



## The decline of idealism: from Lisbon to the 2020 Comprehensive Strategy

The basis for modern relations between Europe and Africa can be found in the 2007 Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES)<sup>1</sup>. This document sought to go 'beyond' development, leaving behind the old paternalistic logic marked by the profound asymmetry between a donor Europe and African recipients, inherited from Lomé and Cotonou. The EU needed to distance itself from its image as a post-colonial power and cloak its external action in the language of partnership to make it attractive to African governments and public opinion. The break with the previous tradition of Africa-EU relations was, on paper, very ambitious: it was not just a question of Europe "helping" Africa, but of recognizing that there were shared interests, mutual responsibilities and a common political agenda between the two geopolitical spaces that made it possible to define a 'partnership between equals'.

One of the most significant advances of the JAES was to accept the need to treat "Africa as a whole", raising the African Union to the status of its main political interlocutor. In contrast to decades of fragmented European policies – ACP (Africa, Caribbean, Pacific), Mediterranean, sub-Saharan Africa – the Strategy proposed a transcontinental framework, from the EU to the AU, which would give Africa its own institutional voice vis-à-vis Europe. The EU was no longer limited to financing development projects but proposed to "co-manage" the African security environment, supporting African peace operations and defining regulatory frameworks in sensitive areas such as migration and resource management.

This was a semantics of equality that proved to be more theoretical than real; as an "integrated Africa" in a unified political continent clashed with very different regional and geopolitical realities (Sahel, Maghreb, Horn of Africa, Southern Africa) and with internal African divisions too deep to make any hint of integration credible. While the institutions focused on meetings to discuss the evolution of democracy in Africa, reality was advancing more rapidly on the ground, as the security situation deteriorated and the economy failed to take off. The JAES became trapped in technical bureaucracy and the forced export of democratic values that did not always resonate with African societies or their leaders.

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<sup>1</sup> COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. "The Africa-EU Strategic Partnership: A joint strategy. Joint Africa-EU Strategy." 2007, December. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint\\_strategy\\_2007\\_en.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_strategy_2007_en.pdf)

European policy remained highly selective and geographically uneven, with Brussels reverting to the comfort of dealing with individual states or sub-regional groups when interests dictated. Ultimately, imbalances in power, financial capacity, and normative power continued to work in Europe's favor.

At the same time, the JAES created a complex institutional architecture with numerous EU-Africa summits, biannual action plans, joint monitoring mechanisms and the participation of parliaments and civil society, but with results that must be described as 'disappointing'. The JAES proved incapable of translating the language of 'mutual ownership' into a genuine African capacity to set the agenda, especially when funding and technical priorities remained largely controlled from Europe.

The damage to its reputation was done, as the rhetoric of "partnership between equals" was not accompanied by tangible changes; African frustration and the narrative of partnership with "post-colonial tendencies"<sup>2</sup> gained strength, opening the way for other revisionist powers that presented themselves as more pragmatic or less prescriptive.

The result was that, rather than a genuine deepening of the partnership, the JAES marked the beginning of the "securitization" and instrumentalization of the geopolitical relationship between Europeans and Africans. The EU no longer limited itself to financing development projects but moved to "co-manage" the African security environment—supporting peace operations and defining regulatory frameworks in sensitive areas such as migration and natural resource management<sup>3</sup>.

The turning point came in 2015, when the migration crisis and the Valletta Summit marked a shift in the European vision of Africa, redirecting it towards security and border control. The Emergency Trust Fund for Africa was created, linking development aid closely with migration management for the first time<sup>4</sup>. From then on, European priorities—migration

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<sup>2</sup> KÓMET, R. and HAGESKOG, A. *A partnership of equals? A critical discourse analysis of the Joint Africa-EU strategy*. Lund University Publications Repository. 2020, p.1.

<https://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=8999361&fileId=8999362> (accessed 9/3/2026).

<sup>3</sup> ARNOULD, C.-F. "The Africa-EU strategic partnership on peace and security", in A. Núñez García-Sauco (ed.). *European and African response to security problems in Africa*. Strategy Notebooks, no. 146-B. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies & Casa África, 2010, pp. 25-44.

[https://www.casaffrica.es/sites/default/files/old\\_cms/casaffrica/Publicaciones/Cuaderno\\_Estrategia\\_PazySeguridad\\_E\\_N.pdf](https://www.casaffrica.es/sites/default/files/old_cms/casaffrica/Publicaciones/Cuaderno_Estrategia_PazySeguridad_E_N.pdf) (accessed 9/3/2026).

<sup>4</sup> OXFAM INTERMÓN. *An emergency for whom? The European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa*. Oxfam International, 2017.

<https://www.oxfam.org/es/informes/una-emergencia-para-quien-el-fondo-fiduciario-de-emergencia-de-la-union-europea-para> (accessed 9/3/2026).

control, the fight against terrorism, and access to strategic resources—took precedence over African preferences for promoting regional development.

As time went by, the debate gradually shifted towards more controversial issues regarding how the Sahel should become a testing ground for European foreign policy, at a time when African stability was increasingly perceived as vital to European internal security. Simultaneously, competition with China and Russia began to take its toll, affecting decisions on European investment and presence on the continent.

In short, the 2007 JAES was a sophisticated attempt by Europe to redefine its relationship with Africa in terms of equality, mutual interest, and long-term vision, but it was overwhelmed by a context of multiple crises and geopolitical competition that the Strategy itself barely anticipated. African partners were left with the feeling that they were not sharing the table, but were still on the menu.

### **The “New Africa-Europe Partnership for Sustainable Investment and Jobs”<sup>5</sup>: from aid to investment**

However, the real Copernican shift came with Jean-Claude Juncker's “New Africa-Europe Alliance for Sustainable Investment and Jobs”, launched in 2018, as a pragmatic response to growing Chinese and Russian competition<sup>5</sup>. The aim was to mobilize European private investment to create youth employment and sustainable growth, in line with the 2007 JAES, but with a more operational and economic approach. The narrative shifted radically when Brussels admitted, for the first time, that official development assistance (ODA) was insufficient and that private capital and job creation were the best antidotes to instability<sup>6</sup>.

The Africa-Europe Alliance sought to attract private capital to generate ten million jobs, proposing to mobilize €88 billion in private investment by 2020. It prioritized SMEs, sustainable infrastructure, and job-creating sectors such as agribusiness, digitalization,

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<sup>5</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION. "A new Africa-Europe Alliance for Sustainable Investment and Jobs: Taking our partnership for investment and jobs further" (COM [2018] 0643). 12 September 2018. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/ES/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0643> (accessed 9/3/2026).

<sup>6</sup> AGENCE FRANÇAISE DE DÉVELOPPEMENT. "Towards a new alliance between Africa and Europe." 16 February 2022. <https://www.afd.fr/fr/actualites/pour-une-nouvelle-alliance-entre-lafrique-et-leurope> (accessed 9 March 2026).

and renewable energy<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, support for the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) signaled a shift toward treating Africa as an emerging trading bloc.

Although ambitious, the initiative was soon criticized as “values-inconsistent” and extractivist<sup>8</sup>, often prioritizing European economic returns over local development. Compared to China’s massive infrastructure investments through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Russia’s direct military presence, the Africa-Europe Alliance has been perceived as generating “poor returns” by limiting technology transfer and prioritizing European supply chains—specifically for critical minerals and renewable energy—over endogenous African industrialization. Similarly, its focus on promoting European regulatory standards (transparency, labor rights, environmental criteria) often clashes with Africa’s immediate needs for mass employment and rapid growth<sup>9</sup>.

Ultimately, the difficulty of overcoming EU bureaucracy and aligning its agenda with African priorities reinforces the thesis of strategic instrumentalization. The EU continues to subordinate the traditional development agenda to the containment of migration, using investment more as a lever for European strategic autonomy than as a genuine vehicle for Africa’s autonomous development.

### **The “AU-EU Strategy 2020”. Towards a renewed partnership with Africa**

The transition in EU-Africa relations reached a new phase in 2020 with the proposal for a “renewed strategic partnership” under European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. This approach prioritized Europe’s internal goals—the green transition, digitalization, job creation, and security—applying them directly to the African context<sup>10</sup>.

This evolution was not organic, but rather a reactive adjustment to systemic external shocks. Europe began to acknowledge, albeit belatedly, that Africa was no longer its exclusive sphere of influence. China, through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), was

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<sup>7</sup> European Documentation Centre of the University of Valencia (CDE UV). (n.d.). Africa-Europe Alliance: boosting investment in sustainable energy in Africa.

<https://cdeuv.es/noticies/menunoticias/item/19364-alianza-africa-europa-impulsar-las-inversiones-en-energia-sostenible-en-africa.html>

<sup>8</sup> NAPOLEON ALLIANCE POLICY FORUM. «The failure of the EU’s strategic partnerships in Africa: What’s behind the lost ground to China and Russia?» (s. f.). <https://www.napforum.org/policy-briefs/the-failure-of-the-eu-s-strategic-partnerships-in-africa-what-s-behind-the-lost-ground-to-china-and-russia> (consultado 9/3/2026).

<sup>9</sup> ALTERNATIVAS FOUNDATION. *Africa Report 2023*. 2023. [https://fundacionalalternativas.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Informe\\_Africa\\_2023-1.pdf](https://fundacionalalternativas.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Informe_Africa_2023-1.pdf) (accessed 9/3/2026).

<sup>10</sup> VON DER LEYEN, U. “A new EU-Africa strategy to transform the relationship.” Press release, European Commission. 2020. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/IP\\_20\\_51](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/IP_20_51)

reshaping African infrastructure, while Russia—via the Wagner Group (now Africa Corps)—was establishing a foothold in the Sahel by exploiting anti-French sentiment and offering security guarantees stripped of "good governance" conditions. Furthermore, the pandemic exposed the fragility of global supply chains, forcing Europe to recognize its over-reliance on Asian inputs as a critical strategic risk.

The resulting "AU-EU Strategy 2020"<sup>11</sup> signaled a departure from the welfare-oriented language of the 2007 JAES, adopting the rhetoric of a "comprehensive geopolitical partnership" based on mutual interests. Funding mechanisms shifted toward leveraging private capital to counter the BRI. However, the strategy faced immediate criticism<sup>12</sup>. It was accused of perpetuating power asymmetries by imposing European regulatory conditions—such as governance and migration management—that ignored Africa's immediate economic urgencies. Critics also pointed to a persistent paternalism, where the discourse of "equal partners" failed to translate into genuine co-ownership of the political agenda.

In parallel, the EU placed the energy transition at the heart of its diplomacy. Through the European Green Deal, Africa emerged as an indispensable ally for decarbonization, given that the continent holds approximately 30% of global critical mineral reserves<sup>13</sup>. However, this push has created tensions: the EU's emphasis on strict environmental standards for market access and hydrogen exports can act as a barrier for African nations.

Ultimately, the Green Deal risks externalizing the costs of Europe's energy transition to Africa while offering new geo-economic opportunities. Its success hinges on whether the EU can balance its trade constraints with tangible financing and, crucially, true African ownership of the green agenda<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION AND HIGH REPRESENTATIVE. *Towards a comprehensive strategy with Africa* (COM (2020) 125 final). European Parliament and Council of the European Union. 9 March 2020. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/ES/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020JC0012>

<sup>12</sup> MARÍN EGOSCOZÁBAL, A. "The new EU strategy: with Africa or for Africa?", *Elcano Royal Institute*. 17 June 2020. <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/comentarios/la-nueva-estrategia-de-la-ue-con-africa-o-para-africa/> (accessed 9/3/2026).

<sup>13</sup> EUROPEAN COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS (ECFR). *Looking ahead to better times: maximising the potential of the European Green Deal for North Africa and Europe* [Policy brief]. ECFR Madrid. 16 January 2023. <https://ecfr.eu/madrid/publication/de-cara-al-buen-tiempo-como-maximizar-el-potencial-del-pacto-verde-europeo-para-el-norte-de-africa-y-europa/> (accessed 9/3/2026).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

## The new financial architecture: the NDICI as an instrument for a “Global Europe”

For years, the EU had focused on the Sahel as a priority area for cooperation, combining development aid, military training missions and governance programs. However, the deterioration of the security situation and competition from hostile actors to Europe have begun to change the European vision of cooperation with Africa. Since 2020, Africa, and in particular the Sahel region, has been experiencing a wave of military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, all of which have taken place against a backdrop of deteriorating security and the advance of jihadist groups such as JNIM (affiliated with Al Qaeda) and the Islamic State in the Sahel Province (ISISP).

At the same time, the Sahel accounts for more than half of global deaths from terrorism<sup>15</sup>, reflecting an environment of chronic violence that overwhelms the capacity of existing regimes. This combination of institutional breakdown and jihadist expansion has eroded state legitimacy, weakened local administrations and undermined the minimum legal guarantees needed to attract and maintain medium-term investment<sup>16</sup>. In this context, European and local investors have been constantly reassessing risk and redirecting investments towards the less exposed areas of the relatively more stable coastal economies and towards sectors that are less intensive in fixed infrastructure, or have postponed investment decisions indefinitely.

Much of the security architecture has collapsed with the intensification of terrorism and the succession of coups that have led to the expulsion of European missions. Brussels has found itself having to reformulate and design new financial and political instruments in the face of local authorities that, *de facto*, have as little legitimacy as they do suspicion towards European intentions. The EU has understood that security cannot be separated from development and that, without a minimally functional state, investments – starting with European ones – are not only reduced, but end up evaporating or being redirected to other destinations perceived as safer.

<sup>17</sup>This context has forced the EU to revise its approach, shifting part of its emphasis from the mere projection of aid and economic presence towards a more explicit logic of political

<sup>15</sup> INSTITUTE FOR ECONOMICS & PEACE. *Global Terrorism Index 2025*. Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025. <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/resources/global-terrorism-index-2025/> (accessed 9/3/2026).

<sup>16</sup> ABDELHAY, L. *Report on the Annual Terrorism Index in the Sahel Region 2025*. ECSaharai. 18 January 2026. <https://ecsaharai.com/01/2026/informe-del-indice-anual-del-terrorismo-en-la-region-del-sahel-2025/> (accessed 9/3/2026).

<sup>17</sup> ROWLATT, J. "Could cold water hold a clue to a dementia cure?", *BBC News*. 19 October 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-54531075>

and security “stabilization”. The European strategy for Africa has shifted towards greater selectivity based on parameters ranging from stricter governance requirements to closer coordination with African actors and a greater emphasis on coastal countries, where there is still some scope for containing the 'contagion effect' from the Sahel<sup>18</sup>.

From this perspective, Europe's insistence on “good governance”, security sector reform and institutional strengthening is no longer a rhetorical component, but has become a *sine qua non* condition to prevent its own investments — both public and private — from being dissipated in ungovernable environments<sup>19</sup>.

This change in philosophy is reflected in the financing instruments. The former European Development Fund (EDF), which functioned as an extra-budgetary instrument for cooperation with African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, has been integrated into a new Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI, also known as “Global Europe”), endowed with €79.5 billion for the period 2021-2027, of which, by law, €29 billion is specifically earmarked for sub-Saharan Africa<sup>20</sup>.

The NDICI – “Global Europe” – is essentially a single “common pot” approved by law in the EU budget (2021-2027), which brings together almost all previous external funds to make them more flexible. This integration is not only technical or administrative, but responds to the EU's desire to fully align its development resources with its strategic and geopolitical priorities, so that every euro invested reinforces the projection of European interests and values in Africa. The aim is for every euro spent in Africa to have a clear and quantifiable geopolitical impact<sup>21</sup>.

The main structural difference between the new NDICI and the former EDF is that the latter operated outside the EU's general budget, with separate agreements (such as Lomé and Cotonou) and without direct oversight by the European Parliament; the NDICI,

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<sup>18</sup> ALTUNA GALÁN, Sergio. "The reconfiguration of security structures in the Sahel: failure of the Western approach, change of partners and turbulence on the horizon", *Elcano Royal Institute*. 17 July 2024.

<https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/la-reconfiguracion-de-las-estructuras-de-seguridad-en-el-sahel-fracaso-del-enfoque-occidental-cambio-de-socios-y-turbulencias-en-el-horizonte/> (accessed 9/3/2026).

<sup>19</sup> RADLOVICH, L. L. "Threats to the Sahel: terrorism, jihadism and authoritarian regimes," *Ibero-American Centre for International Studies (CIBEI)*. 29 November 2024. <https://fundacioncibe.org/las-amenazas-al-sahel-terrorismo-yihadismo-y-regimenes-autoritarios/> (accessed 9/3/2026).

<sup>20</sup> EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. *Regulation (EU) 2021/947 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 9 June 2021 establishing the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe*. Official Journal of the European Union, L 209, 2021, pp. 16-167. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/ES/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32021R0947> (accessed 9/3/2026).

<sup>21</sup> MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, EUROPEAN UNION AND COOPERATION. "The European Union gives the green light to NDICI-Global Europe. Spanish Cooperation – FIIAPP". 2021. <https://www.cooperacionspanola.es/la-union-europa-da-luz-verde-al-ndici-europa-global/> (accessed 27/2/2026).

on the other hand, is incorporated into the 2021-2027 budgetary framework and is therefore subject to European control. This gives it greater transparency, as well as greater geographical and thematic scope and greater flexibility<sup>22</sup>. In other words, the NDICI is financed exclusively from the EU's public budget.

The NDICI allocates minimum amounts to key sectors: 30% to climate change, 20% to human development and 10% to migration and displacement. This sectoral distribution reflects the evolution towards a more 'geopolitical' EU, where aid conditional on good governance is aligned with European interests of stability, shared values and global competition. Projects in areas without state control are excluded, and investments in local development must be accompanied by opportunities for European companies, in order to strengthen the EU's influence vis-à-vis rivals such as China. Cooperation, in the European vision, only makes sense if it generates strategic influence and materializes in quantifiable and sustainable results over time in the face of threats such as those in the Sahel.

Taking stock of these years, it can be said that the NDICI-Global Europe has strengthened regional cooperation with Africa with a broader and more traditional approach. It addresses poverty reduction, human development, governance, human rights, stability and migration management. Thanks to this instrument, it has been possible to co-finance innovative initiatives, such as the ten million euros transferred to the Canary Islands for projects in seven African countries (Cape Verde, Senegal, etc.), giving African partners a greater role in the direct management of funds. It also strengthens regional blocs such as the AU and the AfCFTA, although audits by the Court of Auditors point to a lack of complementarity with national initiatives<sup>23</sup>.

The EU is positioning itself as a geopolitical actor competing with China and Russia in Africa through 'green' and digital links and sustainable investments, although criticism continues over the dilution of traditional Official Development Assistance (ODA), which is now more conditional on results in relation to migration flows and geopolitical competition.

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<sup>22</sup> FUND FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND COOPERATION (FIIAP). "The European Union approves NDICI-Europa Global." 16 June 2021. <https://www.fiap.gob.es/noticias/la-union-europa-aprueba-ndici-europa-global/>

<sup>23</sup> SANTILLÁN O'SHEA, M. and TALVI, E. "Global Gateway: what you need to know and what it means for Latin America and the Caribbean", *Elcano Royal Institute*. 19 December 2023. <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/global-gateway-que-es-lo-que-hay-que-saber-y-que-implica-para-america-latina-y-el-caribe/> (accessed 9/3/2026).

Nor does it help to improve Europe's image in Africa to have around 85% of NDICI interventions labelled as gender-focused. These are perceived as proof that the EU wants to export its own equality agenda and present itself as a normative power on the continent, shaping the regional agenda through official development assistance. For some of Africa's political and civil society elites, the idea that European cooperation comes with conditions attached in terms of values and social models is interpreted as a continuation of the quasi-neocolonial 'export' of norms, rather than the result of fully autonomous African demands<sup>24</sup>.

### The “Global Gateway”: a strategy to compete with China

The “crown jewel” of this shift in EU strategy is, however, the “Global Gateway”, a geo-economic instrument endowed with €300 billion until 2027 (half of which is earmarked for Africa) and whose objective is to compete head-on with China<sup>25</sup>. Its relationship with the NDICI can be understood in hierarchical terms, with the NDICI being the financial resource (the portfolio) and the “Global Gateway” being the strategic framework that decides which projects a portion of that portfolio is spent on.

Unlike the public funding of the NDICI, the “Global Gateway” uses a blended finance model, in which it uses part of the NDICI money as a 'guarantee' to attract private capital, loans from the European Investment Bank (EIB) and funds from Member States. It is therefore not “aid” or a new fund, but a way of directing existing money towards strategic investments in digital, energy, transport, health and education infrastructure, turning public funds into a much larger investment (multiplier effect).

The investments are specific projects involving submarine cables, transport corridors and green hydrogen plants, whose construction is accompanied by a clear message: Europe offers high-quality, sustainable investment with transparency standards, as opposed to the “debt traps” of other players. The “Global Gateway” is thus presented as a European and ethical alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), promoting seemingly

<sup>24</sup> MORASSO, C. "The European Union and the construction of the African gender agenda within the framework of development cooperation," *International Journal of Cooperation and Development*, 8(2). 2021, pp. 168-189. <https://revistas.usb.edu.co/index.php/Cooperacion/article/download/5752/4601/22479> (accessed 9/3/2026).

<sup>25</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION. "Global Gateway: EU Strategy on International Cooperation on High-Level Strategic Digital Infrastructure and Connectivity." COM (2021) 350 final. 2021. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/ES/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0350>

attractive principles such as sustainability (30% allocated to climate), transparency and mobility.

Feature	NDICI – 'Global Europe'	Global Gateway
What is it?	Financing instrument (fund)	Investment strategy (plan)
Approach	Comprehensive development, migration and crisis	Infrastructure and connectivity
Financing	100% EU budget (€79.5 billion)	Public-private mix (Target: €300 billion)
Priority	Developing countries and neighbouring countries	Strategic partners (especially Africa)
Values	Human rights and poverty reduction	Sustainability, transparency and security

Figure 1. Own elaboration

However, a more detailed analysis reveals tensions between geopolitical ambition and actual effectiveness, which has led to criticism for opacity, privatization, and limited transformative impact. The “Global Gateway” has received various criticisms<sup>26</sup>. Among them is the criticism that it converts development cooperation funds into instruments to finance the profits of European corporations investing in sensitive sectors such as critical raw materials, transport infrastructure and resource extraction, without generating stable employment or adding value to African countries. It is also criticized for its lack of transparency in the definition and monitoring of projects, which prevents a comprehensive assessment of their social and environmental impacts. Finally, various projects associated with the “Global Gateway” are accused of causing environmental damage,

<sup>26</sup> SPANISH COMMITTEE FOR DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION. "The Spanish Committee for Development Cooperation denounces the European Union's Global Gateway policies." 26 June 2025. <https://cecode.es/denuncia-politicas-union-europea-global-gateway/> (accessed 9/3/2026).

especially in initiatives with a large ecological footprint such as hydrogen production, lithium mining, data centers and large-scale infrastructure.

On balance, it could be said that the “Global Gateway” strategy has given the EU greater strategic coherence and done away with traditional European rhetoric. It has also made notable progress in the digital, climate, energy, transport, health and education fields, strengthening African partnerships and reducing the continent's sustainable infrastructure deficit, while providing business opportunities in sustainable corridors and digitalization for European corporations, positioning them ahead of their competitors in stable emerging markets. In volatile regions such as the Sahel, governance conditionality has redirected funds to other areas, demonstrating that without state control, investments do not last.

In short, the “Global Gateway” is a successful strategic tool for increasing the EU's influence. However, the lack of agile implementation procedures and a greater focus on local capacities means that European cooperation is often still seen as 'exploitation disguised as development', in which reliable partners are prioritized over the universal ambition to correct democratic deficits and measure real impacts beyond the euros mobilized. Therefore, its ultimate success depends on the EU's ability to streamline implementation and foster local partnerships in order to maximize its geopolitical and sustainable potential<sup>27</sup>.

### **The “European Peace Facility” (EPF): an important instrument for the EU's strategic autonomy in Africa**

Another tool for cooperation that offers interesting possibilities is the “European Peace Facility” (EPF). This is an extra-budgetary EU financial instrument, financed by direct contributions from Member States rather than from the regular EU budget, which was created in March 2021 with an initial ceiling of €5 billion for the period 2021-2027 (subsequently extended), to finance external actions with military or defense implications under the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> EUROPEAN UNION, EUROPEAN COMMISSION, DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT. *Global Gateway*. European Union policy (n.d.). [https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway\\_es](https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway_es) (accessed 27/2/2026).

<sup>28</sup> LABEUROPA. "European Peace Facility: EU establishes European instrument for peace." 7 May 2021. <https://www.labeuropa.eu/2021/05/07/european-peace-facility-lue-istituisce-lo-strumento-europeo-per-la-pace/> (accessed 9/3/2026).

Its origins date back to 2016, when the EU Global Strategy and the Security and Defense Implementation Plan, promoted by Federica Mogherini, identified gaps in common military funding (only 5-10% of CSDP missions were covered). The EFP stems from the evolution of the Athena mechanism (common costs of operations since 2004) and the *African Peace Facility* (APF, £3 billion between 2004-2019 for AU-led African missions), overcoming its geographical and flexibility limitations to circumvent the restrictions of the EU Treaty on direct military financing<sup>29</sup>.

2021 (EPF launch)	€5,000	Planned for a period of 7 years (2021-2027)
2022 (War in Ukraine)	€5,500	First rapid increase to cover arms shipments to Ukraine
2023 (Expansion)	€12,000	Fund doubled in response to the prolongation of the conflict
2024 (Aid Fund)	€17,000	Creation of the "Ukraine Assistance Fund" within the EPF
2025 - 2026	>€18,000	Ongoing adjustments and long-term commitments

Figure 1. Own elaboration based on official decisions of the Council of the EU

This represents a major historical change, as the EU Treaty (TEU) prohibits the use of the common budget to purchase weapons. With the EPF outside the budget, the EU can, for the first time in its history, finance the shipment of lethal weapons to countries at war. In fact, its first use in operations took place in Ukraine (ammunition, vehicles) in 2022, as a result of the Russian invasion. Since then, the EPF budget has grown explosively, from €5 billion at its launch in 2021 to €18 billion for the period 2025-2026<sup>30</sup>.

What was designed as a modest fund for peace missions in Africa has become, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the main financial lifeline for sending weapons to Kyiv and

<sup>29</sup> DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL SECURITY. *European Union: European Peace Facility*. 2021.

<https://www.dsn.gob.es/es/actualidad/sala-prensa/union-europea-fondo-europeo-apoyo-paz>

<sup>30</sup> COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. "Council Decision (CFSP) 2023/2075 of 18 October 2023 amending Decision (CFSP) 2021/509 on the European Peace Facility," *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 247. 2023. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/ES/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32023D2075>

other locations. This has revolutionized the EU's strategic autonomy by allowing Member States to be reimbursed for their expenditure on defense-related activities, mainly in Ukraine<sup>31</sup>. In Africa, the EPF finances the common costs of EU military missions (e.g. EUTM Somalia or, until its completion, EUTM Mali) and also enables the EU to supply military and defense equipment to partner countries and regional organizations (e.g. the African Union). In total, it finances thirteen CSDP operations.

The EPF has become the main financial supporter of African-led peace operations, having allocated approximately €600 million to support missions such as ATMIS (Somalia), mainly for troop allowances and logistical support. It also funds the G5 Sahel Joint Force in the Lake Chad region, with funds for (non-lethal) equipment and surveillance capabilities. At the bilateral level, the main countries benefiting from support to strengthen their armies against terrorist threats or insurgencies have been Mozambique, Niger, Mauritania, Somalia and, more recently, in response to the spread of jihadism towards the south of the Gulf of Guinea, the EPF has begun to fund Ghana, Benin, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire.

The main criticism that can be levelled at this fund is that, since the start of the war in 2022, Ukraine has absorbed the vast majority of its resources, leaving Africa as a secondary strategic priority, despite the fact that it was the initial destination for which this instrument was designed. At the beginning of 2026, cumulative or committed spending in Africa through the EPF amounted to approximately €1-1.2 billion, out of a global total of over €18 billion.

The EPF has also been criticized for becoming the armed wing of the new European diplomacy, contradicting the EU's traditionally peaceful identity. By financing lethal weapons to third parties in active conflicts, not only are the restrictions of the EU Treaty (Art. 41 TEU) violated, but ethical and legal risks are also assumed as a result of the inappropriate use of weapons<sup>32</sup>. In short, the EPF's lethal approach may accelerate strategic autonomy, but it also erodes its credibility as a peaceful power, without guaranteeing a reduction in conflict in regions without effective state control.

<sup>31</sup> SERRANO DEL RÍO, J. *The new European Peace Facility. An analysis within the CFSP*. Opinion paper DIEEEO 55/2022. Institute for Security Studies (IEEE). 2022.

[https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2022/DIEEEO55\\_2022\\_JESSER\\_UE.pdf](https://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2022/DIEEEO55_2022_JESSER_UE.pdf) (accessed 9/3/2026).

<sup>32</sup> EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT. *Report on the review of the European Union's strategy for the EU-G20 summit (A-10-2025-0011-AM-112-117)*. 2025. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0011-AM-112-117\\_ES.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0011-AM-112-117_ES.pdf) (accessed 9/3/2026).

## Conclusions

The evolution of European strategy towards Africa reflects a profound transition from traditional paternalism to a pragmatic geopolitical approach, in which security, critical resources and global competition have displaced the initial humanitarian rhetoric.

Recent experience in the Sahel is forcing the EU to confront the contradiction between its normative discourse, based on the defense of democracy and human rights, and the pragmatic need to protect investments and curb the spread of threats it perceives as direct ( , regional destabilization, disorderly migration flows).

The withdrawal of the European military presence, the reorientation towards partners considered more reliable and the strengthening of the Union's external borders have taught the EU that, in the face of failed states or states dominated by military juntas, its capacity to transform the reality on the ground is limited.

The EU has gradually begun to shift from a logic of 'aid' to one of shared interests and political co-responsibility, organizing all its instruments (trade, investment, security, climate, migration) according to this geopolitical logic rather than a moralizing discourse.

At the same time, the recognition, based on decades of experience, that the absence of effective state control in large parts of Africa renders any cooperation efforts ineffective has served as a reminder to make a consistent and sustained commitment to legitimate and functional institutions. The EU needs functional African institutions that allow for a credible partnership of equals, to avoid seeing its influence blurred by more pragmatic competitors who are willing to validate the African narrative of camouflaged European neocolonialism.

It must also correct its overly paternalistic, security-focused bias, moving from a "stabilization" agenda centered on missions and operational funding to one that integrates security, governance and local development with clear political objectives, defined in conjunction with African governments. Similarly, the EU must stop viewing migration solely as a threat and develop legal channels for labor and academic mobility linked to the needs of the European market and African development policies, so as to promote the training of young Africans, strengthen circular mobility programs and proceed with the mutual recognition of qualifications, in order to avoid a permanent brain drain.

This requires decoupling cooperation from 'moral clientelism', using investment as a tool for transparent influence, with few conditions, but realistic and focused on quantifiable results, rather than European micromanagement of African reforms. The EU must also accept African multipolarity, recognizing that African states are diversifying their partners (China, Russia, Turkey, Gulf countries), regardless of European wishes. Europeans will therefore have to get used to competing with them through attractive proposals, rather than through normative sermons or the use of force.

The ultimate success of this "geopolitical vision" of cooperation with Africa will lie in its ability to positively influence its stability and development, overcoming old bureaucratic inertia, reconciling European possibilities with African urgencies, fostering authentic local partnerships and seeking a genuine impact of its actions on the well-being of populations, beyond mere accounting balances.

In short, the EU must understand that Africa's success is a vital European interest in the new multipolar disorder that is upon us and must treat it as a strategic actor, not merely as a "recipient" of aid. Designing strategies "with Africa" rather than "for Africa" is the best, if not the only, way to build a different and successful narrative in which paternalistic reparation is replaced by a mutually beneficial strategic partnership.

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