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Africa–EU relations in a fragmenting world

Time for a mutually beneficial
partnership at last?

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Summary

Africa–EU relations are shifting amid pressures from global–level power politics and internal political dynamics on both continents. This Research Paper examines whether and how these dynamics generate momentum for building a more equal and mutually beneficial partnership at last. Specifically, the paper analyses survey data on Africans’ views on international partnerships and reflects on the EU’s foreign policy in Africa from this perspective.

Major surveys show that Africans’ priorities regarding development, sovereignty and global governance align well, in principle, with the dominant themes and initiatives in the EU’s external action,

such as the investment–focused Global Gateway. While the EU’s influence in Africa is generally perceived as more positive than negative, unclear benefits, externally imposed conditionalities and Europe–centred implementation risk undermining the Union’s full potential as a partner. To strengthen its position and secure its long–term interests, the EU needs a mindset shift: rather than viewing Africa primarily as an arena for and instrument in geopolitical competition, the EU should recognise that its partnerships there have value in their own right, both for the future and for the EU’s place in it.

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Introduction

Building a partnership of equals has been both the guiding principle and the Achilles' heel of EU–Africa relations¹ over the past two decades. At successive summits since the early 2000s, the EU has repeatedly reaffirmed its commitment to forging a *real* partnership with African countries, one “characterised by equality and the pursuit of common objectives” rather than by historically constructed power asymmetries and a donor–recipient relationship.² Efforts to demonstrate this shift have included highlighting growing and relatively balanced trade relations, adopting language that emphasises African agency and joint ownership, and stressing shared priorities in areas such as multilateral governance, climate change, and peace and security.

Yet summit after summit, the promise of an equal partnership has remained largely unrealised, and significant economic and political power asymmetries between Europe and Africa persist.³ Scholars have pointed to terms favouring the EU embedded in agreements such as the Economic Partnership Agreements, arguing that they reproduce structural inequalities and generate uneven outcomes for African economies and industries.⁴ In the field of security, European interests and priorities often appear to take precedence over those of African

partners.⁵ While deeply rooted economic disparities and development gaps cannot be overcome quickly, it is the perceived gap between European rhetoric and practice that has often fuelled African frustration, particularly during critical moments such as the Covid-19 recovery process and the subsequent disputes over vaccine patents.⁶ Accusations of double standards and hypocrisy, rather than narratives of equal partnership, have dominated public debates and reinforced tensions in the relationship.

These tensions, as well as the impetus for a genuinely strategic and mutually beneficial Africa–EU partnership, have become even more palpable. In the rapidly changing international sphere, both continents are witnessing shifts in their strategic environments and positions in global politics, albeit in different ways. Owing to their vast resources and economic potential, African states have become ever more attractive partners for a diverse range of global and regional actors competing over geopolitical and geoeconomic power. They also see opportunities in the rupture of the Western-dominated liberal international order to reform global institutions in ways that better accommodate African agency. Meanwhile, an ageing Europe is grappling with the prospect of declining economic and political influence as the international order upon which it built its power and prosperity continues to crumble.

This Research Paper analyses evolving Africa–EU relations in light of these global developments, focusing on the prospects of the partnership moving in a genuinely more equal and mutually beneficial direction. Analytically, the paper approaches the Africa–EU partnership(s) as relations under pressure

1 The term “EU–Africa relations” aligns with the dominant Eurocentric discourse regarding relations between Africa and the EU. Hereafter, this Research Paper uses the terms “Africa–EU relations” and “Africa–EU partnership” to underline the shifting power dynamics in the relationship. See Duggan et al. 2021 for a discussion on reframing Africa–EU relations.

2 Council of the European Union 2007.

3 For a short overview of EU–Africa relations, including recent policy developments and key issues, see Duggan et al. (2021) and the entire edited volume by Haastrup et al. 2021.

4 Adetula and Osegbue 2021, 214–217; Akokpari 2017.

5 Mustasilta, Karjalainen and Tammikko 2025; Raineri et al. 2020; Staeger and Haastrup 2026.

6 Carbone 2023, 546.

from both changes in macro-level power politics and related shifts in internal political priorities and trends on both continents. Empirically, the paper reflects on recent EU policies and initiatives in Africa from a perspective that has received considerably less attention in Europe: the views of Africans regarding their international partnerships. Which issues matter most to Africans in terms of their international partnerships, how do they see the EU and other actors, and what forms of engagement do they want from their partners? The paper takes stock of recent surveys of African public opinion on these matters. It then discusses these perceptions in the context of recent EU foreign policy initiatives in Africa.

The paper argues that the potential for alignment between European and African visions of future cooperation is greater than is perhaps commonly assumed in Europe. In particular, current discourses on development, sovereignty, and global governance overlap across the continents in terms of the preferred modes and direction of cooperation. To seize the opportunities presented by converging foreign policy interests, the EU needs a shift in mindset. It must move beyond viewing Africa primarily as *an arena* of geopolitical competition and *an instrument* in the global power struggle, recognising instead that the continent and integrated investments in it have added value when considering Europe's own future. Only through such a shift can the aspiration of a genuinely equal partnership move closer to reality.

1. An evolving relationship in a fragmented world

Over the past 25 years or more, the Africa-EU partnership has gradually evolved from one primarily emphasising traditional development goals of poverty reduction and sustainable development through aid and capacity-building to one increasingly focused on trade relations, security, investment, and cooperation on supply chains, including critical minerals, and the energy transition. This change has noticeably accelerated in recent years, particularly since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the subsequent intensification of global strategic competition. It is clearly reflected in the EU's recent policy initiatives on development and security cooperation in Africa, which are discussed in Subsection 1.1. These initiatives, however, do not emerge in a

vacuum. Africa-EU relations are currently under significant pressure stemming from macro-level shifts in power relations and internal political dynamics on both continents, as discussed in Subsection 1.2.

1.1 Key shifts in EU policies towards Africa

The Global Gateway, launched in 2021, has quickly become the new blueprint for the EU's development agency, particularly in Africa. The Africa-Europe Investment Package of approximately €150 billion represents the Global Gateway's first milestone. It pulls together funding from the EU institutions, the member states, European development institutions and the private sector. The emphasis has shifted from poverty-reduction aid to investment in connectivity, energy and infrastructure projects that the EU regards as strategically important.⁷

The Global Gateway highlights two ideational shifts in approaches to development within the EU. First, the EU's understanding of when and how it should benefit from development cooperation has changed. Whereas development cooperation was conventionally thought to serve European interests in the long term by contributing to stable and thriving societies, the term 'mutually beneficial partnerships' now means cooperation that directly benefits the European private sector and companies.⁸ Second, while the Global Gateway in principle aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals and global climate conventions, the EU increasingly frames its investments in geopolitical and geoeconomic terms. This is clear not only in the overall discourse of the Global Gateway and its presentation as the European model of connectivity in an increasingly competitive world, but also in the specific projects and their substantive area of focus, such as critical minerals. Indeed, by establishing critical minerals partnerships with South Africa, Rwanda, Namibia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Zambia, the EU has acknowledged Africa's growing

⁷ European Commission 2026.

⁸ The emphasis on European companies and the private sector as intended beneficiaries of the Global Gateway was clear in the 2025 State of the European Union address by European Commission President von der Leyen. It was also highlighted in research interviews conducted by the author with EU officials in spring 2026 on the EU's changing peace agency.

importance for diversifying its supply sources and securing stable supply chains.⁹

Meanwhile, overall development cooperation funding from the EU and its member states to Africa is in decline.¹⁰ Budget reshuffles and cuts in official development assistance (ODA) have reduced funding for sectors such as civilian peacebuilding and conflict prevention as well as general governance support.¹¹ Notably, these cuts have accelerated since the United States decided to shut down its Agency for International Development (USAID) and drastically reduce its development and humanitarian funding. The combined reduction in European and US development funding has sparked concerns among development experts and organisations over the adequacy of international humanitarian and development support, particularly for fragile and conflict-affected countries that offer limited investment and trade opportunities.¹²

Although they have received far less attention, considerable changes are also taking place in security partnership frameworks between the EU and African partners. Sub-Saharan Africa is home to a majority of the EU's civilian and military crisis management missions. Most of these, however, were launched in the 2010s and are modest in scale and footprint. Since 2022, the EU has ended more missions in Africa than it has launched, following the coups d'état in the Sahel and the subsequent shifts in geopolitical alignments in the region.¹³ Simultaneously, however, the EU has brought the European Peace Facility (EPF) into full use in Africa as a means of providing more robust material assistance, including lethal support, to its partners. Notably, the recipients of the EU's assistance measures through the EPF include countries such as Djibouti, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in which there are no existing Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions or operations.¹⁴ This more straightforward military assistance to partner states and ad hoc coalitions through the EPF has been argued to challenge the peace and security agency of the African Union (AU), which previously enjoyed

a more privileged position as the main recipient of EU funding for African security operations.¹⁵ Besides the EPF financing, the EU recently signed a defence partnership agreement with Ghana, the first such partnership with an African state.

1.2 External and internal pressures for change in Africa–EU relations

Notably, these policy evolutions and new frameworks for cooperation unfold in a context of significant pressures for change in Africa–EU relations. These changes stem from macro-level power politics but also from internal political dynamics on both continents. Externally, the EU's influence in Africa is increasingly challenged by the fragmentation of the Western-led liberal international order. There is more competition in quantitative terms over partnerships and cooperation with African stakeholders. While China has been Africa's largest trading partner country since 2009, other powers, such as India, Japan, the Gulf states, Russia, Turkey, and Brazil, all see considerable value in Africa's rich natural resources, growing economies, demographic potential, and strategic ports and borders. Even with its reduced development and humanitarian footprint on the continent, the United States is still a key external actor. As with its wider foreign policy, US relations with African actors increasingly focus on bilateral and selective deals involving trade, critical minerals and security cooperation.¹⁶

Rather than this intensified competition resulting in a "new scramble for Africa", however, African governments today have a stronger foothold in their international partnerships, as a multitude of partners offer them a wider range of strategic choices and greater leverage than in previous decades.¹⁷ The growing number of partners also brings with it greater variation in the terms and quality of cooperation and partnerships. Greater choice among partners has emboldened African leaders to voice their frustration with what they perceive as the patronising tone of EU partnerships. These sentiments have been reinforced by growing disillusionment with some

9 Szedlacsek 2026.

10 OECD 2026.

11 Mustasilta 2024.

12 CONCORD 2026.

13 Mustasilta 2026.

14 European Commission: Service for Foreign Policy Instruments 2026.

15 Staeger and Haastrup 2026.

16 Checker 2026; Brookings 2026.

17 Cho 2025.

of the liberal visions of democratic governance and open markets. Compared with partnerships offered by actors such as China, partnership deals offered by the EU and its member states have been perceived by African elites as being heavy on conditions that interfere in governance issues and as shaped by primarily European priorities. As African actors gain a stronger voice at the negotiating table, they are also better positioned to shape the terms of cooperation with their European partners.

Alongside these macro-level shifts, internal political developments on both continents are spurring a change in relations. In Europe, the successive crises of the last decade – from the so-called migration crisis to Brexit, Covid-19, Russia's aggression, and increased volatility in transatlantic relations – have turned the EU's outward-looking transformative ambition into an increasingly inward-looking protective mode. This shapes its external action in general, including in Africa, where the EU's geopolitical, geo-economic, and security interests are now more openly acknowledged as motivators of all its international cooperation. The security situation in Europe also takes up much of the EU's and the member states' attention, leaving less attention, in both absolute and relative terms, for their global partners. Notably, the rise of far-right political parties in Europe is also reshaping both domestic politics and the EU's external action. Among other effects, it has increased pressure on development cooperation budgets and legitimised more openly transactional and nationally oriented approaches to foreign policy.¹⁸

In Africa, meanwhile, growing and increasingly educated young populations continue to confront persistent domestic and global inequalities, governance deficits, and unmet promises of democratic accountability. These issues manifest in political instability, authoritarian backlash, and protracted violent conflicts, which threaten the continent's considerable economic growth potential, regional integration efforts, and growing foothold in global politics. Reflecting increasing frustration with insecurity and inefficient and corrupt leaders, successive coups d'état in the Sahel have had significant implications for the foreign policies of several countries of strategic importance to Europe. More broadly,

political calls for stronger African leadership and enhanced respect for African sovereignty have become more salient across the continent.

Taken together, these geopolitical shifts and the related evolving stances on international partnerships create considerable pressure for a genuine change in Africa-EU relations. While power asymmetries between the two persist, African stakeholders now have more partners to choose from, and there appears to be a willingness on both continents to leave behind the traditional role descriptions of donor and aid recipient. This may offer opportunities for building a more equal relationship; however, it also highlights the need for a better understanding of each other's expectations and needs. Yet research on the Global Gateway and EPF suggests that the planning and implementation of concrete projects remain largely Eurocentric.¹⁹

2. African views on international partnerships and the EU

This paper examines how Africans view their international partnerships, including those with the EU, and what this reveals about the potential for building a more equal Africa-EU partnership in light of the EU's recent policy initiatives. Thus far, much of the EU's attention to transforming its relationship with its African partners has centred on defining its added value as an international partner by comparing its partnership offers to those of other international players. Yet assessing the EU's potential value as a partner and the possibilities for building more genuinely equal Africa-EU relations requires first understanding what African partners themselves expect and value in international cooperation.

With this in mind, this section analyses survey data on the views of ordinary Africans regarding international partnerships and diverse international actors. Several recent international surveys have explored Africans' views on (global) governance, with international partnerships and global affairs featuring high on the agenda. These surveys provide valuable insights into what Africans expect from international partnerships, what they prioritise, and how they view different international actors.

¹⁸ Mustasilta 2024.

¹⁹ Staeger and Haastrup 2026.

The analysis builds on the following surveys: Afrobarometer survey rounds nine and ten; Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Global Census Poll 2023; Gallup World Poll: Ratings of Global Powers in Africa 2024; and the African Youth Survey 2026 by the Ichikowitz Family Foundation. The latter, published in summer 2026, is particularly interesting because it focuses on foreign policy and international partnerships and captures the views of young Africans, a large demographic whose needs and opportunities lie at the core of key policy issues for the EU in its relations with African partners, such as migration and jobs.

The use of survey data in this context presents several challenges. First of all, looking at the aggregated results of Africans' views naturally obscures considerable cross-country and within-country variation, which should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings. Moreover, popular views on international partnerships, priorities, expectations of them and opinions on specific actors do not, of course, directly translate into or necessarily influence partnerships forged at a high political level. The extent to which this happens in democratic and non-democratic countries is an interesting research question in its own right. Nevertheless, given that the Africa-EU partnership ultimately aims to benefit the people, their opinions on international partnerships should be of interest to both European and African leaders. Furthermore, in today's increasingly digitalised public spaces, citizens' opinions and views regarding foreign policies and international partnerships are aired on a global scale in a manner that is completely different from before, a development that can inform international actors and be used by them to shape international relations.

Subsection 2.1 provides an overview of the survey results on how the EU and other international actors are viewed in Africa. Subsection 2.2 then focuses on views concerning the forms and key principles of international partnerships. Section 3 discusses these views in relation to the recent policy and partnership initiatives by the EU in Africa.

2.1 The EU's image in Africa

If the EU's image in Africa were to be summed up in a single sentence, it might go something like this: not quite as bad as is sometimes feared, but not as influential or special as Brussels would like. The EU is, on average, viewed more favourably than unfavourably by Africans, including young people. Nevertheless, it consistently ranks behind China in popularity, and there is greater ambiguity in perceptions of its – and particularly its member states' – influence in Africa.

According to the latest round of Afrobarometer surveys, conducted in 38 African countries in 2024–2025, roughly 50% of respondents view the EU positively with regard to its economic and political influence, compared with 17% viewing it negatively. A considerable proportion of respondents (27%) had not heard enough about the EU to voice an opinion. In positive news for Europeans, the EU's approval rating is up from the figures in the earlier poll in 2021–2023.²⁰

As Figure 1 shows, the EU is viewed considerably more favourably than Russia and India: Russia's influence is viewed positively by 35% of respondents, compared with 24% who view it negatively. Unsurprisingly, Mali stands out as a country with strongly positive views on Russian influence, following its recent geopolitical realignment towards Russia. India is viewed favourably by 40% of respondents, with just under 20% viewing it negatively. However, the EU ranks significantly behind China, with over 60% of respondents viewing China's economic and political influence positively (with similar negative attitude levels to those of the EU). China is clearly the most highly appreciated foreign power according to the survey.

The image of the United States remains positive, with 52% viewing it positively compared with 20% expressing negative views. Notably, however, the reputation of the US has clearly declined from the 2019/2021 round to the most recent. As a majority of the round's national surveys were conducted before

20 The proportion of respondents perceiving the EU's influence as very positive or somewhat positive was around 40% at that time. The survey sample was considerably smaller, approximately 28,000 respondents in the 2021–2023 round compared with 50,000 in the latest poll.

Africans' perceptions of foreign powers and their influence

Question: *Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries and the EU is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?*

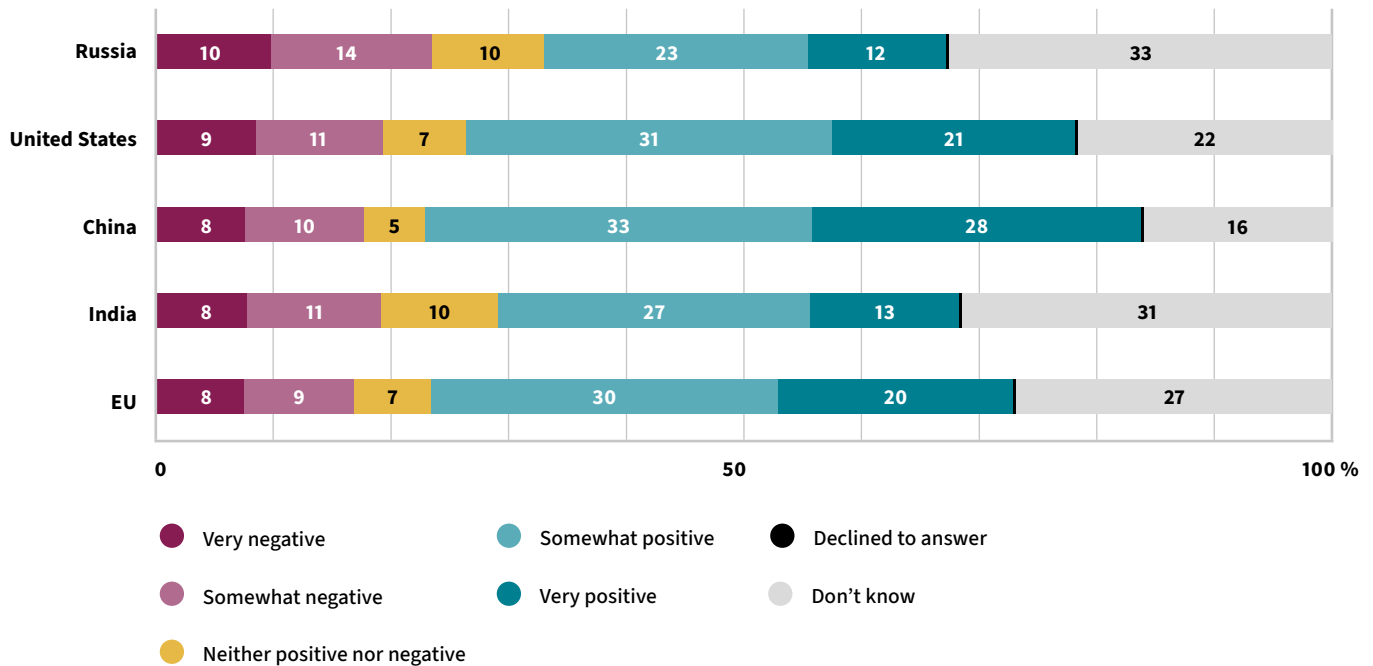


Figure 1. Data source: Afrobarometer round 10.

the start of President Trump's second administration and the subsequent drastic measures affecting international partnerships, this decline should not be interpreted primarily as a reaction to the administration's policies. Rather, Afrobarometer's own analysis points to perceptions of the international powers' policies during the Covid-19 pandemic as a more likely explanation for the decline. China was viewed far more favourably than the US or the EU with regard to international support during the pandemic.²¹

Results from other surveys paint a similar picture of the relative popularity of different international actors among African citizens. China stands out as the most positively viewed foreign power, while the influence of the US, Russia and particularly former European colonial powers is perceived more ambiguously in African countries. The most

recent data derive from the African Youth Survey, conducted in 16 countries. Its findings rank the EU second among external powers in terms of positive perceptions, after China (see Figure 3). However, the African Youth Survey, like the Afrobarometer surveys, paints a more mixed picture of attitudes towards individual European states, particularly former colonial powers. In the African Youth Survey, the UK and Germany were viewed more favourably than France as a former colonial power.²²

The African Youth Survey, like the Afrobarometer surveys, points to interesting results regarding the visibility of the EU. Unsurprisingly, the EU ranks behind both China and the US in the extent to which people recognise its influence (good or bad) and/or have enough information to be able to assess the quality of that influence. At the same time, the EU

²¹ Afrobarometer 2026a, 30.

²² African Youth Survey 2026.

is seen as more influential and is better known than Russia and India, and more influential than individual European states. According to these results, the EU's challenges in Africa cannot be primarily explained by a lack of knowledge or visibility. While indeed less well known than the global superpowers, its influence is recognised by the majority across the surveys. This suggests that to fare even better in the eyes of Africans, it is not sufficient for the EU simply to become more visible. Rather, the Union requires a better understanding of Africans' expectations.

2.2 Africans' expectations of international cooperation and external actors

What, then, do Africans want from their external partners? Drawing on the Afrobarometer findings and the key results from the African Youth Survey, this section identifies three dominant themes and framings in how ordinary Africans think about international partnerships: tangible economic partnerships, respect in partnerships, and governance accountability.

Tangible economic cooperation: jobs, investments and trade

A key challenge facing ordinary Africans, including young people, is their employment situation and economic insecurity and hardship in general. Among young people, rising living costs are viewed as a key challenge, and the creation of new, well-paid jobs is seen as the most important task for Africa's progress. When it comes to international cooperation, this is also an area of particular importance and a high priority for Africans. African youth prioritise international cooperation that delivers tangible results in terms of economic opportunities and infrastructure development in Africa, irrespective of who the partner is. At the same time, the economic challenges facing ordinary Africans, particularly young people, are by far the most important reasons for considering emigration, including to Europe.

The strong preference for international partnerships that deliver tangible results in the form of concrete economic benefits is also visible in Africans' views on international trade. Asked to choose between protecting local producers and promoting international trade, a majority of Africans (63%) see value in more open trade with regional

and global partners.²³ At the same time, however, the African Youth Survey points to an understanding of the structural inequalities in trade relations: African views highlight the desire to cooperate with international actors and frameworks that genuinely invest in African economies and add value to them, as well as respect African resources.

Respect in partnerships

Indeed, in addition to prioritising partnerships that deliver concrete economic benefits, African youth want partnerships that demonstrate respect for African agency and African resources. Respect for their countries' natural resources is among the top priorities or demands of young Africans when it comes to the international powers cooperating with their countries. Africans do not want their international partners to simply grab their natural resources and take off. Rather, they prefer partners that invest respectfully in those resources and the local infrastructure and means needed to leverage them.

Moreover, in a more fragmented and contested international order, Africans want their partners to exhibit respect for African countries' sovereignty. Over a third of the respondents to the African Youth Survey prioritised non-interference in domestic affairs as a criterion for international cooperation. A majority also favour more pragmatic, interest-based cooperation with multiple international partners, rather than partnerships primarily driven by ideological or value-based concordance. This underlines the preference for outcomes-focused cooperation. Africans want to be able to choose their partners and cooperate with multiple powers in mutually respectful ways – without top-down interference in domestic affairs.

Relatedly, as the Afrobarometer data and reports indicate, Africans do not view their international partnerships as zero-sum matters. On the contrary, positive views of and experiences with one international power usually correlate with positive views of other international powers.²⁴ Such attitudes suggest support for or approval of multi-alignment and fence-sitting policies and a rejection of a foreign policy that rigidly chooses sides between international powers.

²³ Afrobarometer 2026b.

²⁴ Afrobarometer 2026a, 27.

African youth's priorities in alliances

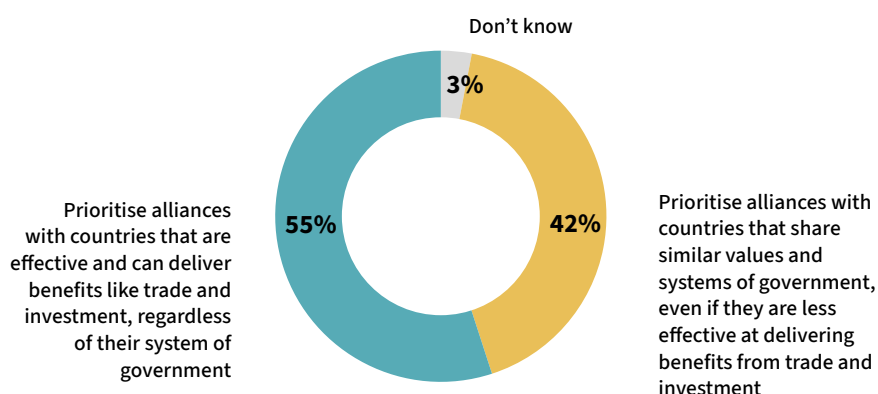


Figure 2. Data source: African Youth Survey.

African youth's perceptions of foreign powers' influence in Africa

Question: *How much influence do you think the following countries and the EU have on your country and is it positive or negative?*

Influence: Share of respondents reporting "a lot of influence" or "some influence".

Positive: Share of respondents reporting "very positive" or "somewhat positive" views.

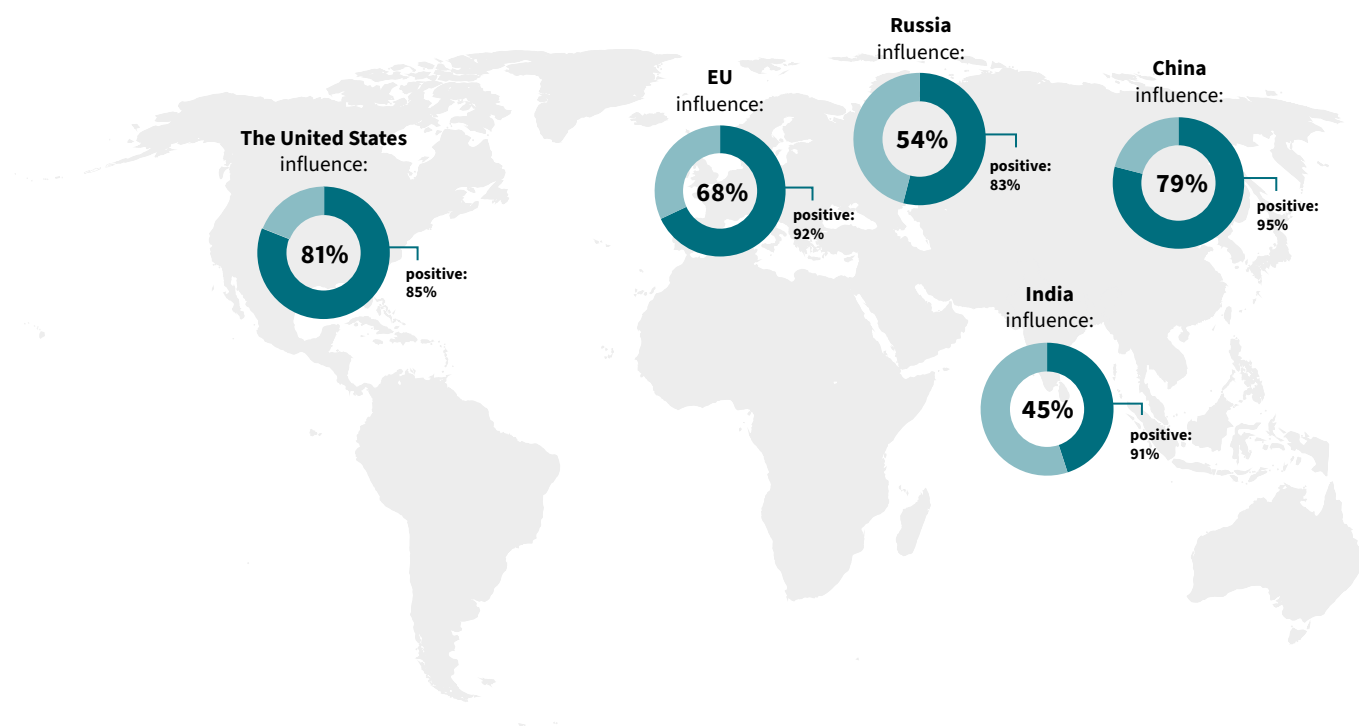


Figure 3. Data source: African Youth Survey.

Accountability for actions

At the same time, this does not mean that ordinary Africans, including young people, do not care about the integrity of their international partners and/or the values reflected in the actions of political leaders, both their own and those abroad. Indeed, democratic values and a strong human rights record continue to rank highly among young people's criteria for international partners. Africans in general, and young people in particular, care deeply about the quality of their governance and the accountability of the leaders governing them. They prefer democratic governments, yet they are dissatisfied with the quality and accountability of elected leaders. It is noteworthy, however, that in the most recent Afrobarometer survey (round 10), overall support for democracy has somewhat weakened, amid declining approval ratings of governments in power.²⁵

Young people overwhelmingly feel that leaders are out of touch with their needs, yet they still believe that their vote matters. Most importantly, with regard to both national leaders and regional and international actors, ordinary Africans expect accountable and responsible action.

These expectations also shape Africans' views of international cooperation. Young people favour long-term partnerships that provide predictable and stable benefits. Moreover, global justice is prioritised. For example, in the fight against climate change, Africans expect rich countries to contribute more and provide greater support for adaptation and mitigation in Africa. Underlying this expectation is the belief that wealthy countries bear primary responsibility for causing the climate crisis. In addition, African countries continue to prioritise cooperation on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.²⁶ Equally, Africans are keenly aware of the mismatch between their continent's growing importance globally and its underrepresentation in global governance institutions. Indeed, in the African Youth Survey, 80% of respondents prioritise UN reforms that would bring about permanent African Security Council membership. Similarly strong support for a greater African role within the UN is evident in Afrobarometer survey results.

To sum up, African views on international partnerships reflect considerable pragmatism, a desire for respect and sovereignty, and openness to international exchange, trade and partnerships that genuinely respect Africans and benefit them. While Africans value their own vote, human rights and democratic governance prospects, they are primarily looking for international partnerships that deliver concrete results, as Figure 2 indicates. Africans do not see contradictions in maintaining a wide range of international partnerships. At the same time, they value long-term commitments and predictability in those partnerships.

3. The EU's engagement in Africa in light of African priorities

In light of the surveys, how well does the recent evolution of EU policies align with the priorities expressed by Africans? Again, the picture is mixed: the alignment is neither as poor as one might fear nor as strong as it could be in principle.

Starting with the strengths of the EU as a partner, its relatively favourable reputation still presents a good basis to build upon. There are countries in which the EU is viewed considerably more negatively, such as Mali, but as the surveys demonstrate, the EU's influence is viewed positively overall, particularly among young people. Moreover, according to both Afrobarometer and the African Youth Survey, its reputation has remained more stable than that of the United States and former colonial powers such as France.

More importantly, recent EU policy shifts also align, at least in principle, with African priorities. The Global Gateway's emphasis on infrastructure, connectivity and investment could help meet the public demand for jobs, economic opportunities and tangible results. Through its critical minerals partnerships with African countries, the EU has also recognised the importance of strengthening local industrialisation and adding value to local supply chains. In principle, this could help address some of the priorities identified by African respondents.

In security cooperation, the EPF-style material assistance and the EU's first Security and Defence

²⁵ Mattes et al. 2026.

²⁶ FES Global Census Poll 2023.

Partnership with an African country, Ghana, indicate a shift from direct intervention towards support for African capabilities, which is consistent with African demands for non-interference. The EU can also draw on its reputation as a relatively predictable, long-term partner committed to the Sustainable Development Goals and multilateral cooperation. However, the EU's increasing emphasis on bilateral security partnerships and military assistance may not align with African preferences for a stronger role for the African Union in regional security.

The EU's main weakness is not simply limited visibility, but also an insufficiently clear and convincing offer of concrete results. China's reputational advantage suggests that it is more readily associated with visible infrastructure and economic benefits. The EU's Global Gateway, by contrast, remains difficult to decipher: it is often unclear which investments are new, how projects are selected, how different EU instruments fit together and what kind of benefits reach local communities. This challenge is illustrated by the Lobito Corridor, a railway and logistics infrastructure project connecting the Port of Lobito in Angola to mineral-rich areas in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Zambia. Presented by the EU and the US as their flagship connectivity project, the corridor has also been framed as a way to redirect critical mineral supply away from China. Much of the announced support consists of pre-existing or loosely connected commitments, while actual new EU support across the three African countries remains considerably more modest.²⁷ Moreover, as the survey results indicate, the corridor's value for local communities does not lie in how it counters China's projects, but in its ability to deliver reliable transport, trade facilitation, local employment and economic diversification in the participating countries.

Conditionality presents a second weakness for the EU. As previous research has noted, the conditions set by the EU for Global Gateway projects, for example, have been seen as patronising and imposed by the EU on its African counterparts.²⁸ They do not align with the growing demands for respect for sovereignty and non-interference. Notably, the conditions that the EU sets for its economic support

and cooperation are changing, with cooperation on migration becoming an increasingly important condition for economic support. This is unlikely to be popular among Africans, for whom migration management is primarily a question of economic (in)security rather than one to be handled primarily through policies centred on border management and returns. Based on African views, the EU would be better advised to focus on legal pathways for migration and mobility, as well as long-term investment in jobs and livelihoods.

A key opportunity in EU-Africa relations at the moment derives from the alignment of the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy and Africans' increasingly vocal demand for respect for their natural resources and partnerships that deliver. This opportunity could be seized more strategically, for example in the area of critical minerals and supply chain resilience. The EU cannot realistically reduce its critical-mineral vulnerabilities through domestic mining, refining and recycling alone. Rather, the Global Gateway, export finance and development cooperation need to support not only extraction but also refining, processing, recycling, energy infrastructure, skills and regional transport networks in African partner countries.²⁹

More broadly, the dominant EU discourse and the views of ordinary Africans are moving in the same direction when it comes to understanding development as a matter of investment and mutual benefits rather than primarily aid. Yet, to seize the opportunities that come with this, the EU would benefit from better integrating its diverse instruments and coordinating its various efforts and those of its member states beyond the conditionalities of the cooperation. This would help secure funding and ensure that investments respond comprehensively to the needs of African partners.

Furthermore, given the decline in the reputation of the US and its withdrawal from multilateral efforts to tackle global challenges, the EU has a genuine opportunity to build a mutually beneficial relationship with Africans in the area of global governance, including climate change and the reform of multilateral governance. The EU could build credibility with African partners by remaining committed to the UN, contributing concretely to its

27 Karkare and Hunter 2026.

28 Heldt 2023.

29 Le Mouel and Poitiers 2023; Szedlacsek 2026.

reforms and giving Africans a voice. Africa should be viewed as one of the EU's primary partners today in strengthening and reforming the rules-based order. Greater EU support for climate change adaptation in Africa would also serve the EU's long-term strategic interests in managing migration pressures.

Conversely, a key threat embedded in the EU's current policy trends is that the Union continues to increasingly condition and reshuffle its development support and investments more explicitly based on its own immediate geopolitical and political concerns while treating Africa primarily as a source of critical minerals and other commodities. This would undermine the traditional strengths of the EU as a partner while producing no significant added value for Africans with regard to their international partnerships. In terms of concrete outcomes, such an approach may fail to deliver meaningful improvements in jobs, infrastructure and livelihoods on the African side, thereby also undermining the EU's strategic priorities.

Conclusion: Towards a mutually beneficial partnership?

Recent speeches, declarations and positions across political divides and institutions within the EU all emphasise the need to move towards a more equal Africa-EU partnership.³⁰ This reflects an important recognition: in a changing global order, Africa is no longer a peripheral recipient of European policies but an increasingly influential political and economic actor.

Yet, at the same time, European debates remain markedly Eurocentric. Africa is often presented primarily through the lens of Europe's own challenges, whether geopolitical competition with China, migration pressures or the search for critical raw materials.

Even when policy documents stress mutual benefit, African industrialisation and value creation are often framed as secondary outcomes of policies designed to advance Europe's strategic autonomy.

This relationship needs to be understood differently. Supporting local processing capabilities and industrialisation to create added value in partner countries in Africa is not just a by-product of Europe's pursuit of its interests. It is one of the most effective ways of advancing those interests.³¹ Diversified supply chains and long-term political partnerships cannot be built on the continued export of raw materials alone. They require an integrated approach that adds value to local economies and value chains and leverages the EU's panoply of instruments and actors in a coordinated and comprehensive manner.

The survey findings indicate that the foundations for such a partnership exist. Africans are not rejecting international cooperation; they are demanding practical results, respect for sovereignty, local economic value and accountable conduct. The EU is comparatively well placed to respond. However, if it continues to treat Africa primarily as an arena for geopolitical competition or as an instrument for managing European vulnerabilities, its policies will remain short-term and risk-averse, producing suboptimal outcomes for both continents.

The required mindset shift is therefore strategic rather than altruistic. Africa's industrialisation, stability and influence in global governance are increasingly connected to Europe's own economic security and international relevance. A partnership that delivers tangible benefits to Africa is not at odds with the pursuit of European interests. It is a sound way of securing European interests in the long term. ■

³⁰ See, for example, von der Leyen 2025. Several European Parliament groups have recently published their position papers and visions on EU-Africa relations; see European People's Party (EPP) (2026), Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) (2026) and Renew Europe (2026).

³¹ EPP 2026.

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