Council, the G20, the IMF and World Bank boards, the WTO, and specialised UN agencies such as FAO, WFP, WHO, UNDP, UNEP, and UNIDO. This coordination strengthens Africa's voice on issues ranging from trade, finance, climate, and health to food security and energy transition. By negotiating collectively, African states are better positioned to influence global rules and funding allocations while ensuring that European engagement supports development priorities rather than unilateral interests.

The UN system and global financial institutions provide both technical expertise and operational capacity. FAO and WFP contribute to food security programming, emergency response, and agricultural policy development. IMF and World Bank engagement enhances macroeconomic stability, debt management, and financial governance, while the G20 serves as a high-level platform for policy coordination between developed and developing economies. Through these channels, the AU–EU partnership amplifies Africa's strategic leverage, enabling African institutions to interact confidently with developed countries and multilateral organisations.

Another critical aspect is the reinforcement of a rules-based international order. By working jointly in multilateral settings, the AU and EU promote transparency, accountability, and predictable norms, ensuring that global decisions reflect shared interests rather than unilateral advantage. This includes sustainable financing for development, climate finance, trade facilitation, and technology transfer. Strengthened AU institutions, supported through EU capacity-building and UN coordination, can translate global commitments into effective regional programs while ensuring that Africa benefits from participation in global governance, rather than being constrained by it.

Ultimately, this objective links institutional strengthening, governance, and multilateral coordination with Africa's strategic agency. Strong continental institutions allow African states to negotiate and implement policies effectively, while aligned EU–AU engagement in global forums increases Africa's influence in shaping international norms, resource allocation, and development agendas. The integration of UN agencies, global financial institutions, G20 platforms, and developed-country partners ensures that the partnership operates within a coherent, rules-based framework that advances Africa's development priorities and enhances global cooperation.

UNESCO AND AFRICAN UNION

The European Union's proposed €5 billion engagement with Africa can be framed as a UNESCO-oriented strategic policy, designed to foster sustainable development, cultural preservation, interfaith cohesion, and educational advancement. This framework is policy-focused, interoperable, and coherent, with each policy pillar representing an area of strategic

engagement where EU resources and African priorities intersect. Each pillar has clear objectives, indicative allocations, and policy outcomes to guide long-term engagement.

The framework rests on six guiding principles: alignment with UNESCO standards in culture, education, and heritage; promotion of interfaith cohesion between Muslim and Christian communities; sustainability and climate resilience; inclusivity and local ownership; educational and human capital development; and regional balance ensuring interoperability across African states and with other international frameworks. These principles ensure policy coherence, enable cross-pillar synergies, and promote adaptive, evidence-based governance.

Pillars

1. Sustainable Urban Development (Approx. €1.5 Billion)

Objective: Support the design and governance of environmentally resilient, inclusive, and climate-adapted urban centers.

Policy Focus: Integration of green infrastructure, smart urban planning, energy-efficient public transport, and climate-resilient buildings.

Expected Outcomes: Enhanced urban livability, reduced environmental impact, and strengthened local governance capacities, creating a foundation for long-term sustainable city development.

2. Cultural Heritage and Landmarks (Approx. €1.2 Billion)

Objective: Preserve, restore, and sustainably manage African cultural and heritage sites, including UNESCO World Heritage sites, while promoting national and regional identity.

Policy Focus: Heritage site restoration, capacity-building in cultural management, museum development, and digital archiving.

Expected Outcomes: Protection of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, enhanced cultural identity, and support for sustainable heritage-based development.

3. Interfaith Dialogue and Cohesion (Approx. €800 Million)

Objective: Strengthen dialogue, understanding, and cooperation between Muslim and Christian communities to promote social cohesion and stability.

Policy Focus: Interreligious platforms, community-led initiatives, youth engagement, and media campaigns promoting coexistence.

Expected Outcomes: Reduced religious tensions, increased social cohesion, and communities empowered to manage diversity constructively.

4. Educational Development (Approx. €700 Million)

Objective: Build human capital to sustain urban, cultural, and social development policies through formal education, vocational training, and research initiatives.

Policy Focus: Scholarships in heritage preservation, urban planning, and interfaith studies; vocational programs for artisans, urban planners, and cultural managers; digital knowledge-sharing platforms.

Expected Outcomes: Enhanced skills, knowledge transfer, and leadership capacity across African societies, linking education directly to cultural and urban policy goals.

5. Innovation and Cultural Tourism (Approx. €500 Million)

Objective: Promote economic development through creative industries, heritage-driven tourism, and technology-enabled cultural engagement.

Policy Focus: Creative economy initiatives, eco-tourism, cross-border cultural routes, and digital/VR heritage experiences.

Expected Outcomes: Diversified local economies, increased employment opportunities, and sustainable cultural tourism networks.

6. Research, Monitoring, and Governance (Approx. €300 Million)

Objective: Ensure evidence-based, coherent, and accountable policy interventions through monitoring, research, and adaptive governance.

Policy Focus: Studies on social cohesion, urban resilience, and cultural impact; development of monitoring and evaluation frameworks; policy coordination with African Union and UNESCO mechanisms.

Expected Outcomes: Coherent and interoperable policy implementation, informed decision-making, and sustainable governance frameworks supporting all other pillars.

Cross-Pillar Coherence and Interoperability

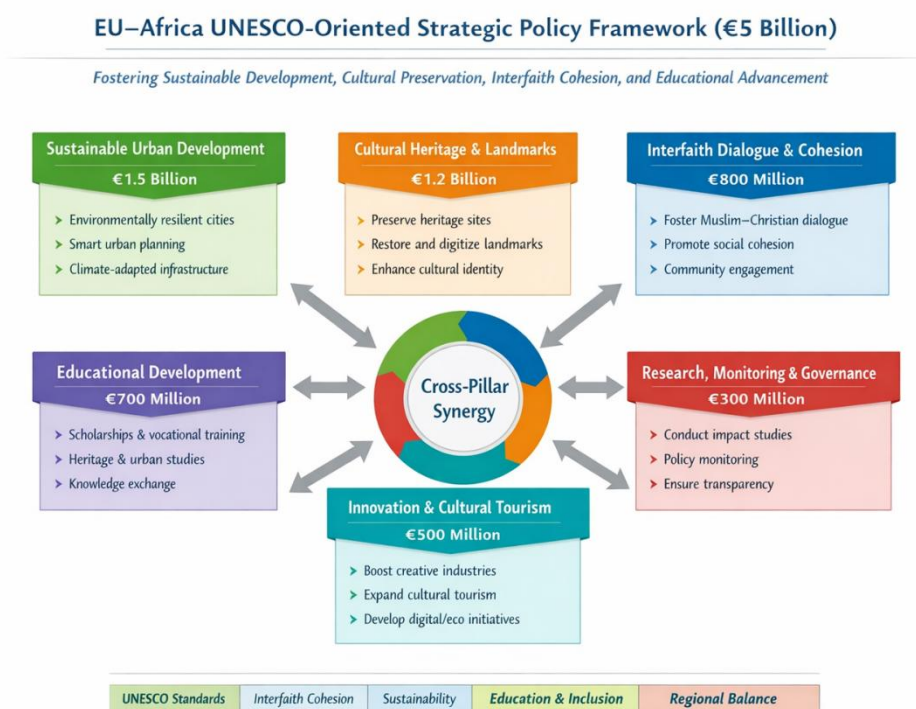
The six pillars are mutually reinforcing. Educational initiatives underpin urban planning, heritage management, and interfaith dialogue. Cultural preservation supports tourism and economic development. Interfaith engagement strengthens social stability, which in turn enables sustainable urban growth. Research and governance provide the analytical and institutional backbone to ensure that EU support is coherent, interoperable, and aligned with African and UNESCO priorities, allowing adaptive responses to evolving societal, environmental, and cultural challenges.

Through this structured, pillar-based approach, the EU–Africa framework is expected to generate multi-dimensional impacts. Socially, it fosters tolerance, dialogue, and cohesion across religious and cultural communities. Environmentally, it enhances urban resilience and sustainability. Culturally, it safeguards African heritage and strengthens regional identity. Educationally, it builds a skilled workforce capable of sustaining development across multiple

domains. Economically, it supports heritage-driven tourism, creative industries, and local enterprise development. By combining policy coherence with strategic allocation and clear objectives, the framework ensures that EU engagement is both impactful and sustainable.

The infographic represents the EU–Africa UNESCO-oriented strategic policy framework, designed as a coherent and interoperable structure for long-term engagement across multiple areas of African development. It emphasizes six pillars, each addressing a different domain but all interconnected to support sustainable, social, and cultural outcomes. At the center of the framework is the idea of cross-pillar synergy, which reflects that each pillar is not isolated. Educational development, for example, supports urban planning, heritage management, and interfaith dialogue by building the skills and knowledge needed to sustain these areas. Similarly, cultural heritage preservation reinforces innovation and tourism, creating economic opportunities while strengthening identity and cohesion.

Figure



The sustainable urban development pillar focuses on creating climate-resilient and inclusive cities with smart infrastructure and planning, recognizing the scale and importance of Africa's urban growth. Cultural heritage and landmarks are central to identity and social cohesion, so this pillar emphasizes the preservation, restoration, and digitization of sites while strengthening local capacities for cultural management. Interfaith dialogue and cohesion promote understanding and cooperation between Muslim and Christian communities, reducing tensions and building more peaceful societies. Educational development strengthens human capital, providing the skills needed to sustain initiatives across all other pillars. Innovation and cultural tourism link heritage and creative industries to economic development, encouraging cultural tourism, eco-tourism, and digital heritage initiatives. Research, monitoring, and governance

provide the foundation for evidence-based policy, accountability, and coordination across all areas.

The infographic also uses color coding to reflect the underlying principles of UNESCO standards, interfaith cohesion, sustainability, education and inclusion, and regional balance. This reinforces that the framework is policy-oriented and strategically guided rather than project-focused, emphasizing coherence, interoperability, and long-term outcomes. Overall, the framework shows how EU engagement can advance sustainable cities, preserve cultural heritage, foster social cohesion, develop human capital, promote economic innovation, and strengthen governance, all in a way that aligns with African priorities and UNESCO's global mandates.

The Green Wall Initiative

The Great Green Wall Initiative is an ambitious African-led effort to combat desertification, land degradation, and climate change across the Sahel region by restoring 100 million hectares of degraded land, creating millions of jobs, and improving food security and resilience. Launched by the African Union and supported by partners including the World Bank, the initiative combines environmental restoration, community development, and climate adaptation. The World Bank contributes primarily through financing, technical assistance, capacity-building, and monitoring frameworks. It channels resources via climate and environmental funds, such as the Green Climate Fund, the Global Environment Facility, and blended financing mechanisms. In addition, the Bank provides analytical tools to assess impact, develop investment plans, and integrate GGWI activities into broader national and regional development strategies.

Reviewing the initiative and defining success criteria requires integrating environmental, social, economic, and governance dimensions. Environmental outcomes include hectares restored, vegetation cover increased, soil quality improved, biodiversity conserved, and carbon sequestration measured. Social outcomes involve the creation of local employment, community engagement, gender inclusion, and strengthened resilience to climate shocks. Economic outcomes are measured through productivity gains in agriculture and pastoralism, sustainable livelihoods, and stronger local economies. Governance outcomes focus on strengthened local institutions, effective land tenure frameworks, cross-border coordination, and transparent use of funds. Success criteria should be co-created with recipient countries, reflecting national development plans, community priorities, and regional coordination mechanisms. Clear baselines, measurable indicators, and realistic timelines are essential, while mid-term evaluations and adaptive management frameworks allow for course corrections and ensure progress is tangible and verifiable.

Recipient countries in the Sahel face multiple, overlapping vulnerabilities, including fragile governance, insecure land tenure systems, poverty, climate variability, and conflicts over natural resources. Their needs encompass technical capacity for land restoration and ecosystem management, financing to implement and sustain large-scale projects, policy frameworks that align GGWI with national development, agriculture, and climate strategies, institutional support for cross-border coordination, monitoring, and reporting, and inclusive approaches that integrate local communities, particularly women and youth.

Figure



Despite political commitment, several structural and operational barriers make it difficult to move forward. Large-scale restoration requires sustained, multi-year financing, and funding gaps often delay implementation. Limited administrative capacity, weak monitoring systems, and fragmented governance structures hinder coordination. Unclear or contested land ownership slows project rollout and can create potential conflicts. Instability and conflict in the Sahel disrupt activities, endanger communities, and limit mobility of technical teams. Multiple stakeholders, including national governments, regional institutions, local communities, donors, and the private sector, create complexity in planning and implementation. Degraded soils, erratic rainfall, and climate shocks make ecological restoration unpredictable, and technical expertise in large-scale reforestation, sustainable agriculture, and ecosystem management is unevenly distributed.

To move forward, the partnership among the AU, World Bank, bilateral donors, and local governments should prioritize integrated, landscape-level planning that aligns restoration with agriculture, energy, and water management. Strengthening institutional capacity at local, national, and regional levels with clear roles and accountability is essential. Blended finance mechanisms combining grants, concessional loans, and private-sector investment are critical to ensure sustainability. Adaptive management and participatory monitoring should be embedded to adjust activities based on environmental and social feedback. Security-sensitive planning and community-based approaches help mitigate conflict-related risks. Aligning GGWI with national development priorities, regional trade, and climate resilience agendas maximizes synergies and long-term sustainability.

By integrating these elements, the Great Green Wall can be evaluated not only on environmental restoration but also on its capacity to deliver resilient livelihoods, strengthen governance, and foster regional development, while taking into account the complex political, ecological, and social realities of the Sahel.

The Great Green Wall Initiative is an African-led effort to combat desertification and land degradation across the Sahel, supported by the African Union and the World Bank through financing, technical assistance, and capacity-building. It aims to restore degraded land, improve food security, create jobs, and enhance climate resilience. Success is measured across environmental, social, economic, and governance dimensions, including restored hectares, local employment, sustainable livelihoods, and strengthened institutions. Recipient countries face challenges such as fragile governance, insecure land tenure, poverty, climate variability, and regional conflicts, which complicate implementation. Funding gaps, weak institutional capacity, fragmented coordination, and technical knowledge shortages slow progress. Land tenure disputes and security risks further constrain project rollout and community participation. Integrated landscape planning, adaptive management, and blended financing can help overcome these barriers while ensuring sustainability. Aligning the initiative with national development strategies and regional priorities maximizes its relevance and long-term impact. The partnership also strengthens Africa's engagement with global institutions like the UN, IMF, G20, FAO, and WFP, amplifying its influence and access to resources. Ultimately, the initiative is a test of combining environmental restoration, resilient livelihoods, and institutional strengthening within a complex political and ecological context.

World Food Program and AU Partnership

Hunger in Africa remains a persistent and deepening crisis. According to recent estimates, over **300 million people** on the continent face food insecurity, with millions experiencing acute malnutrition. The problem has worsened in recent years due to a combination of **climate shocks, protracted conflicts, economic fragility, and governance challenges**. Droughts, floods, and desertification undermine agricultural production, while violent conflicts displace populations, disrupt markets, and limit access to basic services. On top of this, economic shocks, including inflation, unemployment, and disrupted supply chains, have further reduced households' ability to afford or access food. The COVID-19 pandemic and global economic turbulence, including rising commodity prices and logistical bottlenecks, have also amplified these pressures.

Addressing hunger in Africa requires not only emergency food assistance but also **systemic approaches** that enhance agricultural resilience, strengthen local markets, and improve governance. The partnership between the **World Food Programme (WFP) and the African Union (AU)** offers a promising platform for such a multi-layered response. By combining the WFP's operational expertise in logistics, emergency response, and food distribution with the AU's continental mandate, political influence, and coordination mechanisms, this partnership could improve early-warning systems, streamline humanitarian access in conflict zones, and facilitate regional food security initiatives. It could also support investment in climate-resilient agriculture, cross-border trade in staple foods, and social safety nets, thus moving beyond short-term relief toward **sustainable food security solutions**.

A strengthened WFP–AU partnership could also enhance policy coherence by aligning humanitarian interventions with broader continental strategies, such as the **AU's Agenda 2063**, and mobilize international resources in a coordinated manner. This collaborative approach has the potential to not only **ameliorate immediate hunger crises** but also address the structural vulnerabilities that have caused the situation to deteriorate over time.

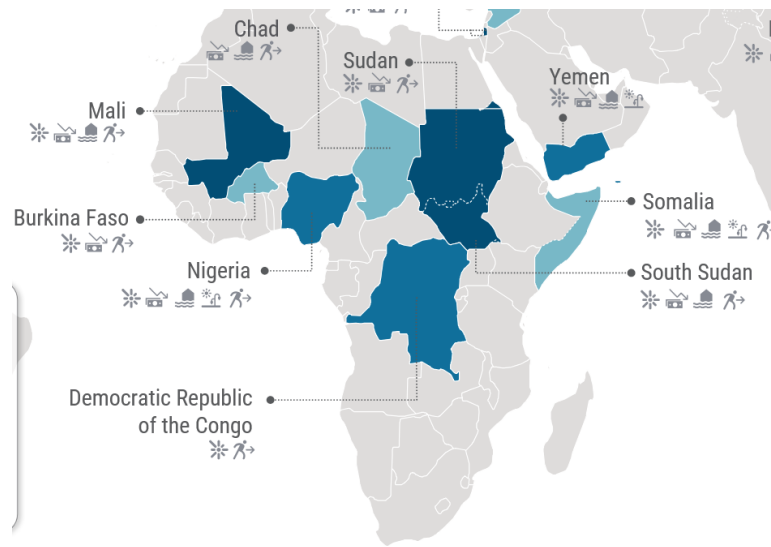
To explain and shed light on the phenomenon of hunger in Africa, it helps to approach it as a **multi-dimensional and systemic issue**, rather than simply as a matter of food scarcity. The goal is to show both the scale of the problem and the interlocking factors that drive it. Here's a framework you can use:

Hunger in Africa is a **complex and persistent crisis** affecting hundreds of millions of people. It is not solely caused by a lack of food but emerges from the **interaction of structural, environmental, economic, and political factors**. Structurally, many African countries face weak governance, limited social protection systems, and underinvestment in agriculture, which constrain food production and equitable distribution. Environmentally, the continent is increasingly exposed to climate shocks—droughts, floods, desertification—that reduce harvests and undermine livelihoods. Economically, inflation, unemployment, and disrupted trade exacerbate households' inability to access sufficient food. Politically, conflicts and insecurity displace populations, disrupt markets, and make humanitarian access difficult, creating pockets of extreme vulnerability.

The phenomenon of hunger is also **dynamic**, with periods of relative stability often masking underlying fragilities. Crises can re-emerge rapidly due to natural disasters, conflict flare-ups, or global economic shocks, which is why hunger in Africa has often gone from bad to worse in recent years. Understanding hunger in this way highlights the need for **integrated, multi-level responses**—combining emergency relief with structural reforms in agriculture, climate adaptation, governance, and social protection.

Partnerships such as those between the **World Food Programme (WFP) and the African Union (AU)** can shed light on effective solutions by combining operational capacity with political coordination. By targeting both immediate food insecurity and underlying vulnerabilities, such collaborations demonstrate how hunger is not only a humanitarian problem but also a **development, security, and governance issue** that intersects with broader regional stability.

Figure Africa remains the global hotspot for Hunger



Source: <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/3e7b0225-ee6e-44c0-93f7-57f53f5a8e61/content>

According to FAO and WFP's early-warning reports, many parts of Africa (including **Sudan, South Sudan, Mali, Chad, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and others**) are classified as hunger hotspots because **multiple overlapping risk factors** are driving food insecurity upward. Conflict and violence are cited as the *primary* drivers in the majority of these hotspots, disrupting food systems, displacing populations, and blocking humanitarian access. Economic shocks such as high food prices and inflation further reduce households' ability to access or afford food. In addition, climate-related extremes — including droughts, floods, and irregular rainfall patterns associated with climate phenomena like La Niña — undermine crop and livestock production, putting further pressure on already fragile food systems. These factors combine and reinforce one another, creating a *multi-dimensional* crisis rather than a single cause of hunger.

FAO's hunger hotspots analysis also highlights **countervailing forces** that can help prevent further deterioration of food insecurity, which mirror the same structural domains where drivers operate. One of the strongest of these is **anticipatory and targeted humanitarian action** — scaled-up food assistance, emergency nutrition programs, and support for local agricultural inputs — to protect lives and livelihoods before conditions worsen further. Strengthened **early-warning systems**, backed by integrated climate risk monitoring, can help governments and partners act ahead of shocks rather than reacting after they occur. Coordinating international support through mechanisms like the Global Network Against Food Crises helps resource allocation and programming across actors, while embedding food security and resilience measures into broader development and governance frameworks can address underlying vulnerabilities in agrifood systems. In some regions, improvements in climatic conditions have already contributed to better food security outcomes, illustrating how climate-resilient agricultural practices and improved weather patterns can function as a stabilizing force.

In short, FAO's hunger hotspot analysis shows that hotspots arise where *conflict, economic instability and climate shocks coincide*, and that the most effective countervailing responses blend **targeted humanitarian assistance, early action, resilient food systems, and coordinated international partnerships** to reduce vulnerability and avert catastrophic hunger.

A targeted approach would encompass interventions that prioritize the **most vulnerable populations and regions**, combining immediate relief with long-term resilience-building measures. This would include precise identification of communities facing acute food insecurity, tailored delivery of emergency rations, and integration of nutrition programs for children, pregnant women, and other at-risk groups. At the same time, it would address structural factors by supporting climate-resilient agriculture, improving local market access, and strengthening social protection systems. Coordination between the **WFP, the AU, and regional actors** would ensure that aid reaches those in greatest need while avoiding duplication and inefficiencies, creating a continuum between humanitarian relief, recovery, and sustainable development. Such a strategy would not only alleviate immediate hunger but also reduce the likelihood of future crises, reinforcing the stability of vulnerable regions and households.

Translating Structural Causes into Continental Solutions: AU, AfCFTA, and EU-AU

The persistence of warlordism, state fragility, and economic underdevelopment in Africa reveals a central lesson: security, political authority, and economic transformation cannot be treated separately. Fragmented interventions reproduce the very conditions they seek to resolve. The African Union's contemporary governance architecture—particularly the Peace and Security Council (PSC), Agenda 2063, and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)—represents an attempt to address these problems at their structural roots by re-scaling governance from fragile national units to the continental level.

At the level of peace and security, the AU's approach directly responds to the historical weakness of postcolonial state authority. Warlordism thrives where states lack territorial reach, fiscal capacity, and legitimacy. The PSC and the wider African Peace and Security Architecture implicitly recognize that African states cannot always monopolize violence individually, but can do so collectively. By authorizing regional and continental responses to crises, the AU seeks to replace fragmented coercion with coordinated authority. This does not eliminate non-state armed actors overnight, but it reduces their strategic space by limiting cross-border sanctuaries, disrupting war economies, and reinforcing norms against unconstitutional violence. In this sense, continental security governance is not a substitute for state-building, but a scaffold that stabilizes fragile states while institutions mature.

However, security alone cannot dismantle warlord systems that are economically rational. This is where AfCFTA becomes structurally decisive. Historically, African economies were externally oriented, fragmented, and dependent on extractive rents—conditions that made war economies viable and attractive. AfCFTA directly targets this legacy by attempting to rebuild Africa as a single economic space, expanding internal markets, reducing border frictions, and incentivizing production rather than extraction. If successfully implemented, AfCFTA weakens the political economy of warlordism by shifting value creation away from controlling territory or resources and toward participating in formal trade, logistics, and manufacturing

networks. In other words, AfCFTA attacks the economic foundations of armed predation, not just its symptoms.

Crucially, continental economic integration also addresses state fragility by altering the logic of sovereignty. Instead of fragile states competing in isolation, AfCFTA embeds them in rule-based continental frameworks that reduce transaction costs, stabilize expectations, and attract investment. This creates incentives for governments to improve customs administration, legal certainty, and infrastructure—core components of state capacity. Over time, economic integration thus becomes a tool of political stabilization, not merely growth.

The EU–AU partnership fits into this architecture most effectively when it aligns with these continental logics rather than bypassing them. Historically, external engagement has often reinforced fragility by privileging bilateralism, short-term stabilization, or project-based aid disconnected from African institutional authority. A reoriented EU–AU partnership, grounded in interregionalism, can instead reinforce African ownership of security and development pathways. In peace and security, this means aligning EU support with PSC decisions, AU-led missions, and regional security strategies rather than parallel initiatives. In economic terms, it means supporting AfCFTA implementation through infrastructure, regulatory convergence, and industrial partnerships that strengthen African value chains instead of extracting raw materials.

From a structural perspective, the AU–AfCFTA–EU nexus offers something historically absent in Africa’s engagement with global systems: scale, predictability, and institutional continuity. Warlordism and fragility persist where authority is fragmented and economic horizons are short. Continental governance expands the scale of authority; AfCFTA lengthens economic time horizons; and interregional partnerships can stabilize financing and external demand without undermining sovereignty.

In sum, Africa’s contemporary continental architecture represents a historically informed response to deep-rooted structural problems. The AU addresses the security externalities that fragile states cannot manage alone. AfCFTA restructures the political economy that has sustained conflict and underdevelopment. A properly aligned EU–AU partnership can reinforce both by supporting African-led institutions rather than substituting for them. Together, these frameworks offer a pathway away from warlordism and fragility—not through imposed state models, but through continental integration that restores the link between authority, legitimacy, and economic opportunity.

Partnering-up with Africa

Partnering up in the African geopolitical landscape means building cooperation that is realistic, mutually beneficial, and aligned with the structural forces shaping the continent. Because Africa’s conflicts, resources, and strategic position are so diverse, partnership cannot be one dimensional. It must be built on shared interests, not charity; on predictability, not improvisation; and on co ownership, not asymmetry. The AU–EU relationship is the clearest example of how this can work when both sides commit to long term alignment rather than short term crisis management.

A functional partnership begins with recognising that Africa's geopolitical conflicts—territorial disputes, resource competition, state fragility, and external power rivalry—cannot be addressed in isolation. They are interconnected, and so the partnership must be as well. Europe brings regulatory power, investment, technology, and institutional experience. Africa brings demographic dynamism, critical minerals, strategic geography, and growing political agency. When these assets are combined deliberately, the partnership becomes more than a donor–recipient relationship; it becomes a strategic alliance.

The first step is aligning priorities. Africa's core interests are industrialisation, infrastructure, governance strengthening, and regional integration through the AfCFTA. Europe's interests are supply chain resilience, energy diversification, migration stability, and neighbourhood security. These agendas overlap far more than they diverge. A partnership works when both sides acknowledge this overlap and build joint strategies rather than parallel ones.

The second step is building trust through predictable frameworks. Africa needs reliable financing for infrastructure, peace operations, and industrial development. Europe needs predictable governance, regulatory alignment, and stable political environments. Instruments like Global Gateway, AfCFTA implementation, and AU security reform can only succeed if they are embedded in long term commitments rather than ad hoc deals.

The third step is co industrialisation, especially in minerals, energy, and manufacturing. Africa cannot remain a raw material exporter, and Europe cannot secure its green transition without African inputs. Joint processing, shared technology, and regional value chains—especially through North Africa as a connector—create a partnership where both sides gain strategic advantage.

The fourth step is shared management of mobility and security. Migration becomes manageable when legal pathways, skills partnerships, and regional mobility systems are strengthened. Security becomes sustainable when African institutions lead, European support is predictable, and both sides coordinate politically rather than reacting to crises.

The final step is embracing Africa's geopolitical centrality. As global powers compete for influence, Africa has more diplomatic leverage than ever. A strong AU–EU partnership protects African agency while giving Europe a stable, cooperative neighbourhood. It also prevents external actors from exploiting fragmentation or weak governance.

In essence, partnering up requires a shift from transactional exchanges to strategic interdependence. Africa and Europe succeed together when they treat each other as long term partners whose futures are intertwined, not as actors solving isolated problems.

The UN, EU AU Peace and Security Partnership

To develop and deepen the relationship between the European Union, the African Union, and the United Nations in a changing world order, the partnership needs to move from coordination to genuine co-production of global governance. The EU can enrich this triangle by consciously shifting its role from agenda-setter to system-builder, helping align regional and global institutions around shared priorities rather than parallel initiatives.

A first pillar is the consolidation of shared strategic priorities around people, planet, prosperity, and peace. These should not function as rhetorical umbrellas but as jointly defined operational domains where AU priorities and UN global mandates shape EU instruments. This implies embedding AU development, climate, and peace agendas directly into EU external action and ensuring UN frameworks such as the SDGs and peacebuilding architecture serve as common reference points rather than external benchmarks.

A second pillar is science- and evidence-based cooperation. Building on the JRC's work on the AU-EU partnership, the three organisations should institutionalise shared data ecosystems, foresight capacities, and joint analytical units on climate risk, food systems, health security, migration, and urbanisation. This would reduce asymmetries in knowledge production and allow African institutions to shape problem definitions, not just policy responses, while anchoring decisions in globally comparable evidence aligned with UN standards.

A third pillar concerns institutional harmonisation and role clarity. The AU–EU partnership should be structurally linked to UN planning and coordination mechanisms, particularly in peace operations, development finance, and humanitarian response. Clear division of labour—AU as regional political anchor, EU as financial and regulatory power, and UN as global legitimising and coordinating authority—would reduce duplication and strengthen collective impact, especially in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

A fourth pillar is capacity and sovereignty-enhancing cooperation. Rather than project-based capacity building, the focus should be on long-term institutional strengthening of AU organs, regional economic communities, and African statistical, regulatory, and research bodies. This aligns with the EU's interest in a more capable African partner and with the UN's emphasis on nationally and regionally owned development pathways.

A fifth pillar lies in joint positioning within global governance reform. The EU, AU, and UN can act as a coordinated bloc in debates on climate finance, development banks, debt relief, digital governance, and peace and security reform. Supporting stronger African representation in global institutions is not only normatively consistent with UN principles but strategically necessary for a more balanced and stable multipolar order.

Finally, the partnership must be underpinned by a reframed narrative of equality and mutual dependence. A harmonised EU–AU–UN relationship should explicitly recognise Africa as a co-architect of global solutions, not a theatre of intervention. This narrative shift is essential for legitimacy, trust, and long-term strategic alignment in an increasingly fragmented international system.

Taken together, these elements point toward a mature trilateral partnership that is less transactional, more institutional, and better equipped to manage global interdependence in a contested world order.

RENVOI

The African-European partnership is a process of strain, inversion and sacrifice, comparable with the contorsion and upendedness trapped in a wheel where escape is not possible and where only our empathic observation of the continents struggles as it comes to terms with forces larger

than itself. The African Union is very much complicit in the African nation's transformation through pressure, release through damage and escape that costs identity or form.

The logic of the exitus from colonialism – the PSC - is that there is no painless way out. You don't leave intact Africa but shaken and at the same time imbued by a sense of awe at the connection to nature and shock at the squalor and occasional encounter with ancient civilisations...and by that we mean a continent whose strength does not lie in restoration but in transformation.

Reconfiguration refers to Africa's capacity to reorder inherited structures rather than replicate them: to bend colonial borders into lived geographies, to turn imposed institutions into hybrid forms of governance, and to translate disruption into social and political creativity. It is visible in the way communities adapt state authority to local realities, in the coexistence of formal and informal economies, and in political orders that function despite—sometimes because of—their apparent fragility. Africa's greatness does not emerge from the illusion of a return to a precolonial wholeness or a seamless integration into external models, but from its ongoing ability to reassemble itself under pressure, to absorb shocks, and to generate new equilibria out of rupture. This is the logic of the post-colonial condition: unfinished, uneven, often painful, yet profoundly generative—demanding not pity or prescription, but respect, patience, and serious engagement.

It helps in this context to recall W.E.B. Du Bois' account of Africa's role in world history, which decisively unsettles any view of the continent as peripheral or derivative. For Du Bois, Africa was never outside history; it was constitutive of it. In *The World and Africa*, he insists that modernity itself—European wealth, industrialization, and global power—cannot be understood without Africa's labour, resources, and enforced incorporation into the world economy. Africa's apparent "backwardness" was not a natural condition but the historical outcome of systematic extraction and exclusion.

Read through Du Bois, Africa's postcolonial reconfiguration appears not as failure but as historical reckoning. The continent emerges as a central arena where the contradictions of global capitalism, empire, and racial hierarchy are laid bare and contested. This perspective reframes the postcolonial moment: Africa is not catching up to history, but re-entering it on its own terms, bearing the accumulated costs of having long been made to carry the weight of others' progress. Du Bois thus invites us to see Africa's struggle and creativity as world-historical forces—shaping, and not merely responding to, the evolving global order.

Africa shapes the global order itself, not only materially but normatively—through both objectives it advances and values it projects, often forged under conditions of constraint.

Objectively, Africa shapes the world by structuring access to critical resources and future growth. It anchors global supply chains for minerals essential to energy transition and digitalisation, hosts the fastest-growing population and labour force, and sits astride key maritime and continental corridors linking the Atlantic, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean, and Red Sea. Africa also shapes global security agendas: peace operations, counter-terrorism, migration governance, and climate adaptation are increasingly designed around African theatres and African agency. Through collective institutions such as the AU and AfCFTA, Africa is also

shaping new models of regional integration that privilege flexibility, gradualism, and political sovereignty over rigid legalism.

In terms of values, Africa contributes a distinct political and ethical grammar to world affairs. It advances a relational understanding of sovereignty—one that balances non-interference with solidarity, as seen in African norms on unconstitutional changes of government and peace support operations. It foregrounds dignity, historical justice, and equality in global governance, insisting that development, security, and climate responsibility be understood through the lens of historical contribution and distributive fairness. Africa's diplomatic practice often favours mediation, inclusion, and consensus over coercion, reflecting social traditions of negotiated authority rather than absolute rule.

Taken together, Africa shapes a world order that is less hierarchical, more plural, and more historically conscious. Its objectives push the system toward material rebalancing; its values challenge the moral foundations of global governance. In this sense, Africa does not merely adapt to global change—it redefines what legitimacy, partnership, and progress mean in a post-colonial, multipolar world



For to ask what it means to be African is to move away from fixed definitions and toward a lived, plural condition. Being African is not a singular identity but an aggregation of histories, cultures, languages, and experiences that resist reduction to one narrative. It is shaped by immense diversity, where belonging is expressed through everyday practices, social bonds, artistic expression, and a deep sense of place rather than through uniform political or cultural markers. At the same time, being African carries a strong historical consciousness. It is inseparable from the knowledge that Africa has been central to world history—from the origins of humanity to the making of modern global wealth—yet has often been written into global narratives through absence, distortion, or instrumentalisation.

This tension produces an identity that is both grounded in pride and marked by struggle: pride in cultural richness and continuity, and struggle against inherited inequalities and external misrepresentations.

To be African also means living with resilience as a social condition rather than a slogan. Resilience here is not passive endurance but an active capacity to adapt, reconfigure, and create meaning under pressure. It is visible in the coexistence of tradition and modernity, in hybrid political and social forms, and in the ability to sustain community and dignity amid material hardship. This resilience underpins a growing insistence on self-definition—on narrating Africa and Africanness from within rather than accepting externally imposed frames.

Ultimately, being African is relational. It is about connection: to land, to community, to history, and increasingly to a global world in which Africa is not peripheral but entangled. It is an

identity in motion, shaped by memory and aspiration alike, defined less by what Africa has been made to endure than by how Africans continue to imagine, negotiate, and assert their place in the world.

Conclusion: Partnership as a Test of Europe's Global Maturity

Africa's rising geopolitical significance has fundamentally altered the nature, scope, and expectations of the European Union–African Union (EU–AU) partnership. Long framed primarily through development cooperation, humanitarian assistance, and post-colonial responsibility, Africa is now increasingly recognised as a strategic continent central to global power redistribution. Rapid demographic growth, accelerating urbanisation, expanding middle classes, and the emergence of large integrated markets under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) have positioned Africa as a future centre of global demand and production. Simultaneously, Africa's possession of critical raw materials essential for the green and digital transitions—such as cobalt, lithium, rare earths, and strategic agricultural inputs—has made the continent indispensable to Europe's long-term economic security.

Beyond economics, Africa's geopolitical relevance is reinforced by its centrality to global security dynamics. The Sahel, the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Guinea have become key theatres for counter-terrorism, maritime security, energy transit, and great-power competition. African votes in multilateral forums, including the United Nations General Assembly, have also gained heightened importance in a fragmented international system. As a result, African states increasingly act as strategic brokers rather than passive recipients of external agendas. This growing agency has reshaped the EU–AU partnership into a relationship marked by negotiation, contestation, and selective alignment rather than unilateral policy transfer.

For the EU, this shift has necessitated a reorientation of its Africa policy from normative leadership toward strategic engagement. Initiatives such as the renewed Joint Africa–EU Strategy and the Global Gateway reflect attempts to respond to Africa's geopolitical centrality by combining infrastructure investment, connectivity, and political dialogue. However, the rapid elevation of Africa's strategic importance has also exposed contradictions within EU policy: while partnership rhetoric has intensified, institutional practices and funding mechanisms often continue to reflect asymmetric power relations inherited from earlier development paradigms.

Despite the formal framing of the EU–AU relationship as a partnership of equals, structural asymmetries remain deeply embedded and continue to shape patterns of cooperation. These asymmetries operate across several dimensions. Economically, the EU remains vastly more diversified, industrialised, and financially capable, while many African economies remain dependent on commodity exports and external financing. Institutionally, the EU functions as a highly consolidated regulatory power with strong supranational mechanisms, whereas the African Union, though increasingly ambitious, remains constrained by limited fiscal autonomy and uneven implementation capacity among its member states.

Financial asymmetry is particularly significant. The AU relies heavily on external donors—including the EU—for its operational budget, peace and security activities, and development

programs. This dependence limits African strategic autonomy and reinforces donor-driven agenda-setting. Politically, this translates into cooperation frameworks where EU priorities—such as migration control, border management, counter-terrorism, and regulatory alignment—often take precedence over African priorities related to industrialisation, employment generation, and structural transformation.

These asymmetries have practical consequences for cooperation. Policy dialogue is frequently shaped by conditionality, benchmarking, and compliance mechanisms that position the EU as evaluator rather than co-strategist. While this approach may deliver short-term outputs, it undermines long-term ownership and institutional learning on the African side. Moreover, it generates frustration among African policymakers, who increasingly perceive the partnership as rhetorically egalitarian but operationally hierarchical. Over time, this mismatch erodes trust and reduces the EU's credibility as a strategic partner.

To foster genuine partnerships with African states, the EU must undertake a qualitative shift in both mindset and practice. This requires abandoning the residual donor–recipient logic and embracing Africa as a strategic actor with its own priorities, constraints, and internal diversity. A central element of this recalibration involves aligning EU engagement more systematically with African-led frameworks, particularly Agenda 2063 and the AfCFTA, rather than treating them as symbolic reference points.

Practically, this implies moving from project-based cooperation toward shared strategic planning and co-design. EU instruments should prioritise long-term investments in productive capacity, regional value chains, and industrial ecosystems, even where short-term returns are uncertain. Supporting African industrial policy, infrastructure corridors, and skills development—rather than focusing narrowly on regulatory reforms—would signal a commitment to structural transformation. At the same time, differentiated partnerships that reflect Africa's internal diversity are essential; a one-size-fits-all continental approach risks obscuring regional and national specificities.

EU–Africa trade complexity demands close coordination between EEAS political oversight and DG INTPA technical implementation to avoid fragmentation and conflicting incentives. Differentiated governance types in African countries require tailored engagement approaches, balancing national, regional, and continental priorities. LDCs and low-capacity states necessitate additional capacity-building, compliance monitoring, and development alignment. The AU must harmonize multi-bilateral agreements, mediate between member states, and ensure alignment with AfCFTA and continental industrial, climate, and infrastructure goals. Integrated EU–AU bureaucratic processes—joint monitoring, shared reporting, and coordinated task forces—are essential for synchronizing trade, technical assistance, and regulatory enforcement. Awareness of external actors, such as the US and China, requires adaptive coordination to preserve EU standards while reinforcing African agency.

Institutionally, fostering genuine partnership requires greater African agency in decision-making processes. This includes joint agenda-setting, flexible financing modalities, and a willingness on the EU side to accept African-defined sequencing of reforms. Reducing policy conditionality in non-normative sectors and extending planning horizons beyond electoral and budgetary cycles would further strengthen trust. Ultimately, a partnership rooted in mutual

strategic interest rather than asymmetrical management would enhance both effectiveness and legitimacy.

Why has the African Union and AUPSC opted to enact a Great Power concert ?

First, Africa hosts a growing array of global powers—such as the United States, China, Russia, EU states, India, and Gulf actors—whose interests often compete on the continent. A coordinated frame work allows African states to manage these interactions collectively, rather than leaving individual countries to be drawn into bilateral dependence or rivalry.

Second, a concert of great powers can help the AU safeguard African interests, ensuring that continental priorities—like resource sovereignty, infrastructure development, and conflict mediation—are aligned with AU-defined objectives rather than dictated by external agendas.

Third, involving multiple global powers in a structured dialogue can enhance conflict prevention and mediation. It reduces the risk of proxy wars and escalation in hotspots such as the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, or eastern DRC, while ensuring that interventions respect African mechanisms like the AUPSC.

Fourth, a coordinated approach allows African states to leverage global resources—including expertise, funding, and technology—more efficiently, while reducing destructive competition among foreign actors.

Fifth, it strengthens African strategic autonomy by allowing the continent to set terms of engagement, prioritize issues, and mediate between competing powers, ensuring that Africa is an active participant rather than a passive arena.

Sixth, the concert provides a mechanism for norm-building and accountability, encouraging foreign powers to respect AU principles on human rights, conflict resolution, and economic cooperation.

Seventh, it draws on historical precedent, echoing the European 19th-century “Concert of Powers,” signaling Africa’s desire to institutionalize multilateral diplomacy and balance influence on the continent.

Eighth, in a multipolar world, this approach ensures that Africa negotiates as a continent, rather than as a collection of fragmented states, preventing marginalization or exploitation by competing global powers.

Above all, many African states lack the capabilities, technical expertise, and seed capital needed to modernize their societies. Many of its elites are reluctant to empower or bind themselves to reforms that would enable African nations to move forward collectively. The AU and AUPSC aim to reduce conflicts by developing regional mechanisms capable of addressing the continent’s multiple and overlapping crises, promoting stability through coordinated intervention and development.

For this reason, we recommend that the EU devote time to carefully analyzing the dynamics at play within the African Peace and Security architecture, as well as the interests and stakes that

post-colonial AU member states assign to its functioning in order to better partner up. The EU must take stronger measures to support and enhance the governance of the African Union Peace and Security Council (AUPSC), ensuring its institutional capacity, decision-making processes, and operational effectiveness are reinforced.

Egypt, Nigeria, South Africa, the DRC, Ethiopia, Niger, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania each approach the AUPSC differently, reflecting their geography, security concerns, and political ambitions, ranging from military-driven intervention to diplomacy and preventive mediation. These differences shape the council's effectiveness and highlight the need for coordinated support and capacity-building across member states. To strengthen AU partnerships, the EU and other international actors should align assistance with African priorities, enhance operational readiness, and support institutional and financial mechanisms that reinforce African-led peace and security initiatives.

Technical assistance and capacity-building programs could provide training, expertise, and technology transfer to strengthen governance, planning, and administrative capabilities of AU institutions and member states. Financial support and seed capital mechanisms should establish dedicated funding streams, grants, or revolving funds to finance modernization projects, infrastructure, and peacekeeping operations. Incentives for elite commitment, such as performance-based support, recognition, or conditional development aid, can encourage elites to adopt reforms and uphold collective African priorities. Regional conflict early warning systems can be developed and enhanced to detect, prevent, and respond to emerging crises rapidly. Joint diplomatic and mediation platforms can facilitate structured multilateral dialogue, negotiation frameworks, and mediation networks to address disputes and coordinate interventions among member states. Strategic partnerships with international and regional actors, including the EU, UN, and regional economic communities, can provide technical, financial, and logistical support aligned with African-led priorities. Peacekeeping force enhancement, through training, equipment, and operational coordination, can enable faster and more effective responses to crises. Knowledge sharing and best practices networks can promote continental platforms for exchanging lessons learned, research, and innovative approaches to governance, development, and conflict resolution.

This contrasts with the extraversion thesis that posits the elites are seeking alliances on extraction to enrich themselves and bypass popular wishes, with the neo-patrimonial thesis emphasizing governance through patronage networks where voters are bought and societies governed via mutually benefitting forms of solidarity, and with the subaltern realist school emphasizing domestic security and stability rather than balance of power are what the local elites, above all, crave. We have proposed to embed those part of the Elephantine reality the theories reveal at sub-regional level to counteract their negative aspects in the context of strengthening of authority to allow rhythmic flexibility and more effective engagement with a large-scale form such as the AU-EU Partnership.

The policy implications at sub regional level are that strengthening governance at the subregional level in Africa requires a multi-layered approach that links local reforms with broader continental frameworks. Security guarantees and regime stabilization form the foundation of this approach, ensuring that states and subregional institutions can operate without the constant threat of internal or cross-border conflict. These guarantees can include

coordinated subregional peacekeeping forces, early-warning systems for conflict, and mechanisms for preventive diplomacy, all aligned with the African Union's Peace and Security Architecture to ensure legitimacy and coherence. Governance reform must go beyond formal state structures and explicitly target **informal power networks**, including traditional authorities, local elites, and community institutions that often control access to resources and influence local stability. Engaging these informal structures ensures that reforms are effective at the grassroots level, builds trust, and strengthens the social contract between citizens and institutions.

External actors, such as the EU, US, China, and multilateral partners, must adjust their **incentive structures and conditionalities** to support long-term stability rather than short-term compliance. This means providing aid, investment, and technical assistance in ways that reinforce accountable institutions, promote inclusive political settlements, and avoid exacerbating local tensions or elite capture. When carefully designed, these incentives can complement subregional governance reforms while enhancing AU coordination, allowing subregional initiatives to feed into continental strategies, share best practices, and mobilize resources efficiently. By integrating security guarantees, regime stabilization, governance reform targeting informal power, and restructured external incentives, subregional frameworks can create the structural and political conditions needed for sustainable governance. Linking these efforts to the AU ensures that subregional reforms are part of a coherent continental strategy, enhancing legitimacy, resource mobilization, and long-term stability across multiple layers of governance.

This adjustment will make the meshes in the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) more tight-knit providing the condition for also lessening the normative contestation between the AU and EU on the assumption lack of understanding, partial implementation and silos more often than lack of leadership, poor culture, and scarce resources causes policy failure due to skittish organisation. Enter also EU support for entrepreneurship, RDI and technology transfer as ink spots and rings in the waterhole on the Savvanah.

The intention is to strengthen the relationship between the African Union and the sub-regional organizations in a manner that reinforces shared objectives under United Nations Security Council Resolution 2320 on peacebuilding and peacemaking, while simultaneously creating a common framework that allows for modernization and differentiated sub-regional pathways. This approach recognizes that sub-regional organizations such as ECOWAS, EAC, SADC, IGAD, and ECCAS operate in distinct security, political, and institutional environments and therefore require tailored modalities of engagement rather than uniform templates. By deepening AU-sub-regional coordination, the framework seeks to enhance coherence in conflict prevention, mediation, and post-conflict stabilization, while preserving sub-regional comparative advantages and operational proximity. At the same time, it underpins a shared strategic culture that aligns continental priorities with sub-regional implementation capacities.

From the perspective of the African Union, this reinforces ownership, institutional coherence, and the effective operationalization of the African Peace and Security Architecture, including clearer division of labor and information-sharing mechanisms. From the perspective of the AU-EU partnership, it provides a structured entry point for differentiated and politically informed engagement that avoids both excessive centralization at the continental level and

fragmented bilateralism at the sub-regional level. Such an approach allows EU support to be calibrated to sub-regional realities while remaining anchored in AU-defined priorities and norms. It also mitigates the risks associated with externally driven stabilization agendas by embedding EU contributions within AU-led coordination and accountability frameworks. Ultimately, strengthening AU–sub-regional relations in this way creates the institutional and political conditions for a more resilient, adaptive, and credible AU–EU partnership across the peace–security–development nexus.

Take the Great Green Wall, launched by the African Union in 2007, aims to combat desertification, land degradation, and climate change across the Sahel by restoring 8,000 km of degraded land. Progress has been uneven, with some countries achieving significant reforestation while others face delays due to funding shortfalls, governance challenges, and local conflicts. Local community engagement has been crucial, as success depends on integrating indigenous knowledge, securing land tenure, and providing economic incentives for participation. Climate variability, including recurring droughts and unpredictable rainfall, continues to threaten newly planted vegetation and long-term ecosystem stability. Cross-border coordination among Sahelian states remains limited, hampering the creation of a continuous ecological corridor and shared management of resources. International support from donors, development banks, and environmental organizations has been essential but often fragmented, leading to inconsistent implementation and monitoring. The project also faces broader socio-economic pressures, such as population growth, migration, and agricultural expansion, which compete with restoration efforts for land and water. Overall, while the Great Green Wall has demonstrated environmental, social, and symbolic potential, its success requires sustained political commitment, integrated regional planning, and increased financial and technical support to achieve its ambitious vision.

The intensification of global power competition has profoundly altered the strategic context in which EU–AU relations unfold. China’s infrastructure-driven engagement, Russia’s security-focused partnerships, and the growing presence of Gulf states and middle powers have expanded Africa’s external options. This diversification has increased African bargaining power, enabling states to hedge, pivot, or selectively align depending on national interests. For the EU, this means that Africa is no longer a default partner but a contested strategic space.

This competitive environment exposes the limitations of EU normative power when it is not matched by speed, scale, and political pragmatism. While EU engagement often emphasises governance, sustainability, and transparency, competing actors frequently offer faster financing, fewer conditions, and more visible political recognition. African leaders increasingly weigh these trade-offs pragmatically rather than normatively. As a result, the EU risks marginalisation if it relies solely on moral authority or historical ties.

It is Zero what the EU has done so far!

If the EU wants to make a difference and wins the hearts and minds and have an impact on the ground it is by leading from behind to confer a more strategic approach to the work of the African Union Political Security Council (AUPSC).

The EU can make a real difference in African peace and security by “leading from behind” through the African Union Peace and Security Council, comparable to the pain European colonialism inflicted upon Africa for now more than five hundred centuries of plunder, random destruction, exploitation, displacement, rape and enslavement. African ownership of security solutions is essential for legitimacy and sustainability, and the EU cannot impose solutions effectively. By supporting the AUPSC, the EU strengthens African leadership while amplifying its own influence. Strategic engagement allows the EU to align its interests with African priorities, from Sahel stability to maritime security, without dominating. This approach ensures EU resources are multipliers rather than substitutes for African efforts.

Advisory support can help the AUPSC prioritize interventions through strategic foresight and scenario planning. Operational support, including logistics, intelligence, and training, enhances African missions while leaving political command to the AU. Embedding liaison officers in the AUPSC ensures continuous coordination and communication. Funding channeled via African-approved mechanisms reinforces local ownership and transparency. The EU can promote norms and standards for civilian protection, human rights, and rule of law. Supporting doctrinal guidance and operational manuals strengthens AU capabilities. Joint exercises and capacity-building programs increase interoperability between European and African forces. Political backing at international forums ensures AU decisions receive recognition and support. This strengthens African authority while maintaining EU influence. The EU must practice strategic patience, prioritizing long-term trust over short-term visibility. Engagement should be complementary, filling gaps without overriding AU initiatives. Subsidiarity is key: the AU leads, and the EU supports. Evidence-based assessments identify where EU input creates the most leverage. Over time, this approach fosters lasting partnerships and goodwill across African states. By empowering the AUPSC, the EU shapes outcomes, builds trust, and strengthens institutions sustainably.

Looking forward, the future of EU–AU relations will depend on the EU’s ability to redefine its comparative advantage. Rather than seeking exclusivity or alignment against other powers, the EU can position itself as a reliable, long-term partner offering institutional depth, regulatory stability, and sustained investment in human and productive capacities. In a multipolar order, credibility will derive less from rhetoric and more from consistent delivery, political respect, and genuine reciprocity. If successfully recalibrated, the EU–AU partnership could evolve into a cornerstone of cooperative multipolar governance; if not, it risks becoming one partnership among many, with diminishing strategic relevance.

The evolving EU–AU relationship can be more fully understood when situated at the intersection of strategic partnership theory, interregionalism, and post-colonial analysis. Together, these frameworks help explain why the partnership has expanded in scope and rhetoric, yet continues to struggle with credibility, reciprocity, and political resonance on the African side.

From the perspective of strategic partnership theory, the EU–AU relationship reflects a shift from transactional cooperation toward a long-term, multi-issue alignment between political entities that perceive each other as systemically relevant. Strategic partnerships are typically characterised by regularised summits, dense institutional architectures, cross-sectoral agendas, and a declared commitment to shared strategic objectives rather than narrow policy

coordination. The EU–AU framework formally meets these criteria through biennial summits, extensive ministerial dialogues, and cooperation across security, trade, climate, migration, and infrastructure.

However, strategic partnership theory also emphasises reciprocity, mutual recognition, and relative symmetry in agenda-setting as conditions for sustainability. It is precisely here that the EU–AU partnership reveals its structural fragility. While the EU increasingly frames Africa as a strategic partner, African actors often experience the relationship as selectively strategic—highly prioritised when European interests are at stake, such as migration containment or security stabilisation, but less so in areas central to African transformation, including industrialisation and technological upgrading. This asymmetry produces what can be described as a partial strategic partnership: institutionally dense but politically imbalanced.

Moreover, strategic partnership theory highlights the importance of strategic narratives. The EU’s narrative of a “partnership of equals” competes with African perceptions shaped by historical experience and contemporary practice. Where rhetoric is not matched by institutional reform or shared control over resources, the partnership risks symbolic inflation without substantive strategic convergence.

The EU–AU relationship is often cited as a flagship example of interregionalism, defined as structured interaction between regional organisations aimed at managing interdependence and amplifying collective voice in global governance. Interregionalism assumes that region-to-region cooperation can mitigate asymmetries between individual states and create more balanced negotiating frameworks. In principle, the AU–EU format allows Africa to engage Europe collectively, reducing bilateral fragmentation and enhancing continental coherence.

In practice, however, asymmetrical interregionalism has prevailed. The EU represents a deeply institutionalised and legally empowered regional actor, while the AU remains a hybrid organisation with limited enforcement capacity and heavy reliance on external financing. This imbalance weakens the region-to-region logic and often results in the EU engaging simultaneously at multiple levels—continental, regional, and bilateral—thereby diluting AU authority. Such practices undermine interregionalism’s promise of collective agency and reinforce perceptions of selective engagement.

At the same time, interregionalism remains politically significant for Africa. It provides a platform for agenda articulation around continental priorities such as Agenda 2063 and the AfCFTA, and it symbolically affirms Africa’s status as a global region rather than a collection of aid recipients. The challenge for the EU lies in recalibrating interregional engagement to strengthen AU institutional capacity rather than bypass it for short-term efficiency gains.

Post-colonial analysis offers a critical lens on the historical continuities embedded in the EU–AU partnership. From this perspective, contemporary asymmetries cannot be understood solely as capacity gaps or institutional lag; they are also products of colonial legacies that shaped African economies, borders, and governance structures. Development cooperation frameworks, even when well-intentioned, often reproduce hierarchical knowledge systems in which European norms, standards, and policy models are treated as universal benchmarks.

This epistemic asymmetry manifests in policy dialogue, where African policy preferences are frequently evaluated against external criteria of “good governance,” “best practice,” or “reform readiness.” Post-colonial theory highlights how such practices marginalise alternative developmental trajectories and reinforce dependency through technical expertise, consultancy markets, and compliance-based funding. Within the EU–AU partnership, this dynamic complicates claims of equality and fuels scepticism toward EU-led initiatives, even when they align with African interests.

A second post-colonial lens emphasises African agency, resistance, and strategic adaptation within a multipolar system. Rather than viewing Africa as structurally constrained, this perspective highlights how African states actively navigate global competition to expand policy space. Engagements with China, Russia, Gulf states, and emerging powers are not merely alternatives to the EU but instruments through which African actors rebalance power relations and renegotiate terms of cooperation.

From this viewpoint, Africa’s selective alignment and non-alignment strategies represent a form of post-colonial statecraft aimed at escaping dependency and reclaiming sovereignty. For the EU–AU partnership, this means that credibility depends less on normative persuasion and more on respect for African strategic autonomy. Attempts to frame global competition in binary or ideological terms risk alienating African partners who prioritise flexibility and diversification over alignment.

Taken together, strategic partnership theory, interregionalism, and post-colonial analysis converge on a central insight: the EU–AU relationship is at a critical juncture between rhetorical maturity and structural recalibration. The partnership has outgrown a development paradigm but has not yet fully transitioned into a genuinely reciprocal strategic alliance.

For the EU, adapting to this reality requires rethinking power, agency, and partnership itself. This entails strengthening AU institutions as political actors, accepting differentiated development paths, and recognising Africa’s growing leverage in a competitive global order. Only by aligning strategic ambition with institutional reform and historical awareness can the EU–AU partnership evolve from an asymmetrical interregional arrangement into a durable strategic partnership in a multipolar world.

AU has three strategic priorities for trade policy: (1) Africa must reclaim agency in shaping its trade relationships rather than reacting to external power plays; (2) intra African integration, especially through AfCFTA, is central to building scale, value chains, and bargaining leverage with partners like the EU; and (3) prosperity and structural transformation require linking trade liberalization with industrial policy, governance reform, and equitable standards — not merely market access.

Africa’s geopolitical significance has expanded dramatically in recent decades, driven by a combination of demographic growth, economic potential, abundant natural resources, and strategic positioning along key maritime and continental trade corridors. These transformations have reshaped the EU-AU partnership, compelling the European Union to recalibrate its approach beyond traditional development aid toward a more multifaceted, strategic engagement. Africa is no longer merely a recipient of European assistance; it is increasingly

recognized as an actor that can shape global trade, climate policy, and security dynamics. The continent's demographic trajectory, with a population projected to surpass 2.5 billion by 2050, positions it as both a major labor and consumer market, creating new avenues for European investment and cooperation, while simultaneously enhancing Africa's bargaining leverage in negotiating terms of engagement.

The entry of other global powers, including China, the United States, India, and Gulf states, has intensified competition for influence on the continent, prompting the EU to reconsider the nature and value of its engagement. Africa's leadership, asserting its own developmental priorities through initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and Agenda 2063, has further complicated the traditional donor-recipient dynamic. This assertion of agency challenges the EU to negotiate on more equal terms, balancing its strategic interests with genuine respect for African autonomy. The evolving EU-AU partnership now encompasses an array of sectors, from trade and investment to climate adaptation, digitalization, and security cooperation, reflecting Africa's expanded role in the global system and the EU's recognition that effective engagement requires long-term strategic collaboration rather than episodic aid interventions.

Despite Africa's growing prominence, the EU-AU relationship is characterized by persistent structural asymmetries that shape cooperation and can constrain the development of truly equitable partnerships. Economically, the European Union remains far more advanced, technologically sophisticated, and financially capable than most African states. This disparity manifests in trade imbalances, limited African access to advanced industrial and digital technologies, and dependency on European investment and financial flows. The institutional dimension further amplifies asymmetry: the EU operates through highly integrated governance structures, including the European Commission and the European External Action Service, while the African Union continues to contend with fragmentation, uneven member-state commitment, and limited enforcement capacity. These differences can delay policy coordination, weaken implementation of joint initiatives, and create friction over priorities and timelines.

Military and security capabilities constitute another significant asymmetry. The EU possesses advanced defense infrastructure, sophisticated crisis management mechanisms, and comprehensive intelligence capabilities, whereas African states often rely on external support for complex security challenges. This power imbalance affects joint peacekeeping operations, maritime security initiatives, and counterterrorism cooperation, sometimes creating tensions over leadership, responsibility, and operational command. Normative and policy frameworks add a subtler, yet equally consequential, layer of asymmetry. The EU's insistence on human rights, democratic governance, and anti-corruption standards may clash with African priorities that emphasize sovereignty, regional integration, and pragmatic governance. These structural differences influence the perception of EU policies in Africa, at times generating skepticism about the EU's motives and undermining the trust required for effective collaboration.

To cultivate authentic, mutually beneficial partnerships, the European Union must adopt a more flexible, African-centered approach. This begins with aligning engagement with African-led agendas such as the AfCFTA, Agenda 2063, and African peacekeeping frameworks, emphasizing the EU's role as a facilitator of African ambitions rather than a prescriptive actor.

Policies should be context-sensitive, tailored to the specific economic, social, and political realities of individual African states and subregions. Investment in capacity building, industrialization, digital infrastructure, renewable energy, and innovation ecosystems is crucial, as it reduces structural asymmetries and enables African states to engage as equal partners rather than dependent recipients.

Furthermore, partnership mechanisms should include joint strategic planning, shared decision-making, and co-monitoring, ensuring that African voices shape every stage of engagement, from project conception to implementation and evaluation. Diversification beyond aid is equally important: the EU must expand its cooperation to encompass trade, research, climate action, security, and technological partnerships, reflecting Africa's growing role in global systems. By repositioning itself as a collaborator rather than a conditional benefactor, the EU can create a framework for sustainable, resilient, and strategic partnerships that respect African agency while advancing European interests.

The intensifying competition among global powers in Africa presents both challenges and opportunities for the EU-AU relationship. China's Belt and Road Initiative, the United States' strategic investments, and the Gulf states' diplomatic and economic engagement create a multipolar environment in which African states possess greater leverage to negotiate favorable terms and pursue diversified partnerships. This shift challenges the EU to rethink its traditional model of engagement and to present an offer that is competitive, respectful, and attuned to African priorities. Security and strategic considerations are also central, as competition over maritime corridors, resource zones, and conflict-prone regions heightens the risk of instability. EU-AU collaboration in security and intelligence sharing, maritime surveillance, and conflict prevention will therefore be increasingly essential, but must be carefully framed to avoid perceptions of neocolonial overreach.

Technological and digital competition adds another layer of complexity. Africa is emerging as a crucial arena for AI, 5G, renewable energy, and data infrastructure, creating both opportunities for EU-African co-investment and risks of strategic dependency if initiatives are poorly coordinated. In this multipolar context, the future of the EU-AU partnership will increasingly be defined by strategic interdependence, requiring the European Union to recognize African agency, adapt to a rapidly changing global environment, and invest in shared growth, security, and technological capabilities. Only through such a recalibrated, genuinely cooperative approach can the EU maintain its relevance and cultivate partnerships that are resilient, equitable, and future-oriented.

The EU-Africa relationship is a mirror of Europe's strategic capacity in a multipolar world. Hesitation or adherence to outdated aid models risks marginalisation, while proactive, co-produced partnerships offer a pathway to shaping interdependence and securing Europe's long-term interests.

EU dominates on both sides of the ledger, confirming its role as Africa's primary trade partner. China shows a clear import surplus for Africa, highlighting Africa's dependence on Chinese manufactured goods relative to commodity exports. India is more balanced, reflecting a maturing South-South trade relationship. US trade volumes are modest but relatively

symmetrical. Russia stands out for its asymmetry: low African exports, higher African imports—typical of a narrow, commodity- and energy-focused relationship.

Genuine partnership is more than a technical exercise; it is a test of Europe's ability to act as a mature global actor. By recognising Africa's agency, aligning interests, and investing in shared futures, the EU can move from managing decline to shaping global outcomes. Conversely, failure to adapt may result in diminished influence, leaving Europe on the sidelines as other powers deepen ties with the continent.

The time to act is now. Africa's rise is not a distant trend—it is a present reality. The EU must embrace a new paradigm that moves beyond aid, acknowledges structural asymmetries, and empowers African agency. Only then can Europe and Africa co-create a partnership capable of delivering economic growth, security, and resilience in a rapidly evolving global system.

In a multipolar world defined by interdependence and competition, the EU–Africa partnership is not merely a development issue; it is a strategic imperative. By reframing the relationship from aid to agency and respecting African perspectives on speed, scale, and strategy, Europe can secure its interests, support Africa's ambitions, and demonstrate its capacity to operate effectively in a complex, interconnected international environment.

How to proceed then Rr?

First of all, we are looking forward to progress in the stabilization of the Red sea area in terms of an integrated coastal and maritime management plan combined with EU-mediated diplomacy between Ethiopia and Eritrea to elicit a constructive approach to Horn of Africa pending Ethiopian access to the harbor in Berbera, a Sudan conference, the Libya-Libya approach implemented and then the transformation of the Nile Basin Initiative to a Nile Commission, something the African Union's general Secretary respects.

Second, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) would provide foundational support for a comprehensive program targeting the African Islam–Christianity Belt, with a particular focus on pilot projects in Nigeria and the Ivory Coast. The initiative would aim to stabilize Sub-Saharan Africa across political, social, economic, and security dimensions, leveraging the OIC's normative influence, community networks, and capacity for faith-based mediation. The financial envelope for these interventions is envisioned at approximately €10 billion, enabling large-scale engagement in conflict prevention, community resilience, youth empowerment, and governance strengthening. The OIC's role would underpin continental and subregional efforts, complementing AU coordination, EU technical and financial support, and World Bank expertise in development and infrastructure. By anchoring initiatives in interreligious dialogue and local legitimacy, the program seeks to reduce identity-based tensions, mitigate extremist influences, and foster inclusive governance. The pilot projects would serve as demonstrators for scalable interventions across other conflict-prone regions of Sub-Saharan Africa. Integration with existing AU frameworks ensures alignment with continental peace, security, and development objectives. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms would track social cohesion, political stability, and economic outcomes to guide adaptive programming. The initiative would emphasize multi-level coordination between AU institutions, subregional bodies (ECOWAS, ECCAS), and local authorities. Overall, the OIC's participation would

provide both moral authority and strategic capacity to advance stabilization in the African Islam–Christianity Belt.

Third, the European Union would commit approximately €4 billion to a UNESCO-led package supporting education, culture, and city-to-city alliances across Sub-Saharan Africa. This package complements the OIC's €10 billion stabilization program by investing in human capital, social cohesion, and urban development, addressing structural drivers of conflict and underdevelopment. Education initiatives would include vocational training, digital literacy, and school infrastructure, aligned with AU continental frameworks and local governance structures. Cultural programs would foster interreligious dialogue, heritage preservation, and creative economies, reinforcing identity pluralism and community resilience. City alliances would promote municipal cooperation, knowledge sharing, and sustainable urban planning, linking local actors to subregional and continental networks. The EU package is designed to reinforce governance, participatory planning, and social legitimacy, ensuring that stabilization and development efforts are mutually supportive. Coordinated oversight with the AU and subregional bodies (ECOWAS, SADC, EAC, ECCAS, UMA) ensures strategic alignment, avoids duplication, and leverages comparative advantages. Together with the OIC's stabilization program, the EU package advances a holistic, multi-level approach to peace, development, and modernization across the African Islam–Christianity Belt.

The remaining €5 billion would be strategically deployed to reinforce governance, infrastructure, and multilateral coordination across Africa. A portion would strengthen AU institutions, including the African Peace and Security Council, by funding capacity-building, digital decision-making platforms, and regional conflict prevention mechanisms. Another portion would support strategic multilateral initiatives involving China, the US, and the EU, ensuring coordinated investment, knowledge transfer, and infrastructure financing while preserving African agency. Capacity building to the workings of the African free trade area is being examined by the EU and increased funding for AU-EU Exchange rate programs. A flagship infrastructure project would be the tunnel between Morocco and Spain, linking North Africa and Europe, fostering trade, mobility, and regional integration. Additional funds would be allocated to feasibility studies for five high-speed rail corridors across key African trade and urban nodes, enabling long-term planning for continental connectivity. Governance reforms would focus on transparency, accountability, and project oversight, ensuring that major infrastructure and multilateral initiatives are effectively managed. Coordination with the OIC stabilization package (€10B) and the EU UNESCO package (€4B) ensures complementarity and avoids overlap. The program is designed to leverage financial and technical expertise from external partners while embedding AU leadership and regional priorities at the center. Integrated monitoring and evaluation systems would track progress across governance, infrastructure, and multilateral coordination, generating data for adaptive management. Overall, this €5 billion tranche completes a holistic investment framework combining stabilization, education, culture, and strategic continental infrastructure for long-term African development and integration.

Fourth, under the UN a total of €1.5 billion is proposed to strengthen the AU Peace and Security Council (AUPSC), enhancing institutional capacity, early warning systems, digital decision-making, and conflict prevention mechanisms. Funds would also support training, rapid deployment of regional standby forces, and operational coordination across subregional

organizations such as ECOWAS, SADC, EAC, ECCAS, and UMA, reinforcing AU leadership and African agency in peace and security matters. An additional €2 billion is allocated to the Great Green Wall, expanding land restoration, climate-smart agriculture, and local livelihoods initiatives across the Sahel, while strengthening monitoring, community engagement, and maintenance programs to ensure ecological sustainability and conflict-resilient growth. A top-up of €1 billion to the UNESCO-led program on education, culture, and city-to-city alliances will scale vocational training, digital literacy, interreligious dialogue, cultural preservation, and municipal partnerships, emphasizing youth empowerment, social cohesion, and knowledge exchange to reinforce local governance and community legitimacy. Furthermore, €500 million is earmarked for SDG-aligned governance initiatives, supporting institutional reform, public administration modernization, anti-corruption measures, and monitoring of SDG progress at national and subregional levels, ensuring integration with AU, EU, and UN programs to create measurable and sustainable outcomes. Coordinated support across these four pillars strengthens African governance, social resilience, climate adaptation, and institutional capacity while reinforcing AU leadership, subregional authority, and alignment with continental and global development agendas.

Fifth, in return for the €15 billion injection, the African Union and its member states provide a comprehensive set of counterpart contributions to ensure ownership, alignment, and sustainability. The AU, through the Commission and Peace and Security Council, offers strategic oversight and coordination of all funded programs, ensuring they align with Agenda 2063, subregional priorities, and continental frameworks. It provides technical capacity across its departments, including Peace and Security, Political Affairs, Infrastructure and Energy, and Social Affairs, to manage, monitor, and evaluate projects. The AU also delivers policy and normative frameworks to harmonize national and subregional regulations with program objectives, covering climate adaptation, governance standards, and SDG compliance. Monitoring, reporting, and evaluation platforms are established to provide transparency and accountability in the use of funds, and to track progress against agreed outcomes.

Member states commit human and operational resources through line ministries such as defense, foreign affairs, education, infrastructure, and environment. They provide legal, regulatory, and institutional frameworks that enable project implementation, cross-border infrastructure, and subregional coordination. Member states offer land, facilities, and access rights for infrastructure projects, including sites for Great Green Wall interventions, rail corridors, and the Morocco–Spain tunnel, as well as financial co-contributions to support operational costs, staffing, and maintenance of completed projects. Local governance structures and community authorities provide legitimacy, facilitating social acceptance and long-term sustainability.

In addition, both the AU and member states commit to addressing Africa's shared strategic challenges by coordinating with lead partners across security, development, and governance domains. This includes sustained action on anti-corruption, good governance, rule of law, and human rights, ensuring that funded programs strengthen institutions and civic trust. They actively participate in multi-level coordination with external partners to tackle cross-cutting threats such as insecurity, climate stress, economic inequality, and social fragmentation. Through these combined contributions, the AU provides strategic guidance, while member states deliver operational capacity, resources, and legitimacy, ensuring that the €15 billion

investment achieves measurable, sustainable outcomes across peace, development, governance, and modernization in Africa.

Finally they address shared regional challenges at the level of lead partners such as Egypt, Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia, Congo in relation to environment, security, social, economic and geostrategic challenges to even out domesticating external strategies by aloof elites. The Stock Exchanges of Johannesburg and Lagos and Cairo examines a strengthening of their links with the euro notably in relation to the issuance of €uro denominated green bonds to ensure the lift-off is being consolidated, comparable to the filling of the coffers of the central banks with Euros and exchange rate arrangements commensurate with the trading power of the EU.

Sixth, EU Member State development ministries can be assigned leadership roles under the AU-EU Partnership by aligning their comparative advantages with jointly agreed AU-EU priorities. Leadership should be thematic and sector-based, not country-dominated, and embedded in the Team Europe approach. Assignments work best when ministries co-lead dossiers with African counterparts rather than acting unilaterally. Health is a key sector, covering health systems strengthening, pandemic preparedness, and pharmaceutical manufacturing. Best practice includes the AU-EU Health Partnership, co-chaired with strong Member State involvement. Energy and the green transition are another priority, including renewables, grids, and clean energy access. The Africa-Europe Green Energy Initiative illustrates coordinated leadership under Global Gateway. Digital transformation is a growing dossier, focusing on connectivity, digital governance, and skills. Member States with strong digital expertise can lead under the AU-EU digital partnership framework. Education, research, and innovation are central to youth, skills, and employment agendas. Horizon Europe and AU-EU education initiatives show effective shared leadership models.

Agriculture and food systems cooperation covers climate-smart agriculture, value chains, and food security. AU-EU agriculture ministerial conferences are examples of sector-specific leadership. Peace, governance, and resilience link development with security and institutional strengthening. Development ministries can lead on conflict prevention, governance reform, and civil society support. Team Europe provides the main coordination mechanism for assigning and exercising leadership. Joint programming ensures coherence between national, EU, and AU priorities. Best practice emphasizes shared financing, pooled expertise, and clear division of labour.

Leadership should be based on expertise, scale of contribution, and long-term commitment.

Overall, effective assignment strengthens AU ownership, EU coherence, and delivery of the Joint Vision 2030.

Further research

Further research on the EU-AU partnership should focus on several key areas. One important aspect is the impact of Africa's youthful demographics on economic development. Understanding how to leverage this demographic dividend through effective policies and educational initiatives is crucial. Additionally, aligning the partnership with the Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs) can enhance the effectiveness of joint initiatives, and establishing metrics for success will be essential.

Exploring the role of the EU in supporting the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is another vital area. Identifying barriers to trade integration and how EU investments can enhance regional trade will provide valuable insights. Furthermore, assessing the effectiveness of EU-AU cooperation in managing migration is necessary, particularly in establishing legal pathways and addressing root causes.

Climate change and environmental sustainability should also be examined, focusing on how the EU can support African countries in climate adaptation efforts. Security cooperation and conflict resolution are critical, as analyzing the effectiveness of EU support for AU-led peace operations can lead to better frameworks for sustainable peace.

Investigating the role of technology in enhancing the partnership is important, particularly in terms of digital infrastructure investments and governance implications. Lastly, strategies for strengthening African institutions through institutional capacity building should be explored, including best practices for governance reforms.

This research aims to deepen the understanding of the EU-AU partnership and its potential to address contemporary challenges while fostering mutual growth and development. By focusing on these areas, the research can contribute to more effective collaboration and strategic alignment between the two entities.

Counterarguments

While strengthening and maturing the EU-AU partnership presents numerous potential benefits, there are several counterarguments to consider.

One significant concern is the risk of perpetuating dependency. Critics argue that an enhanced partnership may lead to African nations becoming overly reliant on European support, undermining their sovereignty and agency. This dependency could hinder the development of self-sustaining institutions and economic systems within African countries.

Another counterargument is the potential for unequal power dynamics. The historical context of EU-AU relations has often been characterized by asymmetrical interactions, where the EU holds more influence over decision-making processes. Strengthening the partnership without addressing these power imbalances may result in African priorities being sidelined in favor of European interests.

Additionally, there is skepticism regarding the effectiveness of joint initiatives. Some argue that past collaborations have not yielded significant results, and without a clear framework for accountability and evaluation, future efforts may face similar challenges. This raises questions about the genuine commitment of both parties to a truly collaborative approach.

Moreover, the diversity of African nations poses a challenge. The continent is not monolithic; different countries have varying political, economic, and social contexts. A one-size-fits-all

approach to partnership may overlook these differences, leading to ineffective policies that do not resonate with local needs.

Lastly, external geopolitical pressures can complicate the partnership. As global powers compete for influence in Africa, the EU-AU relationship may be affected by competing interests, making it difficult to maintain a unified front. This could lead to fragmentation within the partnership and dilute its effectiveness.

In conclusion, while there are compelling arguments for strengthening the EU-AU partnership, it is essential to critically assess the potential risks and challenges. Addressing issues of dependency, power dynamics, effectiveness, diversity, and external pressures will be crucial for fostering a mature and equitable partnership.

Scenarios

The future of the AU-EU partnership can unfold in several scenarios, each shaped by various factors such as political dynamics, economic conditions, and global trends. Here are some potential scenarios:

Scenario 1: Enhanced Strategic Cooperation

In this scenario, the AU and EU deepen their collaboration across multiple sectors, including security, trade, and climate change. Both entities align their policies and initiatives, leading to a more integrated approach to addressing shared challenges. This could result in successful joint projects that enhance regional stability, economic growth, and sustainable development.

Scenario 2: Fragmented Engagement

This scenario sees the AU and EU struggling to maintain a cohesive partnership due to diverging interests and priorities. As global powers compete for influence in Africa, the partnership may become fragmented, with individual EU member states pursuing bilateral agreements that undermine collective efforts. This could lead to a lack of coordination and ineffective responses to pressing issues.

Scenario 3: Conditional Cooperation

In this scenario, the EU adopts a more conditional approach to its partnership with the AU, tying support to specific governance and human rights criteria. While this may promote accountability, it could also create tensions and resistance from African nations, leading to a backlash against perceived external interference. This scenario risks alienating key partners and undermining trust.

Scenario 4: Focus on Economic Integration

The AU and EU prioritize economic integration, particularly through initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). This scenario emphasizes trade partnerships, investment in infrastructure, and technology transfer, fostering economic growth and job

creation. Successful implementation could enhance Africa's position in the global economy and strengthen the partnership.

Scenario 5: Crisis-Driven Collaboration

In this scenario, the AU-EU partnership is primarily reactive, responding to crises such as conflicts, migration surges, or climate disasters. While this may lead to short-term cooperation, it lacks a long-term strategic vision. The partnership may struggle to address underlying issues, resulting in a cycle of crisis management rather than proactive engagement.

Scenario 6: Empowerment of African Agency

This scenario envisions a partnership where the EU actively supports African-led initiatives and governance structures. The AU gains greater autonomy in decision-making, and the partnership is characterized by mutual respect and shared leadership. This could lead to more sustainable outcomes and a stronger sense of ownership among African nations.

Scenario 7: Technological and Digital Transformation

In this scenario, the AU and EU focus on leveraging technology and digital innovation to enhance their partnership. Collaborative efforts in areas such as digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, and e-governance could transform economic and social landscapes. This scenario emphasizes the importance of adapting to the digital age and harnessing technology for development.

Each of these scenarios presents unique opportunities and challenges for the AU-EU partnership, highlighting the need for strategic foresight and adaptability in navigating the complexities of international relations.

The implications of strengthening the AU-EU partnership at the organizational level and in terms of learning and foresight are significant. Here are some key considerations:

Organizational Level Implications

Strengthening the partnership may lead to the development of more robust institutional frameworks that facilitate collaboration. This could involve creating joint committees, task forces, or working groups focused on specific areas such as security, trade, and climate change, enhancing coordination and efficiency.

Both the AU and EU may invest in capacity-building initiatives to strengthen their respective institutions. This could involve training programs, knowledge sharing, and resource allocation to enhance the effectiveness of regional bodies and improve governance structures.

A more integrated partnership could lead to streamlined decision-making processes, reducing bureaucratic hurdles and enabling quicker responses to emerging challenges. This agility is crucial in addressing urgent issues such as security threats or humanitarian crises.

Strengthening the partnership may result in increased funding and resource allocation from the EU to support AU initiatives. This financial backing can enhance the AU's ability to implement programs and projects that align with shared priorities.

The partnership could foster improved data sharing and analysis between the AU and EU, enabling both entities to make informed decisions based on evidence. This collaboration can enhance the understanding of regional dynamics and inform policy development.

Shared Learning Opportunities

The partnership can create opportunities for shared learning between the AU and EU. By exchanging best practices, lessons learned, and innovative approaches, both entities can enhance their capabilities and adapt to changing circumstances.

Strengthening the partnership may lead to the establishment of strategic foresight mechanisms that allow both organizations to anticipate future challenges and opportunities. This proactive approach can enhance resilience and adaptability in a rapidly changing global landscape.

Collaborative research initiatives can provide valuable insights into emerging trends, risks, and opportunities. Joint analysis of issues such as climate change, migration, and security can inform policy decisions and enhance the effectiveness of joint initiatives.

The partnership can enhance the capacity for scenario planning, enabling both the AU and EU to explore various future scenarios and develop strategies to navigate potential challenges. This foresight can inform long-term planning and decision-making.

Through learning and foresight, the AU and EU can achieve better policy alignment, ensuring that their initiatives are complementary and mutually reinforcing. This alignment can enhance the overall effectiveness of their partnership and contribute to shared goals.

In summary, strengthening the AU-EU partnership has significant implications at both the organizational level and in terms of learning and foresight. By enhancing institutional frameworks, fostering shared learning, and developing strategic foresight mechanisms, both entities can better navigate the complexities of global challenges and work towards achieving their common objectives.

Policy recommendations

First, strengthen institutional frameworks by establishing joint committees and working groups focused on key areas such as security, trade, and climate change to facilitate collaboration and decision-making. Create a formalized mechanism for regular dialogue between AU and EU leadership to ensure alignment on strategic priorities.

Second, enhance capacity building initiatives by investing in training programs for AU and regional institutions to improve governance, policy implementation, and crisis management capabilities. Foster knowledge-sharing platforms that allow for the exchange of best practices and lessons learned between AU and EU member states.

Third, promote financial and resource support by increasing EU funding for AU-led initiatives, particularly in areas such as peace and security, infrastructure development, and climate resilience. Develop innovative financing mechanisms, such as blended finance models, to leverage private sector investment in African development projects.

Fourth, improve data sharing and analysis by establishing a joint AU-EU data repository to facilitate the sharing of information on key issues such as migration, security threats, and economic trends. Collaborate on research initiatives to enhance understanding of regional dynamics and inform policy development.

Fifth, foster joint learning and capacity for foresight by creating opportunities for joint learning through workshops, seminars, and conferences that bring together policymakers, researchers, and practitioners from both the AU and EU. Develop strategic foresight mechanisms that allow both organizations to anticipate future challenges and opportunities, enabling proactive policy responses.

Sixth, align policies and initiatives to ensure that EU policies and initiatives are aligned with AU priorities, particularly in areas such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and Agenda 2063. Promote coherence between development, security, and trade policies to enhance the overall effectiveness of the partnership.

Seventh, engage with civil society and local communities by involving civil society organizations and local communities in the design and implementation of joint initiatives to ensure that they are responsive to local needs and priorities. Foster public awareness campaigns to promote understanding of the AU-EU partnership and its benefits among citizens in both regions.

Eighth, address power imbalances by acknowledging and addressing historical power imbalances in the AU-EU relationship, promoting equitable decision-making processes, and ensuring that African voices are heard and prioritized. Encourage the EU to adopt a more flexible approach to cooperation, allowing African states to navigate diverse economic and political landscapes without rigid conditionalities.

Ninth, strengthen regional integration efforts by supporting the AU's efforts to promote regional integration through initiatives that enhance trade, infrastructure connectivity, and economic cooperation among African states. Facilitate partnerships between European and African businesses to promote investment and technology transfer in key sectors.

Tenth, monitor and evaluate partnership outcomes by establishing mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of joint initiatives to assess their effectiveness and impact on both AU and EU objectives. Use evaluation findings to inform future policy decisions and improve the overall partnership framework.

Eleventh, systematically examine the intersections and tensions between Islam and Christianity across and around Sub-Saharan Africa, identifying the historical, socio-economic, and political root causes of conflict. This analysis should be conducted in close cooperation with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the African Union, with the aim of designing interventions that address underlying grievances, foster interfaith dialogue, and promote

durable peace. Understanding local dynamics, power structures, and communal narratives is essential to preventing religious friction from undermining regional stability.

Twelfth, establish robust partnerships with the United Nations on sustainability and with UNESCO-related initiatives to ensure interventions are well-targeted, context-sensitive, and impactful on the ground. Engagement should extend to lead partners within sub-regional organizations to avoid top-down imposition, ensuring that European support complements, rather than overshadows, African leadership. The objective is to avoid the Nemesis of Europe—the imposition of external priorities—transforming cooperation into a shared endeavor where AU leadership retains agency and ownership.

Thirteenth, conduct a detailed analysis of the African Peace and Security Council's internal dynamics, examining both the binding and bonding mechanisms, the tensions and trade-offs, and the incentives and penalties that shape decision-making. By understanding the “pain and pleasures” of its operational and political workings, external partners can craft support that is agile, credible, and responsive, signaling genuine commitment while respecting budgetary and temporal constraints. Effective engagement with the Council requires balancing technical assistance, mediation support, and institutional strengthening to maximize impact on peace and security outcomes.

Fourteenth, address governance failures with vigor, linking institutional reform directly to trade promotion and economic integration across the continent. Weak governance undermines investment, trade facilitation, and regulatory predictability, so interventions must prioritize transparency, accountability, and institutional capacity-building. Strengthening governance structures enhances Africa's ability to leverage intra-continental and international trade, supports regional economic communities, and reinforces sustainable development objectives, creating a virtuous cycle of political stability and economic opportunity.

and beyond, and between AU and EU, and forge a partnership on anti-corruption.

Fifteenth seeks to standardize, as far as possible, the contractual underpinnings within a coherent multi-bilateral AU–EU partnership, ensuring legal clarity, harmonized obligations, and enforceable frameworks that facilitate cross-border cooperation, attract investment, and provide predictable governance structures for sustainable development projects. This approach aligns institutional expectations, reduces transaction risk, and establishes common standards for financing, monitoring, and reporting, thereby enhancing the credibility and effectiveness of joint initiatives across African and European jurisdictions. By embedding standardized contractual principles, the partnership can more efficiently mobilize public and private resources, coordinate technical assistance, and ensure accountability, ultimately supporting the accelerated implementation of SDGs and green finance objectives across the continent.

By implementing these policy recommendations, the AU and EU can strengthen their partnership, enhance collaboration, and work towards achieving shared goals in a rapidly changing global landscape.

Perspective

Taking perspective on preceeding analysis lends itself well to the view that the EU–AU relationship should be viewed less as a settled partnership and more as a relationship in transition, shaped by shifting global conditions, internal asymmetries, and evolving African agency. Taking perspective requires moving beyond evaluations of individual initiatives and instead focusing on how structural change, institutional practice, and political perception interact over time.

First, the EU–AU relationship must be understood within a rapidly changing international environment. Africa’s geopolitical relevance has increased not because of a single factor, but through the convergence of demographic growth, economic potential, security relevance, and diplomatic weight. This has altered expectations on both sides. For the EU, engagement with Africa has become strategically necessary rather than normatively optional. For African states, external partnerships are no longer exclusive or hierarchical but selective and competitive. Any assessment of the partnership must therefore account for Africa’s growing room for manoeuvre and the EU’s declining ability to rely on default alignment.

Second, many of the tensions identified stem from the way cooperation is organised rather than from a lack of political intent. Differences in institutional capacity, financial autonomy, and decision-making authority continue to shape outcomes. While the EU operates through consolidated regulatory and budgetary instruments, African continental and regional structures face implementation constraints that limit their ability to act as equal counterparts. This creates a persistent gap between the language of partnership and the reality of policy delivery. Viewing the relationship from this perspective shifts attention from rhetoric to institutional balance and from short-term outputs to long-term capacity and ownership.

Third, historical experience and political perception remain central to how the partnership is received. Even where cooperation delivers tangible benefits, processes that appear directive, conditional, or externally driven can undermine legitimacy. Trust is shaped not only by results, but by how priorities are defined, who controls resources, and whose knowledge is privileged. Recognising this dimension does not imply revisiting the past, but acknowledging that credibility in the present depends on visible respect for autonomy and co-decision.

Taken together, this perspective frames the EU–AU relationship as a strategic necessity constrained by institutional imbalance and fragile political trust. The central issue is not whether cooperation should deepen, but how it can be recalibrated to reflect Africa’s growing agency and the realities of a competitive global environment. Progress will depend on the EU’s capacity to align strategic ambition with institutional reform and political sensitivity, and on its willingness to treat partnership as a shared process rather than a managed outcome.

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