GEOPOLITICAL EVOLUTION

The Mediterranean Region as a Bridge in the Africa-Europe Partnership

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Throughout the twentieth century, the evolving relationship between Europe and Africa has had a great impact on the history of the international community. The Schuman Declaration of 1950 clearly stated that one of the future tasks of a united Europe would be the development of the African continent [1]. Since then, the modalities in which the EU intervened in, influenced, cooperated and partnered with Africa have been diverse and no immune to criticism. For many, Europe has built for decades a donor-recipient, one-sided relationship with Africa. In 2020, however, the EU is trying to change this approach, at least on paper. The recent Africa-EU partnership attempts to create *reciprocal* cooperation on key priorities: green transition and energy access; digital transformation; sustainable growth and jobs; peace, security and good governance; migration and mobility [2].

Introduction

Using “Africa” instead of “African Union” (AU) to describe the new collaboration with Europe is not coincidence. With Morocco formally re-joining in 2017, the AU now comprises all African countries. Therefore, the name “Africa-EU” wants to signal a renovated

cooperation with a *united* continent. Yet, when “EU”, “Africa” and “partnership” are mentioned in the same sentence, many would immediately think about Sub-Saharan Africa, with the north (Southern Mediterranean countries) usually perceived as a distant separate block [3]. A reason for this could be the region’s foreign policies. For decades, Southern Mediterranean countries, particularly Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, have dedicated a considerable part of their foreign policies in building cooperation and economic integration with Europe, neglecting to create strong ties with the rest of Africa. As a result, their economies have grown dependent on European markets, while their geopolitical influence was decreasing in the rest of the continent [4].

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Yet, the situation in Africa, as well as in the Mediterranean, is changing. Sub-Saharan regions have become the second fastest growing region in the world [5]. In this area, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the East African Community (EAC) have fuelled African integration, contributing to the gradual transformation of the AU into a supra-national entity and becoming important actors in the international arena [6]. In this context, both the EU and Maghreb countries (with exception of Libya, which is undergoing a drastic civil war) have turned their attention to Sub-Saharan Africa. This new “move to the South” could affect the future EU relationship with Southern Mediterranean countries and with Africa as a whole. The Mediterranean region could play an essential role in bridging Europe and Africa and enhancing real partnership between the two continents.

In this regard, the sixth EU-Africa Summit will be convened in October 2020 at a time of turbulences triggered by the effects of the COVID-19. The outbreak of the global pandemic serves as a perfect backdrop to accelerate the redefinition of the AU-EU Partnership as the pandemic is already impacting Euro-African economic, financial and human relations in various areas.

In the first part, this article will briefly describe the EU’s presence in Sub-Saharan Africa, discussing how the emergence of RECs has provided Europe with a valuable partner in the pursuit of its regional policies. The second part will instead present how Maghreb countries have turned their attention South, as a result of their failed integration endeavour through the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) and as an attempt to increase their influence in the continent while reducing their economic dependence on the EU. To an end, the article will introduce some recommendations for the EU as a mode of concluding remarks concerning its future relations with Southern Mediterranean countries, taking into account this new EU pivot towards the African continent.

The presence of the EU in Sub-Saharan Africa

The EU-Africa cooperation, whether on a bilateral or multilateral level, evolves around some key priority areas like governance, democracy, migration (management) and peace and security. Europe is currently the first aid provider for Africa and has established a solid military and civilian presence in the continent. With regards to its Common Defence and Security Policy (CDSP), most of EU active military Training Missions (EUTM) and civilian capacity building operations are in Sub-Saharan hot-spots, from the Sahel to the Central African Republic (CAR) and the Horn of Africa (Somalia). Four out of six EU military missions are deployed in Sub-Saharan Africa (one additional is deployed in the Mediterranean Sea) and five out of eleven EU civilian missions are undertaken in Sub-Saharan Africa, while an additional one is deployed in North Africa. Economically, the EU relations with Sub-Saharan Africa fall within the overarching framework of the Cotonou Agreement [7], adopted in 2000 and expected to last until December 2020. In Cotonou (Benin), the EU signed Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) [8] with 79 countries from Africa, the Caribbean and Pacific (ACP). EPAs cover all Sub-Saharan Africa, with some exceptions applied to those economies defined as Least Developed Countries (LDCs) like the Republic of Congo for which the EU grants duty-free, quote-free access to European markets.

Both from a security and an economic perspective, the EU foreign action in Sub-Saharan Africa has found in RECs like the ECOWAS, EAC and SADC valuable partners, able to represent the political will of their respective member states under a unique front [9]. Despite the many hurdles permeating the region and some stumbling on the way, such as the lack of prompt intervention in 2013 to prevent the Malian crisis, Sub-Saharan RECs have become influential actors in the international arena and active promoters of Pan-African integration (Agenda 2063 [10], African Continental Free Trade Area [11], African Economic Community…).

On security matters, the AU’s African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) [12], acting as the supranational legitimising body, relies on RECs to manage and prevent regional conflicts. This has been the case for the establishment of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) for the conflicts in Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau, or for the Operation Restore Democracy in The Gambia (ECOMIG) [13]. Since the 2007 Lisbon Summit [14], which established high-level regular joint meetings with the AU, the EU has developed strong ties with Sub-Saharan RECs, particularly with ECOWAS. With the latter, joint ministerial meetings have been held annually or biannually on matters of security and peacebuilding [15].

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From an economic perspective, ECOWAS, SADC and EAC have been essential for the development and integration of the continent. Despite the many challenges faced by African economies, such as weak regional production networks, high product and market concentration, and instable business environments, Sub-Saharan economic communities have achieved positive results. Within the African continent, intra-regional trade is the highest for ECOWAS, EAC and SADC, despite their relatively lower complementarity index [16] [17]. The three of them have also been pivotal for the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), signed in March 2018, enforced in May 2019 and ratified as of July 2020 by 30 African countries. The emergence of ECOWAS, SADC and EAC as important economic actors promoted further relations with the EU. Representing their member states, the three RECs signed the European EPAs (the same regulated by Cotonou), enhancing inter-regional cooperation not only in trade, but also in governance and development. Currently the growth rates of imports and exports between ECOWAS, SADC and EAC, and the EU are the highest in the whole African continent [18], higher than those in North Africa.

The political emergence of Sub-Saharan RECs and the gradual integration of their growing economies has attracted the attention of the international community. This “move towards the South” has been evident with regards to Europe and other world powers like the US and China. The EU and its member states are today the biggest aid provider to the region. Its assistance has steadily increased since 2014, reaching approximately €22 billion per year in programmes implemented at the continental, regional and national level in Africa, for which some 20% of this amount is managed by the European Commission.

In contrast with the rest of the continent, the REC responsible for the integration of North Africa, the AMU, has failed to cooperate politically and harness the economic potential derived from deeper regional integration. Pursuing their foreign relations on a bilateral basis, Southern Mediterranean countries have also shifted their attention towards Sub-Saharan Africa.

Southern Mediterranean countries turning South

Southern Mediterranean countries, especially Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, have always had special relations with the EU, determined by association agreements since the 1990s and by multiple historical and geo-political factors. Arguably, both North Africa and Europe have long tended to see their cooperation exclusively through Mediterranean lenses.

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Since the early 1990s, with European markets growing fast, North African countries have focused their bilateral negotiation efforts on enhancing cooperation with Europe. This was principally an attempt to capture a new and vibrant external import demand, and boost domestic economic growth rates [19]. While this may have been true for several years, the last decade has seen stagnating European economies, showing Maghreb countries their profound dependency on Europe as well as their isolation from the rest of Africa. For instance, Tunisia's development efforts have been significantly hampered by both their lack of cooperation with the rest of Africa and the rapid decrease in exports to Europe, due to the economic crisis and their domestic political and economic struggles [20]. However, while Mediterranean countries (both North and South) were facing economic hardship, Sub-Saharan Africa managed to emerge and become the second fastest growing region for the period 2016-2020 as indicated by the World Bank (2020). As a result, North African countries, like Europe, have shifted their attention to the South, trying to increase their influence on the rest of the continent.

In contrast with Sub-Saharan regions and their respective RECs, North Africa did not have the sufficient political willingness to cooperate, to act as a unique front. Despite their economic potential, Southern Mediterranean countries have currently the lowest rate of intra-regional trade in Africa [21]. This is mainly the result of the stalling integration process of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), a process that began thirty-one years ago (1989), but which has delivered poor results, and in any case is far from accomplishing its original ambitious goals (e.g. coordination on foreign policy, defense, economy and cultural affairs; establishment of a common market by the year 2000). In this context, different reasons can explain the current impasse within the AMU. The historic rivalry between Morocco and Algeria is probably the most relevant one. Since independence, the antagonism between the two countries has de facto blocked the creation of a prosperous and influential Maghreb, isolating the region from the integration dynamics characterising the rest of Africa [22]. The Moroccan unwillingness to set aside old territorial disputes, the Algerian reluctance to directly intervene in others' affairs [23], and the protracted Tunisian absence from AU meetings have contributed to the isolation of these three countries from the rest of Africa. Isolated and dependent on Europe, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia felt the imperative to diversify national economies and to expand political influence in their continent. Like Europe, North African countries have built their recent agendas on Sub-Saharan Africa cooperation. Each of the Arab Maghreb countries has now its priorities and strategy, whether on economic relations, governance, security, migration or diplomacy.

Morocco, under King Mohammed VI, has made clear its willingness to become a "bridge" between Africa and the EU, and a new force within the continent. In 2017, the country re-joined the AU and applied for membership in ECOWAS, while seeking to join the free trade zone of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) [24]. Particularly important is the agreement with Nigeria to develop a trans-African pipeline to transport Nigerian natural gas to Europe through Morocco. Currently a destination country for migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, Morocco increased its attention on the security situation in the Sahel, engaging in religious diplomacy and becoming the first African investor in West Africa [25].

Instability in the Sahel has also been a concern for Algeria, focused on maintaining stability on its Southern border with Mali. Algeria's role within the AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC) and APSA has always been predominant. Yet, its unwillingness to physically intervene in others' affairs has limited its involvement in the Sahel. During the last AU summit in February 2020, the Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune used his speech to announce Algeria's return to Africa [26] and the set-up of an international cooperation agency focused on Africa and the Sahel (similar to the Moroccan Agency for International Cooperation) [27] . This comes after Algeria completed, in 2019, a key part of the future trans-Saharan highway [28], designed to connect Algiers and Lagos (Nigeria).

For its part, Tunisia's attempt to expand its reach into Sub-Saharan Africa starts from a lower base. Yet, the country joined the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) in 2018 and received ECOWAS observer status in 2017.

Conclusions

Whereas Africa as a continental construction with all its RECs is gaining geo-political and economic importance, it is fundamental that the EU consolidates this pivot to the continent without undermining or neglecting the relevance that the Mediterranean region plays as a bridge between Europe and the African continent. To this end, the EU should not articulate its cooperation with the Southern Mediterranean and Africa as dissociated processes, but establish concentric circles from which the political dialogue can be fostered in juxtaposing fora, in which EU programmes and funding schemes can seek triangulation (EU-Southern Mediterranean-Africa) and cross-fertilisation in their common objectives, especially through the multilateral layer.

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From this point of view, institutional dynamics such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) should not only be preserved but also enhanced with a view to serve as a catalyst for political dialogue and initiatives between the EU and the Southern Mediterranean countries. The same goes for the Africa-EU partnership that encompasses the EU and its member states with the AU and its members. A bolder interaction between the AU and the UfM is desirable as to promote joint initiatives and programmes in multiple areas of interest such as private sector development, investment, transportation, energy, climate change, human mobility, water management and food security, among others.

The near establishment of a new single EU instrument for development cooperation (the

Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument) that unifies the existing instruments (ENI, DCI, IcSP…) into a single one for the next multiannual financial framework (for 2021-2027) will go in the right direction provided that it promotes this necessary cross-fertilisation between geographic programmes of the new instrument. Moreover, the inclusion within this new instrument of the European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFSD+) and the External Action Guarantee with an increased fire-power of €60 billion should improve the coherence of the EU foreign action in the regions.

The European and North Africa "move" towards Sub-Saharan Africa will surely affect African dynamics and the way the entire continent cooperates with the EU. Yet, in pursuing its cooperation with Southern Mediterranean countries, Europe should recognise that its neighbours have their own agenda which may not consider or favour the EU in the area. As for migration, for instance, the EU security approach has not been successful neither at home nor in North Africa. Its efforts to manage irregular migration have often been one-sided and the Maghreb has clearly no interest in becoming a buffer zone for Europe [29] . Moreover, North African countries will use migration as a leverage to increase their influence on the rest of the continent. In the context of its renewed partnership with Africa, the EU should coordinate its initiatives with its North African partners, promoting the real integration of this area. This could help promote stability in the Sahel and support real Maghreb integration as outlined in the new EU-Africa strategy [30]. However, this will not be possible until the EU defines a coherent policy towards North Africa, and a common approach to Libya, one which can successfully serve everybody's interests and that understands the complex dynamics and demands of the region.

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