



Africa: the EU-US security-economy nexus

by Dominik Balthasar and Cristina Barrios

Africa has come to rank high on the US and EU agendas. While the EU hosted its fourth EU-Africa meeting on 2-3 April, US President Barack Obama is preparing his first 'US-Africa Leaders Summit' for 4-6 August. Meanwhile, French President François Hollande is visiting the Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Chad this weekend. His tour comes only days after France announced its decision to replace 'Operation Serval', undertaken in response to the military offensive of radical Islamists in Mali in early 2013, with a wider counter-terrorism operation codenamed 'Barkhane'. Other EU member states are also re-defining their engagement with Africa: Germany, to name one, is seeking closer military cooperation with France in the Central African Republic and is in the process of elaborating a new Africa strategy.

What emerges from this renewed attention towards the continent is that both the US and the EU have subscribed to a two-pronged approach encompassing a focus on security and economic cooperation. Hence, despite tangible operational differences between them, they converge on a specific understanding of both security and economic aspects. While security is largely framed as countering violent extremism, economic cooperation has primarily come to be seen through trade and foreign direct investment lenses. It is essential, however, that this security-economy 'nexus' does not impair ongoing efforts regarding governance and state-building.

Prioritising security

The most pronounced feature of US and EU engagement in Africa lies in their current focus on 'hard' security measures. Having taken the lead in military operations in the Sahel and beyond, France encapsulates this approach. The new 'Operation Barkhane' continues to pursue a targeted counter-terrorism objective, albeit adjusting from a national to a regional perspective. Sticking to the deployment of 3,000 troops, 20 helicopters, and 3 drones, French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian declared that this lays the ground for a 'long-lasting presence' of France in the region spanning from Mauritania to Chad. Meanwhile other EU member states are providing significant contributions to EU military operations in the area.

The US, too, is focusing on 'hard' security measures in Africa and has become a proponent of the recent French operations, supporting its activities with intelligence and logistics. Moreover, Washington has carried out counter-terrorism actions in the Sahel since 2002, and the US Africa Command (Africom), established in 2008, provides training and equipment to African militaries also beyond the region. According to Africom sources, an average of 5,000 American soldiers is deployed in Africa on any given day. And the declaration by a high-ranking Africom official that 'I'm not an Africa expert – I'm an al-Qaeda expert' attests to the definition of security that the US entertains in the African context.



However, confining security to military operations in general – and counter-terrorism activities more specifically – risks hobbling ongoing efforts in support of democratic governance and state-building, as shown by a recent study by the Life and Peace Institute in the context of Somalia. While military means to counter violent extremism remain necessary, past international engagements in the Horn of Africa, the Sahel and elsewhere have shown that a broader understanding of security is needed, if the challenges emanating from both extremism and underdevelopment are to be tackled effectively and sustainably. The EU seeks to include conflict prevention measures and remains the main development partner for most African countries. Yet, ‘hard’ security has increasingly attracted most of the attention and, possibly, funds.

Exchanging aid for trade

During the April 2014 EU-Africa summit, leaders from both sides proclaimed the need for a fundamental shift from aid to trade as an agent of poverty reduction. Accordingly, the French presidential visit to Côte d’Ivoire aims, first and foremost, at boosting economic and business partnerships between the two countries, and ensuring that French investment and aid advance bilateral trade. This new emphasis also resonates with other EU member states: for instance, the concept note of the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, which is likely to inspire the government’s forthcoming Africa strategy, clearly pushes for a greater role for the private sector.

Such a shift from aid to trade is increasingly evident, too, in the US approach to Africa. When President Obama visited Africa one year ago, he travelled with some 100 American businessmen and representatives from major US companies, including General Electric, Microsoft, Coca Cola, and mining giant Caterpillar. And while the upcoming US-Africa summit in August will address a whole range of issues, its main focus will be on forging economic partnerships. This is highlighted by the fact that the conference will host the first ever US-Africa business forum, which is set to eclipse the focus on security – limited to a working lunch on ‘Peace and Regional Stability’.

Over the past decade, in fact, trade relations with Africa have grown in importance for both the US and EU. While goods imports from Africa to the US have fluctuated at around €48 billion per year between 2004 and 2013, US exports to Africa have increased by 38%, reaching €25.7 billion in 2013. Similarly, while EU imports from Africa stood at an average of €137 billion during the same period, EU exports to

Africa rose from €76 billion in 2004 to 152 billion a decade later.

Although trade carries the potential of fostering economic development, there is a danger that the US and EU succumb to the idea that trade, *per se*, will alleviate poverty – by no means a foregone conclusion. For one, the potential benefits stemming from trade significantly hinge on the respective economic sectors, and Africa’s resource sector – for example – is (in)famous for its negative impact on sustainable development. For another, in order to contribute to poverty alleviation, the shift from aid to trade needs to be accompanied by social investment and redistribution policies – at heart, issues of governance.

Squaring the circle

This re-emphasising of the security-economy nexus somewhat mirrors Africa’s Janus-faced predicament. While being a continent affected by serious (security-related) challenges, it also provides significant opportunities – a point increasingly made by many across the Atlantic. This circle of opposites can possibly be squared only by taking governance into account. African crises can be tackled, and African opportunities can be seized to the benefit of all involved only if governance mechanisms are strengthened and functional states are put in place. The US and the EU should not lose sight of governance and state-building as key priorities – including in Côte d’Ivoire, Niger, and Chad. Although the White House has not invited the presidents from Zimbabwe and Sudan to the August summit, many of the African leaders that will be present – including those from Angola, Equatorial Guinea, and Cameroon – have significantly stretched democratic principles for decades, and kept a tight grip on domestic security forces that safeguard their regimes.

Within the next three years a dozen presidential elections are due to take place in Africa. This makes insisting on governance, rule of law, and state-building immensely important, not least to achieve progress in the common fight against poverty and terrorism. In a speech before the Ghanaian parliament back in 2009, President Obama famously stated that ‘Africa does not need strong men – it needs strong institutions’. Five years later, and despite the rise of the terrorist threat, there is no reason to ditch this principle. Rather, it needs to become part and parcel of the new ‘nexus’ – or ‘compact’ – linking Africa’s security with its economy and trade.

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