

INTRODUCTION

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Since the inception of the European Communities, Africa has been on the horizon for the development of foreign and diplomatic relations, largely due to European states' will to maintain relations with former colonies and to exert some form of normative power (Haastrup, 2013). However, both the institutional developments in practice and the study of European-African relations have been marked by an asymmetrical hierarchical relationship imbued with post-colonial characteristics. Reasons for this state of affairs are often attributed to Africa being a complex continent with more than fifty countries with porous and volatile border areas and differentiated relationships with both the European Union (EU) and its Member States. On the other hand, Europe is also made up of a myriad of different states with very different and oftentimes complex historical relationships with African countries.

The European Communities' diplomatic and strategic relations with the African continent date back to the Treaty of Rome (1957) and the launching of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States (ACP), since 2020 renamed the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS) (Raimundo, 2021). The European Union-Africa Union Summit was launched in 2000 (by then not including all African countries), aimed at overcoming the limitations of the ACP agreements, particularly trade restrictions. The Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES), set up at the Lisbon Summit of 2007, established a roadmap of intentions stressing partnership engagement but not clarifying its operationalization or its funding, which later summits tried to implement (Kell & Vines, 2020).

In February 2022, the 6th European Union-African Union Summit took place in Brussels. It had been postponed for two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, an issue that would shape an agenda that otherwise could be seen as a follow-up of the same issues – and problems – of previous gatherings. The Joint Vision for 2030, agreed upon in Brussels, focused on security, human rights, gender equality, children's rights, youth, democracy, the rule of law and good governance, climate change, and food security. It also added a new priority, namely equitable access to vaccines. The main announcements, however, concerned the Global Gateway, a €150 billion project geared towards infrastructure investment in Africa as well as funding for the manufacturing of the SARS-COVID-19 vaccine in six African countries (Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, and Tunisia) (European Council, 2022).

The almost concomitant Ukrainian invasion by the Russian Federation and the support given to the Ukrainian government by the EU overcame the visibility of these projects (Carbone, 2023). Their influence remains nonetheless, as do the criticisms that persist, summit after summit, concerning the lack of a real part-

nership. The postponement of debt relief restructuring remains a key problem, which would allow some African economies to stabilize (Shiferaw, 2023). On the positive side, it is possible to highlight the European support of continental initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the African Peace Fund, and the reinvigorated role of the Africa Centres for Disease Control (CDC).

From an institutional viewpoint, given the complexity of both contexts and their relations, it is therefore more straightforward to deal with the level of analysis of the main regional organizations on each continent – the African Union (AU) and the EU. Yet, while this relationship has changed in the past decade, allowing for greater African agency, it also remains complex and uneven (Haastrup et al., 2021; Scheipers & Sicurelli, 2008) and marked by a considerable convergence/dissonance gap (Del Biondo, 2020; Gibert & Nivet, 2013).

This gap has consolidated significantly over the years despite the substantial diplomatic, financial, and institutional attention that the EU has attributed to the AU, in recognition of the latter's leading role in African foreign and security policy (Mattheis et al., 2023). Indeed, the AU's relationship with the EU has grown more multifaceted and, to some extent, more conflictual, often triggering mistrust and hindering the implementation of mutual agreements (Kotsopoulos & Mattheis, 2018; Miyandazi et al., 2018). Its susceptibility to growing tensions on the conceptualization and promotion of human rights and good governance agendas (Sanches, 2021), has further pushed contemporary debates to recognize an inter-institutional dynamic undergoing a period of flux.

This special issue, although not exclusively dedicated to this level of analysis, has a clear focus on EU-AU relations from different perspectives. The most prevalent topic is security, with several articles delving into this issue in the relationship between the EU and the AU. Luís Bernardino offers a policy-oriented article, focusing on the reasons for the lack of success of the attempts at strengthening strategic cooperation between both organizations. On the other hand, Ricardo Sousa explores norms diffusion, through which the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) emulates the EU, thus reiterating the latter's normative power and identifying a possible road for APSA to become fully operational.

Broadening the topic of security beyond the military, Uzoma Patrick-Agulonye, Daniel Adayi, and Francisca Chinemerem provide an analysis of some challenges faced by both organizations in their relationship, focusing on climate change, poverty, and sociopolitical fragilities. This article produces some recommendations on how both the EU and the AU can mutually benefit from this relationship and enhance regional and global stability. Maintaining the focus

on systemic transversal security issues, Philip J. Havik focuses on the AU-EU Partnership in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The author explores the example of the EU's health diplomacy and its ambition to shape African institutions while comparing the models of both organizations, including their regulatory policies.

Broadening the scope of EU-Africa relations, António Raimundo analyzes the new post-Cotonou Agreement and its implications for the governance of EU-Africa relations. The author focuses on the negotiations and main innovations of this agreement and identifies some of its challenges regarding complementarity and fragmentation in EU-Africa relations. Finally, Arlinda Cabral's article offers a reflection on education policies in Sub-Saharan Africa vis-à-vis global education agendas, concluding that while there is effective incorporation into national policies, there is still a need for further research on the reach of global educational objectives.

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