



Why Africa matters

by Cristina Barrios and Alex Vines

The 4th EU-Africa Summit held in Brussels last week brought together 80 national delegations, 41 of them led by heads of state or government. African leaders ignored Zimbabwe's call for a boycott or postponement of the summit, following the EU's refusal to lift travel restrictions on President's Mugabe's wife. Described by the prime minister of Lesotho as a 'business-like' event, the summit took place at a busy time for African summitry, which now includes a United States-Africa meeting (scheduled for August 2014), and, since 2000, regular China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) summits.

Assessing the summit

While all these top-level meetings are a sign of the growing geopolitical importance of the continent, both the EU's attempts to strengthen its partnership with Africa and its Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) have, to date, largely disappointed. The summit in Brussels sought, therefore, to place the partnership on a firmer footing.

According to the summit declaration and the Roadmap 2014-17, the JAES will sharpen EU-Africa objectives and reduce the eight current spheres of cooperation (called 'partnerships') to five 'areas of mutual interest'. For example, 'climate change' may disappear as a separate JAES item and be incorporated into a broader area of cooperation on 'global and emerging issues'. At the same time, a specific target has already been set: the adoption of an EU-Africa

agreement under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change at the UN Conference to be held in Paris in 2015. The rigid format of JAES implementation through Joint Expert Groups is likely to be scrapped and replaced by less technical – and possibly higher level – platforms. However, this alone will not solve the problems of implementation, which are perceived differently by each side: Europeans lament the stagnant regional integration of the continent and the seemingly limited capacity of African states to absorb support, whereas Africans object to 'unjustified' European delays in the supply of funds linked to conditionality.

With specific commitments made to the African Peace Facility (€750 million over the next three years) and capacity-building efforts, the 'peace and security partnership' is the area which has seen most progress. Indeed, most collateral meetings were about regional security challenges and the role of various actors at an African, European or UN level.

EU and African heads of state and government also acknowledged points of friction, in the Declaration on Migration and Mobility, for example. Although the Declaration also advocates cooperation on international justice, given the standoff between the African Union and the International Criminal Court (ICC) over the indictment of African leaders, how this will work in practice remains unclear. Moreover, the gap – or rather gulf – between Europe and Africa regarding the anti-LGBT measures adopted by some African countries is evident

in the summit text on human rights and gender equality. The commitment to ‘undertaking political consultations’ on the reform of the main UN bodies alludes to the campaign(s) for a permanent African seat in the Security Council, and full convergence on such thorny issues as the Economic Partnership Agreements is still to be reached.

Europe’s promotion of democracy, good governance and human rights in Africa was once again tested by the summit guest list. Sudan, prudently, only dispatched a high-level delegation, as all EU states are signatories to the ICC and would be obliged to arrest President Omar al-Bashir were he to enter Europe. While Africa’s longest serving president, Equatorial Guinea’s Teodoro Obiang Nguema (in power for 35 years) did attend, the notable absence of President Mugabe – despite the special effort made to invite him – has done Zimbabwe no favours at a time in which the country is in urgent need of foreign direct investment (FDI). It is also quite clear that some African leaders are courting other international partners – especially China and to a lesser extent Brazil and India – hoping that Europeans will adopt a business-first strategy and drop their concerns over good governance, human rights and democracy.

In addition, while Europeans insist on dealing with Africa as a continent, its actual record regarding integration – both continental and regional – is patchy. The recent crises in Mali and the Central African Republic can be added to the list of examples where inter-state disagreement has led to inaction within the African Union. On the ground, it is national regimes – and often political leaders – who resist further efforts at integration, despite the economic benefits that open, pan-African markets and infrastructure development could bring to their populations. This lack of integration cannot be tackled by the EU alone, and African leaders cannot continue to blame ‘external actors’ for their economic underdevelopment in the post-colonial era.

Looking backwards - and forwards

These problems notwithstanding, the quantity and quality of the turnout at the Brussels summit shows that, increasingly, Africa matters.

More than 50 years after the independence of most African states, the continent now boasts solid economic growth, stronger civil societies, and better institutions, as well as significant advances in communications and information technology. Africa is still rich in minerals and energy, and both the frequency and the intensity of the ‘resource wars’ of the past have declined significantly. Following the spike

witnessed at the end of the Cold War, major wars for state power in sub-Saharan Africa are now (20 years after the Rwanda massacre) thankfully rare, with the overall number of conflicts having halved since 1990. That said, low level insurgencies – involving mobile rebel groups (like LRA, AQIM, Boko Haram, Al-Shabab) which operate across national borders – have increased. Additionally, electoral violence (as seen in Zimbabwe, Kenya, or Côte d’Ivoire) continues to plague the continent (although it also testifies to the reintroduction of multi-party contests).

Finally, ageing and resilient leaders often preside over countries which are getting ever younger, and rapid population growth – concentrated especially in impoverished and environmentally strained regions – is fuelling internal migration, urbanisation and, at times, radicalisation.

Ensuring the continent’s prosperity and security is in Europe’s strategic interest. North Africa and the Sahel are part of Europe’s ‘extended’ neighbourhood; piracy and armed robbery at sea in the Gulf of Guinea and the Indian Ocean affect international trade, hitting European as well as African business by, *inter alia*, raising insurance premiums; and religious/political radicalisation is a challenge shared by both continents.

Europe’s current economic slowdown is also hurting Africa, leading to less trade, tourism, and remittances from local diasporas. As the world’s most youthful continent, skilled and mobile Africans could assist in boosting both Africa’s and Europe’s economic performance, if given the space and the opportunity to do so. Nigeria is soon to become the world’s third-largest country by population after India and China, and Lagos, Dar es Salaam and Bamako are among the fastest-growing cities on earth. According to a recent UN study, half of the top 20 largest populations in the world in 2100 are projected to be found in Africa.

Africa still partly depends on Europe for development, FDI, trade and investment, capacity-building, funding of peace and security, and building institutional resilience. Europe, in turn, relies on Africa for migration, trade, and global governance reform. This 4th EU-Africa summit has, overall, done no harm and probably some good, and should be seen as a stepping stone on the path to a deeper, more comprehensive bilateral relationship.

Cristina Barrios is a Senior Analyst at the EUISS.

Alex Vines is the Head of the Africa Programme at Chatham House.

