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Country Report



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Third EU-AU Ministerial Meeting in Brussels – New Impetus on the Anniversary?

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On May 21, the foreign ministers of the European Union and the African Union met for the third time in Brussels. The aim of the meeting was to take stock of the progress made since the sixth EU-AU summit in February 2022¹. Both sides also wanted to explore how the partnership can be further deepened in the face of global challenges. The adopted declaration gives an idea of the potential for cooperation. However, it cannot hide existing differences on key issues such as migration. To ensure that cooperation is not limited to solemn declarations and ambitious announcements at summit meetings, it was agreed to set up a monitoring mechanism.

This year's conference coincided with a special year: 2025 marks the 25th anniversary of the strategic partnership between the EU and the AU - a unique cooperation between two neighbouring continents. It is based on common political, economic and security interests as well as on the guidelines of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the AU's Agenda 2063. In this context, the meeting also served as preparation for the seventh joint summit at head of state and government level, which is due to take place in Africa later this year. The ministerial meeting was chaired by the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Kaja Kallas, and the Angolan Foreign Minister, Tete António, who currently holds the chairmanship of the Executive Council of the African Union. The presence of over 70 delegations in Brussels, including more than 50 ministers, demonstrated the enormous importance for both sides.

1) Between demands and disorientation - expectations of the African Union at the ministerial meeting

As the African Union's largest development partner, the EU has been offering the neighbouring continent a wide range of forms of cooperation for years in order to improve the critical overall situation in various regions of the continent, which also have a direct impact on

¹ https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/54412/final_declaration-en.pdf

developments in Europe. The EU has also been trying to promote infrastructure corridors on the African continent through projects under the EU Global Gateway initiative, which was launched in 2021, even before the dimensions of the Chinese New Silk Road became known. However, it was precisely this approach that was criticized by the newly elected President of the African Union Commission, Djiboutian Mahmoud Ali Youssuf, in a press conference ahead of the ministerial meeting between the two institutions. The projects were “too slow, Eurocentric and not on an equal footing”² and therefore not what the AU had in mind. According to Youssuf, the EU-AU partnership should instead be based on the African Union's ambitious and multi-layered Agenda 2063, as this already describes the AU's interests and goals in detail.

“Eye-to-Eye level” is the keyword used by African diplomats, Commission staff and think tankers in Addis Ababa. They want to break away from the paradigm of development cooperation, decide independently on partnerships develop as much autonomy as possible. However, the reality does look different given the fact that the African Union is still struggling for legitimacy among its own population. Despite efforts on many levels, the Union has not been able to shape the continent according to its own visions and principles. This is primarily due to an unwillingness of the member states to give up parts of their own sovereignty to the AU. The AU's annual motto for 2025 is “Justice for Africans and people of African descent through reparations”. A comprehensive reappraisal of the European colonial era³ (exclusively) is primarily intended as a vehicle for a stronger representation of Africa on the international and multilateral stage. A Nigerian think tanker explained in an interview that the term ‘reparations’ is by no means purely financially connoted by the AU. Rather, it stands for the need for a serious European commitment that meets Africa at eye-to-eye level and contributes to promoting Africa in its position in the world as a result of a shared past. This includes the deadlocked debate on the reform of the UN Security Council with a permanent African voice (with veto rights), but also a reform of the international financial system in favour of fairer treatment of Africa. Furthermore, it is also about the return of stolen artifacts; bilateral financial compensation, on the other hand, only plays a secondary role - contrary to various public debates.

In terms of security policy, the African Union is hoping above all for (financial and intellectual) support from the EU in the areas of conflict prevention, stakeholder coordination and capacity building of regional structures for the formation of AU-led peace operations on the African continent. According to an African diplomat from the advisory staff of the AU Commissioner for Peace and Security, Bankole Adeoye, the latter in particular is in Europe's interest. By providing material and financial support to AU peacekeeping forces, Europe could contribute to peace in Africa's conflict hotspots without having to send its own soldiers.

However, another diplomat reported that the AU is reluctant to set a clear agenda and prefers to see the EU in the leading role; the EU should put forward positions and decisions. However, it is hard to deny that this is ultimately in direct contradiction to the AU's other expectations of conducting politics on an equal footing and in the interests of both sides.

² <https://vimeo.com/event/5124071>

³ There are no discussions with the successor states of the Ottoman Empire, above all Turkey, about reparations for the slave trade to America in the 18th and 19th centuries.

2) Expectations and Agenda of the EU

In the first six months of the new Commission, the partnership between the EU and the AU has rarely been at the forefront. The ministerial meeting was therefore also an opportunity to make it clear that, despite the justified focus on the situation in its eastern neighbourhood, the EU is serious about its goal of “giving new impetus”⁴ to the mutual partnership, as formulated in the Commission President's political guidelines. The Global Gateway initiative is also intended to help with this, as around half of the funds for Global Gateway are dedicated to benefit projects on the African continent. In principle, the EU has been making increasing efforts in recent years to emphasize that it is striving for partnerships “on an equal footing” with countries on the African continent. Accordingly, both the ministerial meeting and the summit itself should emphasize the partnership nature of the relationship. Other topics that were a particular focus for the EU included Cooperation in the area of migration, security and raw materials partnerships. Representatives of several EU countries also proposed the introduction of a monitoring mechanism in advance in order to track the implementation of promises made at ministerial meetings and summits.

3) Key Points of the Ministerial Meeting

The ministerial declaration⁵ is primarily based on four pillars: a. Economy and sustainability; b. Peace and security; c. Migration and mobility and d. Cooperation at multilateral level. Despite the emphasis on common goals, the wording remained vague in many areas.

Central to economic cooperation is the EU's support in implementing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and strengthening economic resilience. The aim here is to create a growth engine through investment in sustainable infrastructure, access to finance and the promotion of jobs, particularly for women and young people. It is questionable whether these measures can drive the desired integration and regional value creation, as concrete measures to promote local entrepreneurship and job creation are often a long time coming. In terms of climate protection and energy policy, both sides reaffirmed their willingness to intensify cooperation, particularly in the area of renewable energies and green technologies as well as a fair energy transition. However, despite this rhetorical determination, there is a lack of investment from the private sector that could accelerate actual implementation on the continent, as there is often a lack of targeted communication between the EU institutions and the private sector. The EU's Global Gateway initiative, which is considered a key instrument for sustainable infrastructure projects, was also highlighted as the key to achieving these goals. A total of 138 of the program's 264 flagship projects are located in Africa, which shows the clear focus on the continent. Interestingly, the Angolan co-chair of the ministerial meeting, whose country is also involved in the Lobito Corridor project, was much more positive about Global Gateway than the AU Commission President (see above). In the health sector, the need for greater cooperation was emphasized, particularly through the expansion of local vaccine production and the strengthening of institutions such as the Africa Centre for Disease Control (Africa CDC) and the African Medicines Agency (AMA), which is currently being established. Both

⁴ https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en?file-name=Political%20Guidelines%202024-2029_EN.pdf (page 28)

⁵ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/q50bjauc/joint-communique%C3%A9-21052025.pdf>

institutions are already receiving considerable support from the EU, including through the European Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA).

Future security cooperation focused on the fight against terrorism and the development of African security capacities (including through the provision of material by the European Peace Facility (EPF). There was also a joint commitment to strengthening maritime security, particularly regarding combating drug trafficking and piracy. Both sides pledged their cooperation in the fight against illegal fishing. The importance of international support for the African Union Stabilization Mission AUSSOM in Somalia, which was launched in 2025, was emphasized, as was the urgency of an immediate and unconditional ceasefire in Sudan. With regard to the situation in eastern DR Congo, both sides reiterated their support for the AU led mediation as well as the initiatives of SADC, EAC, Qatar and the USA. Both sides expressed concern about the growing and diverse humanitarian challenges, without going into specific crisis situations.

Another key topic was migration and mobility, whereby the rights of migrants should be protected, and legal migration routes and the integration of regular migrants should be promoted. The declaration also encourages “comprehensive and mutually beneficial” partnerships and combating the causes of irregular migration. The rather general wording of the ministerial declaration reflects the differences in interests between the two continents, particularly on issues of repatriation and effectively combating illegal migration. While the EU is pushing for stricter migration controls, the African side is calling for more support in creating legal migration routes and combating the causes of migration. Migration policy therefore remains a sensitive issue.

Although the declaration is particularly elaborate with regard to closer cooperation at multi-lateral level, concrete progress is rather rare. Both sides also explicitly support the World Trade Organization, whose 14th Ministerial Conference will take place in Cameroon in 2026, as well as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement and its goals. The AU's permanent seat at the G20 is also supported. The ministers also agreed to work on the so-called UN80 initiative to reform the United Nations. Remarkably, the successful conclusions of the negotiations for a pandemic agreement in parallel to the ministerial meeting was not mentioned in the declaration, although the AU and EU had both been strong supporters of such an agreement in the past.

One concrete step forward is the agreement on a monitoring mechanism to ensure a more continuous implementation and review of the joint projects.⁶ This measure, which was initiated by several EU member states, is intended to improve the traceability of the objectives formulated as part of the partnership. A further meeting in June will define the details of this new instrument. Also noteworthy: The adopted declaration refers several times to the AU Agenda 2063 as a frame of reference, which is to be seen as recognition of the call by the new Chair of the AU Commission. The call for local processing of African resources illustrates the claim to an equal partnership - even if structural hurdles and geopolitical realities remain key challenges.

⁶ <https://agenceurope.eu/en/bulletin/article/13618/5>

4) Analysis and Comment

The implementation of the EU-AU partnership is made considerably more difficult by structural and political challenges - in particular by the heterogeneous composition of the African Union. The AU, which has rarely been able to set its own priorities in terms of foreign policy and has rarely been able to communicate common positions to the outside world, includes both close partners of the EU and countries with strong ties to Russia or China, which often makes a coherent African negotiating position and the implementation of common strategies difficult. This geopolitical fragmentation weakens the effectiveness of the partnership and leaves many of the adopted initiatives stuck in diplomatic deadlocks.

Another structural weakness is the irregular communication at the highest political level, which means that important momentum for the strategic management of the partnership is lost. The EU therefore runs the risk of losing ground in terms of its long-term relevance for Africa - especially compared to China, which is impressing many African countries with its high-level political presence and quick investment decisions. Particularly against the backdrop of demographic developments and a rapidly growing young population in Africa, it is clear that Europe must invest more in political education and cultural exchange via universities (see China) in order to secure ties with the next generation of African decision-makers. Without a stronger offer in this area, the EU could lose access to Africa's political hopefuls - with far-reaching geopolitical consequences.

This is particularly relevant in light of the (at least temporary) withdrawal of the United States from key areas of development cooperation and democracy promotion. Even if Europe can hardly fill the vacuum on its own, the EU should step up its commitment in the areas of health, democracy promotion and security. In recent months, representatives from various African countries have made it clear to Brussels that they value the EU's reliability and predictability. If the EU were to miss this opportunity, other players would fill the vacuum: These include China and, in the area of military cooperation, Russia; however, other countries such as India, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates are now also very active.

At the same time, however, it should also be noted that both sides have fundamentally repositioned themselves in recent months. The African Union in particular has undergone a reorientation due to the replacement of almost the entire leadership, which is why hardly any new initiatives could be expected apart from a review of common broad lines in the partnership.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the rhetorical determination of both sides to strengthen cooperation and the emphasis on joint initiatives, such as within the framework of the Global Gateway, are positive. The establishment of the monitoring mechanism is also to be welcomed: this can increase the pressure to follow up political announcements with action and not just exhaust oneself in symbolic summit declarations without tangible results.

Despite all of the above limitations, there are sufficient points of contact for a closer partnership: for many African countries, the EU remains a preferred partner due to greater linguistic and cultural proximity. Global Gateway projects can play an important role in reducing logistical bottlenecks and implementing the African Free Trade Area. However, this requires closer involvement of the private sector on both continents. If greater integration between the two economic areas is taken seriously, greater market opening and the removal of non-tariff trade barriers will be required. In addition, the EU may also be required to at least rethink its own instruments (such as the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs)). Closer cooperation is also possible in the area of global health, particularly in pandemic prevention.

The strengthening of the partnership with the African continent will ultimately have to take place not only through cooperation with the AU, but also with its regional organizations and, above all, through strong bilateral cooperation, especially with like-minded partners on the continent.

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