



The following background document has been drafted and produced by our European Solidarity Corps intern Agne Rekeyte. The document stands as a background briefing and concept note for our event, *Crossroads Europe: The Future of EU-Africa Relations*.

The event took place online on May 18 and 20, 2021 and included one training on how to use the Conference on the Future of Europe Digital Platform, and another training to support the participants to draft and structure policy recommendations.

## The EU's Trade Policy and EU-Africa Relations



Co-funded by the  
Europe for Citizens Programme  
of the European Union





## Introduction

Africa might seem as not the most evident partner for the EU in the global context at first, however, there have been multiple efforts and strategies in ensuring mutually useful partnerships between African and the EU's states. Ursula von der Leyen has emphasized the importance of Africa as a key partner in ensuring a prosperous and sustainable future in a global context ([European Commission, 2020](#)). Thus, it presents the key idea of maintaining crucial relations between Africa and the European Union. According to the European Commission, this should be done by securing partnerships regarding the global issues of green transition and energy access, digital transformation, sustainable growth, and jobs, ensuring peace, security, and governance as well as working towards the issues of migration and mobility ([European Commission, 2020](#)). Therefore, the potential to have a mutually beneficial relationship is a reasonable choice for both Africa and the EU, while it is seen as a rational choice to tackle the problems of the 21st century ([European Commission, 2020a, p.1](#)).

## Africa - EU Relations

Given the colonial history and imperial politics, which have dominated the last century of European - African relations, some issues might arise when it comes to the relationship and potential partnerships between European Union and Africa's states. Some might argue that the colonial relationship has persisted in a form of neocolonialism. The official languages of the states have remained to be the European colonial ones, education is mostly delivered in European and not local languages, such as French or English. Moreover, the legal systems of some African countries are based on European models. This can present us with a picture of a continuing neocolonial relationship between the two continents. However, the recent trends of mutually beneficial partnerships and objectives to work towards global goals could also suggest the colonial relationship is being put behind. For instance, the implementation of the economic partnership agreements between the EU and some African Union's countries ensure a shift from giving aid to focusing on trade and mutual economic benefits ([European Commission, 2020b](#)). This demonstrates that despite the colonial heritage in Africa, the EU is working towards developing a mutual partnership instead of a continuance of imperial domination.

## One belt One Road Initiative and the triangle China - EU - Africa

Surely, the influence of China as a newly emerging global actor in politics and economics should not be missed when analyzing the EU's and Africa's relations. China's One Belt One Road transcontinental initiative seeks to ensure economic integration of different countries along the historic Silk Road ([Ibold, n.d.](#)) This could also make an impact on EU - Africa relations as the initiative includes some African partners, for instance, states as Tunisia, Egypt, Ethiopia ([Belt and Road Portal, n.d.](#)). This demonstrates the length of influence China could reach in Africa with the implementation of the project and specifically with 'the 21st Century





Maritime Silk Road', which connects China and Africa through the old historical maritime road, reaching different strategic locations, for instance, the Arabian Peninsula, Persian Gulf. However, the inclusion of Africa so far seems to be superficial as Africa is barely mentioned in the vision documents of 2015 for the initiative, maintaining a focus mostly on Asia and only then Europe, with no mention of African states (Demissie, Weigel and Xiaoyang, 2016, p.12). This demonstrates how the triangle of these actors might interplay and that the reach of the initiative might be limited, leaving more room for the European Union.

### Can the EU be competitive and attractive compared to China?

The EU certainly has its advantages as well as disadvantages, when considering the potential it has in comparison to China. It depends on how the EU can present itself to Africa as a worthy partner and its understanding of the mutual benefits, without leaving Africa in a neocolonial position as the weaker part of the partnership. Surely, the difficult colonial history does not help, however, the current new ideas of EU- Africa cooperation can influence trade agreements and development and certainly help towards improvement. With Africa seen to be a huge potential for the future, with the youngest population and rapid digitalization, the EU has been one of the main partners of trade in Africa. Currently, according to the former European Commissioner of Trade, it is the largest partner of the continent with more than 30 % of exports and imports happening across the EU and Africa ([Hogan, 2020](#)). This demonstrates how the EU's and Africa's partnership on trade is prosperous now, however, China is also an important partner for Africa. It comes second after the EU in terms of trade ([Hogan, 2020](#)). Considering that China has included Africa in the One Belt One Road Initiative and has plans for Africa to be a part of it, the EU could be left on the sidelines. Nevertheless, the EU is a major investor in sustainable development in Africa, so the partnership between the two is progressive and has 'positive dynamics' ([Hogan, 2020](#)). Therefore, so far the EU's position is quite strong and promising in the African continent.

### The geopolitics of vaccines in Africa

However, there is one major issue, which could become a clear obstacle for effective partnerships between the EU and Africa. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the problems the African continent was facing and now, the geopolitics of the vaccines has become quite complicated. The well-known Covax scheme by the World Health Organisation (WHO), aiming to provide equal access to Covid-19 vaccines, has proved to be quite inefficient. The estimates of Africa being able to reach herd immunity only by 2023 or even 2024 and the barely productive Covax scheme proves that ([Bischof, 2021](#)). Therefore, this has become a hindrance in the geopolitics of Africa and towards its partnerships with the EU. While the most wealthy EU states keep great vaccine supplies, the African continent has seen ignorance and a shortage of vaccine supply from their biggest partner. Therefore, varying decisions by the EU from seeing Africa as their global partner to solve common global issues to providing more than enough vaccines for the EU member states might pose problems to





effective cooperation between Africa and the EU in the future, consequently leaving space for China to obtain power in the African continent and overtake promising EU's partnerships with Africa's states.

### Conclusion

Overall, addressing the important issues of the European Union's and Africa's relations with regard to their colonial past, China's potential influence in the African continent, and how these three might be connected could contribute to a better understanding of the problems facing the EU today and its partnerships in Africa. This can then offer insight and further discussion on these matters. For that, the Europa Union Deutschland has organized a series of events regarding the theme of 'Global Europe' to explore the topics of development cooperation and EU - Africa relations concerning the current issues facing Europe, such as trade and vaccine distribution.

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