Against the backdrop of its failing policies in Africa in recent years and barely clutching the presidency of the European Union on rotation basis, France is attempting to “reset” its relations with Africa by strengthening EU ties with the African Union. To this end, in December 2021, while presenting his EU presidency program, France’s president called relations with Africa a priority, as he announced his intention to rebuild “an economic and financial New Deal with Africa.” At the same time, the French leader called the ties between the continents “somewhat tired.”

In its efforts, Paris makes little secret out of the fact that it counts on Brussels’ support. In early January, Valdis Dombrovskis, the Vice-President of the European Commission affirmed this by pointing out that it is necessary to “strive for closer economic integration, while driving the green and digital transitions of our economies and societies.”

France’s Emmanuel Macron is obviously afraid that African leaders that relied on him in the past would join a new anti-France liberation movement on the continent following suit of CAR, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and would refuse to lobby the predatory interests of their former metropolis. A further testament to this was the meeting of the President of the Fifth Republic with the representatives of G5 Sahel states on February 16, attended only by politicians from Niger, Chad and Mauritania. Two out of five countries of the region never received the invitation from the Elysee Palace, with the leaders of Mali and Burkina Faso being left out. It seems that the French president,
therefore, invited only loyal policymakers so that he could avoid embarrassing questions and statements considering that Macron has nothing to win from the pushback against his policies in the run-up to the presidential elections in France. In these circumstances, the political effect of this event was somewhat dialed down with a lot of African media choosing to turn a deaf ear to the meeting.

Nonetheless, Macron called on his European partners on Twitter to engage in equal partnership with African countries: “Now let’s involve our European partners in an equal partnership with Africa, not at times of crises, but also in order to achieve new and innovative things. We in Brussels will be moving in this direction together.”

In other words, having failed miserably at resetting the relations with G5 Sahel states, Macron arranged the two-day 6th European Union - African Union summit that took place on February 17. The event kicked off four years and three months after the previous similar meeting with its initial date being pushed back from November 2020 due to coronavirus. Moreover, as some pundits argue, such pandemic-related move proved to be handy amidst a gaping rift between Europe and Africa. The situation was further aggravated by the pandemic itself which made healthcare and vaccine production issues look quite prominent on the summit’s agenda.

This was reinforced by the speeches of a number of African leaders at the summit who expressed indignation at the way vaccines were distributed at the height of the pandemic. Indeed, back in December, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa accused Europe of hoarding vaccines and securing more doses for itself than the European population actually needed, which demonstrated undisguised greed that disappointed Africa amidst European claims about “the EU being a partner to the African Union.” Ahead of the summit, nearly 100 humanitarian and advocacy groups including Human Rights Watch and Oxfam accused the EU of having “betrayed Africa.” Those accusations are corroborated by the WHO data according to which only 11% of the African population has been vaccinated. Pharmaceutical companies, in particular, refused to waive their intellectual property rights to allow crucial COVID-19 vaccine production to be deployed in more countries. According to Reuters, only slightly more than 5% of medicines and 1% of vaccines consumed by the African population (total population of 1.2 billion people) are produced locally.

Under these conditions, the only thing the EU could do was to commit to “changing the situation” and announce the allocation of about 145 million vaccine doses in order to reach the target of at least 450 million jabs by the summer. The European Investment Bank, for its part, pledged to make available €500 million in cheap credits for African countries to shore up its healthcare systems as the EU Commission announced that the EU and the Gates Foundation would invest over €100 million over the next five years to boost the continent’s drugs and vaccine production.

Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission said that “as Africa sets sail for the future, the European Union wants to be Africa’s partner of choice.” She added that Africa is rich in renewable power sources such as hydropower, solar power and wind power, and therefore “the world needs Africa.”

Though it is not clear why the president of the European Commission thinks that Africa is rich in “hydropower”, when due to lack of water Horn of Africa is facing famine caused by the most severe drought since 1981 as 13 million people in Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia can stumble into calamitous disasters. Meanwhile, a serious regional conflict may break out at any moment over Ethiopia’s construction of a new hydroelectric power station on the Nile...

At the same time, the EU announced plans to invest €150 billion in African countries’ projects over the next seven years within Europe-backed Global Gateway initiative that should counter-weight the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. The investment is expected to be funneled into the development of the Internet, education and renewable sources of energy. Specific projects and conditions for allocating funds are yet to be agreed upon, however, while it is not clear if such offer will satisfy the African leaders considering that they have options to choose from. For now, Africa is hesitant to believe the European, and, especially, French promises since Europeans often make political demands in exchange for help. Such a stance was clearly confirmed by the Elysee Palace’s statement ahead of summit regarding the withdrawal of European and Canadian troops from Mali. Without providing any proof, the former accused the local authorities of condoning violence and lambasted them for building business cooperation with Russia, including in the regional security matters.

“The EU is a relevant partner but it’s no longer the main or the most important partner, while at the same time Europe’s attachment to Africa is significant,” Lidet Tadesse, an official of the European Centre for Development Policy Management, said at a briefing on February 15. For now, France and the EU are compelled to acknowledge that not Europe, but China, Turkey and Russia have been the most successful actors in Africa in the last decade. China invests heavily in this continent, but its loans, of course, are not without a selfish motive. China is Europe’s
main competitor, and Beijing already met with African leaders in 2021, although the African Union has also held summits with the US, Japan and Turkey with the second Russia—Africa summit scheduled for late 2022. Russia has a head-start in the sense that Russian interests align with those of Africa: Moscow takes a vivid interest in solidifying African sovereignty, consolidating state institutions, and market growth which would entail a boon for Russian exports that could replace some of European goods. Last century, Moscow’s standpoint was repeatedly in demand in Africa and it has recently gained an additional momentum.

All these strides foster envy and fears in Paris and Brussels, which is why Europe has been actively assisting France in restoring its positions in Africa. However, due to France’s failing policies in Africa such moves do not gain traction in African countries themselves.

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