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From aid manager to diplomatic power? The EU's role in addressing state fragility in Ivory Coast

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>> The European Union (EU) has a history of involvement in Ivory Coast under the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) partnership. However, Ivory Coast's slide into fragility during the past decade and the 2010 post-election crisis revealed the weakness of EU engagement. This challenged the EU to move beyond its traditional role as aid donor to develop a more politically-focused and strategic approach.

In response to Ivory Coast's crisis, the EU complemented its existing development cooperation with stabilisation and humanitarian interventions, in addition to a focus on state building and democracy. It also strengthened its diplomatic engagement. However, the crisis revealed serious shortcomings in the EU's post-Lisbon Treaty external relations, notably its lack of strategic thinking, weak leadership by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and divisions between member states. The EU must now focus on addressing the drivers of fragility in Ivory Coast, particularly the fragmentation of the political elite, latent ethnic and economic divisions and the precarious public security situation. In order to do so effectively, the EU must adapt its approach, strengthening its political analysis and strategic thinking and overcoming internal dysfunction and leadership struggles.

Following years of political wars and xenophobic violence, Laurent Gbagbo took power in Ivory Coast in 2000. His authority was soon challenged by an organised rebellion that took control of the north of the country. In response, the United Nations Security Council approved international intervention through the deployment of the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI), supported by the French Operation Unicorn. Although elections are a vital part of any peace process, the first polls only took place in October 2010. Gbagbo lost to Alassane Ouattara, who was

HIGHLIGHTS

- To address state fragility in Ivory Coast, the EU must move beyond its traditional aid management role to adopt a more coherent and political country strategy.
- A weak EEAS, divisions among member states and reluctance to use hard power have prevented the EU from taking leadership in Ivory
- The EU must prioritise work on the main drivers of fragility in Ivory Coast: elite fragmentation, barriers to reconciliation and security sector reform.

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»»»»» finally installed in power in April 2011, following military assistance by rebel forces, UNOCI and Operation Unicorn. The ramifications of the post-election conflict were severe: at least 3,000 people died and over one million were exiled or internally displaced. Beyond its conflict and security problems, Ivory Coast continues to experience serious development challenges. It ranks 149th in the Human Development Index, 51 per cent of its population live in poverty and youth unemployment stands at 70 per cent. International support is urgently required to stabilise the country and forge a pathway to development.

INCONSISTENT COUNTRY STRATEGY

The absence of a politically sensitive and consistent country strategy undermined the EU's response to the 2010 crisis in Ivory Coast. Although the Union developed broader policies aimed at addressing the political and security situation, it failed to consider Ivory Coast's weak national processes, which lack accountability. These internal flaws ultimately hampered the EU's efforts. The EU also put in place new diplomatic measures, but these were implemented on an ad hoc basis.

Prior to the crisis, the EU's focus was on traditional development efforts: from 2003–2009, 58 per cent of the EU budget was allocated to areas including water provision, agriculture, livestock, trade and transport. The EU also supported Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) activities, in partnership with the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and GTZ. However, DDR efforts did not reach most combatant cells, instead benefiting 'fake' soldiers. The impact was limited. Not only was the initiative badly managed, but once the allocated funds (at least €16 million) were spent, follow-up was inconsistent and insufficient. Ultimately the EU's DDR effort failed to encourage the government and the rebels to end the conflict.

The EU also supported the electoral process, covering up to 50 per cent of election costs. It collaborated with the Independent Electoral Commission, the

Prime Minister's office and the UN to develop the electoral register. However, voters' eligibility was undermined by new laws defining 'Ivorianness', which disqualified much of the population from citizenship and ignited tensions over land and economic rights. The registration process was deeply flawed: some offices accepted the 'family document' as proof of citizenship while others rejected it, and birth certificates were easily forged. Corruption absorbed much of the Ivorian election budget and undermined the effectiveness of EU support.

Nevertheless, the EU showed significant commitment to resolving the electoral crisis. From November 2010 to April 2011 the EU's efforts kept Ivory Coast on the international community's radar. The European delegation and European embassy staff also remained in Abidjan throughout the violence. Unlike other donors, the EU continued to fund NGO projects during this period. EU countries unanimously recognised Ouattara as President while he was still in the Gulf Hotel and engaged with the new Ouattara-appointed diplomats, thereby helping to marginalise Gbagbo. In addition, the EU adopted economic sanctions, including an assets freeze on state companies and visa bans on Gbagbo's allies. However, it was the West African Central Bank's severing of relations with Gbagbo and the broader embargo on exports and maritime ports that had the most significant impact on Gbagbo's access to resources. The EU also provided aid in other areas. By summer 2010, €248 million from the 10th European Development Fund (EDF) was available for disbursement for good governance, agriculture and regional infrastructure. Overall, the EU response to the 2010 crisis was swift and well-coordinated between the delegation in Abidjan and the Council in Brussels. Nevertheless, the EEAS did not generate a coherent political strategy and progress was hindered by the fact that policies remained ad hoc.

EUROPE'S REFUSAL TO LEAD

The Lisbon Treaty sought to empower the EU for international leadership but has so far merely complicated external action. The EEAS has been unable to overcome the bureaucratic divisions that prevent

effective diplomatic action and channel the multiple voices of member states into one. Member states' interests – those of France, in the case of Ivory Coast – continue to drive EU action, undermining the aspiration to a collective response. European diplomatic 'choices', such as refraining from the use of force and relying on African partners, appear to be a means of avoiding leadership. In the case of Ivory Coast, the EU has insisted on limiting its role to that of donor, rather than becoming a strong diplomatic partner.

The EU's role in election observation highlighted its lack of coordination and apolitical policies. Although the EU provided key data that the UN

used to substantiate Ouattara's victory, the mission quickly left the country without making any 'political' suggestions on how the findings could be implemented. Once Ouattara was installed, Ivory Coast would have benefited from a symbolic high-level visit from High Representative Ashton. Instead, there were two lower profile vis-

its by EU officials, one a composite EEAS delegation and the other headed by Development Commissioner Piebalgs. In addition to development assistance, the EU provided humanitarian aid through ECHO. The leadership of development and humanitarian actors – along with the lack of a visit from Ashton to lend political weight to EU engagement in Ivory Coast – ultimately meant that the EU response was restricted to these two fields.

French shaping of EU policies in Ivory Coast has not only secured France's national economic interests, but has also influenced decision making in Brussels. While France's strength precluded EU leadership, EU institutions and member states also accommodated France. In this sense, the case of

Ivory Coast illustrated the problem of multiple actors shaping EU foreign affairs.

On the one hand, France was relatively detached from collective EU action. Rather than working closely with the EU delegation in Ivory Coast, France prioritised the Security Council and its own bilateral relations. As it had supported military force in Libya, France felt increasing pressure to intervene in Ivory Coast. The French government therefore obtained a new formal request from the UN Secretary General, enabling it to use Operation Unicorn's commando operation to expel Gbagbo. However, France's failure to involve the rest of the EU in this effort was also partly due to the Union's internal shortcomings. Member states were reluctant to intervene for French interests, allowing France to act by default. Moreover, in some European circles, diplomats became sensitive to Gbagbo's communications campaign, which presented intervention as neo-colonial interference.

Another major challenge was the EU's reluctance to use military power. As in Libya, Ashton opposed non-civilian EU operations despite her heated condemnation of Gbagbo's abuses. Member states also disagreed over the use of force in Ivory Coast, mirroring Germany's reluctance to intervene in Libya. Most countries refused to commit additional funds or troops, and the idea of substituting French forces with an EU operation (as in Chad and the Central African Republic) was never even suggested. Certainly most Ivorians would have preferred an African operation, or else a strong UN or EU, to resolve the electoral stalemate. While a 'civilian power EU' is advertised as a choice, the fact is that the Union's insistence on disconnecting political leadership from hard power and its reluctance to use force prevent this from being truly possible. In order to effectively deal with conflict and stabilisation, CSDP operations should become a valid option in the EU's portfolio.

Once post-election negotiations began, the EU yielded to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union and African countries, allowing them to mediate and diffuse the situation. However, the effectiveness of



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»»»»» the African response was undermined by divisions between actors. South Africa and Nigeria were unable to rally others to their respective anti- and pro-interventionist positions and Gbagbo maintained powerful allies such as Angola. West African countries were divided between those that were openly anti-Gbagbo and those that feared military intervention would set a negative precedent and spread the violence. The EU used its diplomatic leverage with some countries to isolate Gbagbo. However, although the EU provides significant funds to African institutions and they play a central role in the Joint Africa-Europe Strategy, the EU failed to apply sufficient pressure to African institutions. Given its own shortcomings, it is understandable that the EU is lenient with other institutions. However, unconditional engagement with African partners needs to be reconsidered. While these institutions certainly need support to provide 'African solutions for African problems', this mantra also masks an EU choice to downplay its own role and evade responsibility.

ONGOING STATE FRAGILITY IN IVORY COAST

For the EU to play a valuable role in Ivory Coast, it must address the three main drivers of fragility within the country: political fragmentation, ethnic and economic divisions that undermine reconciliation and lack of security. This demands a political understanding of fragility that transcends technical responses. It also requires increased coordination between governance, security and development policies. The EU must improve its policy coherence and develop a more strategic approach that goes beyond its traditional aid management role.

Shoring up President Ouattara may seem an appealing option for the EU at present, but blanket support will prove counterproductive in the long term. Elite fragmentation has been responsible for much of Ivory Coast's instability, where politics is characterised by personalised leadership and party volatility. There is a possibility that Ouattara's camp might simply replace the previous elite, perpetuating the vicious circle of privileged access to resources. Inter-

national actors – including the EU – should therefore support pluralism and a constructive role for the opposition, which has the potential to spoil the transition. The strong presidential regime in Ivory Coast means that legislative and judicial institutions are currently dominated by the executive. EU election and institution building support should address these 'balance of power' challenges.

Reconciliation is dangerously undermined by hate speech and xenophobia, combined with unequal economic opportunities and the possibility of 'winners' justice'. In light of this, the EU should support three key actions to aid reconciliation. Firstly, it should help to map the complex causes of conflict and use its findings to inform domestic and international policy making. For example, UNDP research has linked conflict to land ownership and to conflicting interests between farmers and cattle-owners and used this knowledge to identify reconstruction needs by regions.

Secondly, the EU must support politically sensitive transitional justice. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have denounced violations not only by Gbagbo's partisans, but also by pro-Ouattara ex-rebels now in the national military. It is therefore important to ensure that the work of the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission is effective and extends to the whole of Ivorian society. Use of the International Criminal Court in Ivory Coast could end up being politicised as in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, or irrelevant as in Sudan. In addition to transitional justice, EU policies must support capacity building across the judicial system.

Thirdly, the EU should support economic reconstruction. Ivoirians elected Ouattara for his focus on economic development and his good relationship with both financial institutions and France, a critical donor. He has already delivered to some extent on these expectations. The International Monetary Fund recently reviewed the Rapid Credit Facility and announced a three-year programme under the Extended Credit Facility. Moreover, France has converted a historic €2 billion Ivorian debt into investment and compensations, set up a loan with

exceptional conditions, and conceded €100 million for French companies. In addition, the French Development Agency supports businesses in Ivory Coast, and sponsors microfinance initiatives such as Microcred and Advans. The EU could also contribute to growth and economic development in Ivory Coast, through both budget support and funding for civil society.

A priority in post-conflict Ivory Coast is to control armed groups and bandits and ensure that the Republican Forces of Ivory Coast (RFIC) can provide security throughout the country. However, the RFIC is dominated by the ex-rebel New Forces, led by Guillaume Soro, Ouattara's Prime Minister and Defence Minister. Former New Forces members still stand in for state security along international borders, where they deal with customs; in major towns, where they provide their own administration and police; and at countless checkpoints. They charge fees for transporting goods and people in a para-fiscal system estimated to cost the Ivorian state €230 million per year. Given that a similar situation exists across West Africa, including in Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Benin and Togo, a regional response to these security problems appears to be a strong option.

Ouattara is currently exploring Security Sector Reform (SSR) with France, the EU, the United States (US) and UNOCI. UNOCI could be useful for DDR, but its capacity is limited. Given its success in Somalia, US-EU cooperation would be worth exploring further in Ivory Coast. The EU has the expertise and operational capacity for SSR, along with good civil-military planning. However, the EEAS struggles to define CSDP missions and funding is improvised rather than allocated. In Ivory Coast, any funds for SSR will probably come from the 'B envelope' (EU funds foreseen in the EDF but not allocated to programmes). Since Member states are reluctant to man CSDP missions, the EU is likely to co-opt ECOWAS and the African Union. However, this could politicise the mission, limiting its effectiveness. It is likely that France would assume EU leadership on security matters, although the French do seem open to a European-led SSR.

CONCLUSION

The crisis in Ivory Coast tested the EU's post-Lisbon Treaty capacity for international relations. It needed to expand its traditional capacity as aid manager and take a broader diplomatic role to effectively respond to state fragility and the post-electoral crisis.

On the positive side, the EU reacted to the crisis with strong declarations, increased coordination among member states and economic sanctions. It also provided support for elections and peace building programmes, showing flexibility by acting swiftly and allocating new funds. However, the EEAS proved unable to develop a strong country strategy that responded to the political dynamics of Ivory Coast. Ultimately the EU did not assume international leadership, and was at times paralyzed by internal divisions over the use of force.

To strengthen its response in Ivory Coast, the EU must consolidate the shift from donor to strategic diplomatic partner. The new Country Strategy Paper/National Indicative Program should be politically sensitive and address drivers of state fragility. Policies and tools must be based on a stronger EU strategy that prioritises political dialogue and engages the US, Canada and African diplomatic partners. The EU could take a greater lead in the area of SSR. It also needs to reconsider its unconditional engagement with African institutions. While a West African regional response is necessary for Ivory Coast, the EU must insist that regional institutions deliver on the ground. Finally, the EEAS must strengthen its coordination and strategising, seeking to draw France into a collective EU response.

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