

# **SHARED FORTUNES: WHY BRITAIN, THE EUROPEAN UNION, AND AFRICA NEED ONE ANOTHER**

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## **SUMMARY**

- Britain and Africa are deeply connected through their history and people as much as through trade, investment, aid, and culture.
- They can both benefit greatly from this relationship – especially in areas where their interests converge, including economic development, security, education, and climate.
- But political forces on both sides could push them apart – even as, increasingly, Britain needs Africa more than Africa needs Britain.
- The British government and the EU need to understand the relationship in its geostrategic context – the influence of China, Russia, Gulf states, and others affects African countries' views on their place in the world.
- A closer and more responsive relationship between Britain, Africa, and the EU would have significant benefits for all sides – partly because each is weaker individually than they are together, and because Britain still has strengths that are most useful in cooperation with others.
- But this will only be possible if the British government significantly changes its approach to Europe as well as to Africa.

# Introduction

In April 2014, the first EU-Africa Summit for several years was held in Brussels. It was attended by almost every European and African head of state or government – except the then British prime minister, David Cameron. It seemed that neither the European Union nor Africa was that much of a priority for him – at least, not more important than the Conservative Party constituency event in Wales that he attended instead. In this, Cameron might have been reflecting the views of the many British voters who had little interest in Africa or, at the time, the EU. Alternatively, he may simply have taken both for granted, thinking that they would always be there when he needed them.

Following Britain's exit from the EU, the current prime minister pledged that "Global Britain" would engage more actively with the rest of the world. In the event, the government's February 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development, and Foreign Policy made few references to either the EU or Africa (beyond some modest platitudes about engagement with the latter to paper over the drastic cut in aid budgets it had recently announced). Clearly, neither were government priorities.

Yet Britain and Africa still have significant shared interests. The partnership between the two has great potential. But it will not fulfil that potential without some significant changes in Britain's priorities and actions. And the effort will be all the more effective if Britain engages with Africa in cooperation with the rest of Europe. This paper explores how this could be achieved. It sets out the historical context of Britain's relationship with Africa before and after independence. It explores the main economic, political, and social dynamics that underpin the existing relationship and what they mean for the future, as well as how this is affected by changes in Africa itself. Finally, it looks at the European dimension, and where closer collaboration rather than increased competition between Britain and Europe in Africa could have benefits for all parties.

The paper often uses the term "Africa" in reference to Britain's diverse relations with individual African countries and with the African Union. This is convenient shorthand. It is not an attempt to treat Africa as a single country. Equally, the paper refers to "Europe" as including the United Kingdom and other non-EU states rather than just the EU.

## After the empire

For a people so proud of their traditions, the British sometimes have a remarkably selective memory of their country's imperial history. Britain's relationships with African countries – as with Ireland, India, and even the United States (however 'special' that may seem now) – have deep and contested

historical roots. Where the British side may see an empire to be proud of – and even nostalgic about – the other sees imperial exploitation and oppression that took all too long to banish. Until recently, British education tended to gloss over more than 200 years of brutal and profitable slave trade by concentrating on the more virtuous story of the abolition of that trade. Greater honesty about the past – which is spreading increasingly into classrooms, national bodies, and corporate boardrooms – can help build a more balanced and honest relationship between Britain and Africa.

But history still has consequences.

Language is one of them. Almost all Africans now live in countries where English, French, Arabic, or Portuguese is one of the official languages and is at the core of the national curriculum. This has enabled them to connect with and influence the wider world, but also receive information mediated through these global languages – be it from the BBC, Agence France-Presse, Al Jazeera, or Xinhua. The fact that one-third of Africans speak and read English in some form is a major benefit for Britain as it seeks to engage with them.

Economics is another such area. It was trade and profit that first drew British merchants to Africa. And, while not every colony was strictly profitable in an accounting sense, they all sent raw materials to Britain and received its goods, financial services, and other forms of trade. That was a core purpose of the British Empire. So, British colonies became an integral part of a global network of business, trade, and finance that continued after independence. This network lingers on in companies and trading patterns that still link Africa to the UK.

Thirdly, while independence marked a rupture, it did not sever political ties between Britain and African countries. The Commonwealth was the mechanism by which Britain sought to convert an empire into an alliance that was sufficiently loose and non-committal for all to feel comfortable within it. It has even expanded from 17 former British territories in Africa (neither Zimbabwe nor South Sudan is currently a member) to include Rwanda and Mozambique. Commonwealth heads of state and government are due to meet in Kigali in June 2022, following a two-year delay caused by covid-19. Although the Queen remains the head of the Commonwealth, its members gather now less to meet with the British government than to meet with one another. It is an international network that cuts across regional groupings and imposes few constraints on its members. The Commonwealth has been useful in bringing its members together through a common language; a formal commitment to democratic values such as pluralism and human and civil rights (though this is often tested and has sometimes proven flexible); and its networks of expertise in common law and parliamentary and electoral practice.

Independence enabled African nations to join the panoply of global structures that make up the

multilateral system, from the United Nations, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the World Health Organization to the International Court of Justice, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. African countries have also joined the political networks that emerged within these structures – such as the G77 and the Non-Aligned Movement – and their own regional organisations, ranging from the Organisation of African Unity (now the AU) to the Economic Community of West African States, the Southern African Development Community, the East African Community, and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development. While African leaders see some of these multilateral structures as part of a Western-dominated global system, the rebalancing of the global order in the past decade is beginning to change this perception. This matters for Britain’s relationship with Africa, because it is both mediated through and reflected in the multilateral system. Ultimately, as Britain’s permanent seat on the UN Security Council depends on its credibility as a global player, African states’ view of that credibility matters.

Since independence, Britain and much of Commonwealth Africa have maintained strong links with each other. However, the country’s connections with non-Commonwealth Africa have been weaker. Britain expanded its trade and tourism with Morocco and Egypt, while making big energy sector investments in Algeria and Angola. But, in Egypt particularly, Britain’s former role as an imperial power creates both an affinity and mistrust. History can be papered over, but it never goes away.

Paradoxically, it was to Britain that many Africans fled to escape post-independence political turmoil and conflict in the 1960s and the 1970s. Dissidents, refugees, and their families moved to the UK from Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, Somalia, and several southern African countries. Life was not always easy; they faced widespread racism and prejudice. But survival was possible – while it might not have been back home. This new diaspora followed the arrival in the UK of almost half a million people from the Caribbean in the 1940s and the 1950s.

Nevertheless, Britain’s post-independence relations with Africa were bedevilled by the slow process of decolonisation in southern Africa and the struggle against apartheid. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s support for the South African government seriously strained Britain’s relations with a number of African governments and damaged the country’s reputation on the continent.

From the mid-1990s, however, the relationship took a new turn, especially under the Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Coinciding with the revival of African countries’ economic fortunes and the spread of democracy after 1990 (the ‘African Renaissance’, as some called it), this proved to be a heyday for British-African relations – as reflected in the attention the UK paid to Africa at G8 summits, the Blair Commission for Africa, the creation of the Department for International Development (DFID), Britain’s increases in aid spending from £2.5 billion in 1997 to

£8.5 billion in 2010, and British support for the New Partnership for Africa's Development and other African initiatives.

After 2010, the relationship began to fade. Cameron's coalition government stuck to the same rhetoric, encouraged investment, and introduced legislation that formalised Britain's commitment to spend 0.7 per cent of GNI on foreign aid. But travel to Africa and meetings with African leaders were largely delegated to then-deputy prime minister Nick Clegg. And British ministers for Africa came and went with monotonous regularity, allowing none to establish sustained relations with African leaders. The neglect accelerated after the 2015 election and the overwhelming focus after 2016 on extricating Britain from the EU. The British political establishment and civil service had little bandwidth for other priorities. Theresa May, as prime minister, came as close as anyone to defining a more coherent strategy on Africa, as revealed in her speech on a brief tour of the continent in 2018, but never translated this into a formal document on her return. Britain slightly expanded its diplomatic presence in Africa, but any potential benefit to the relationship was blown away by her successor's announcement of the abolition of DFID and deep cuts to UK aid in late 2020.

Brexit baffled leaders of Anglophone African countries – who could not understand why Britain would throw away the power and influence that came with EU membership – but generated hope among leaders of Francophone ones, who speculated that Britain would at last engage with them more closely. The Integrated Review, insofar as it was noticed at all on the continent, did not reassure the former or satisfy the latter, despite its pledge to maintain a raft of policies on Africa and prioritise relations with South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Ghana. Actions speak louder than words, and they told a different story.

## British influence in Africa

Britain's current engagement with Africa arguably falls under four broad headings: economic links, security cooperation, cultural and educational contacts (part of soft power), and people.

### Economic relations

Britain's trade with Africa has shrunk in absolute and relative terms. In 1960 the UK accounted for around 30 per cent of all African trade, but now accounts for barely 3 per cent. According to the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Africa's November 2020 report on UK-Africa Trade after Brexit and research by Carnegie, trade in goods and services grew from \$15 billion in 2000 to \$27 billion in 2008 and \$43 billion in 2012, before falling back to \$34 billion in 2019 and (partly due to covid-19) only \$14 billion in 2020. By comparison, China accounted for \$190 billion of Africa's \$1,300 billion in

global trade in 2019. That year, more than 40 per cent of the UK's African trade was with South Africa and Nigeria. Pre-Brexit trade relations had been governed by the EU's Cotonou Agreement. This allowed for quota- and duty-free access to most African countries under the Everything but Arms agreement, with economic partnership agreements for others that allowed largely free access, albeit with the controversial requirement for the reciprocal liberalisation of African markets. Since Brexit, Britain has simply rolled over the same regime, signing new deals with 16 African countries that are almost identical to the old ones. So far, there is no sign that the UK is changing its trade regime to support the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). And the media perception of doing business in Africa remains unduly negative.

Nevertheless, the UK has maintained a stronger position in investment in Africa. In 2019 the country held the second-largest stock of foreign direct investment in Africa (after China) at \$66 billion – 83 per cent of it invested in oil, gas, mining, and financial services. Annual investment grew rapidly after 2000, but plummeted after Brexit and recovered in 2018-2019, only to fall again during the covid-19 pandemic. African investment in the UK was around \$3 billion in 2014, but the UK has found a niche in encouraging expanding African companies to list on the London Stock Exchange. By 2019, more than 110 African companies with a combined market capitalisation of \$175 billion were listed on the London Stock Exchange – more than on any other stock exchange outside Africa. The firms had been attracted by the liquidity of its market and relative ease of listing. London has also become the most popular foreign location for issuing African sovereign bonds, with \$36 billion raised in total. This has partly compensated for the retreat of British banks from African markets: Standard Chartered remains, but Barclays has almost completely withdrawn and HSBC has only a limited presence. Arguably, the financial relationship between the UK and Africa is too close. There is abundant evidence that London's openness to foreign wealth has facilitated the laundering of the corrupt gains of ruling elites from Africa and elsewhere, especially in the property market.

But financial flows go both ways. There is no precise figure for remittances from the UK to Africa, but a thorough study in 2017 estimated the flow to be \$6.5 billion in 2015. Much of this money flows directly to households to fund education, construction, and small businesses. With remittances significantly exceeding the volume of aid spending to Africa, there was pressure on the government in 2020 to cut the transfer cost of remittances to support communities suffering the economic consequences of covid-19.

Since hosting the first UK-Africa Investment Summit in January 2020, the government in London has worked hard to promote British investment in the continent. A key role in this has been played by the CDC Group, now rebranded 'British International Investment'. Having invested more than £7 billion in the past five years, the organisation's new strategy for 2022-2026 pledges to allocate between £1.5

billion and £2 billion per annum to long-term investments in viable, job-creating enterprises – particularly in renewable energy – while withdrawing from the fossil fuel business. Much of this investment will be in Africa. This makes economic sense: Africa is home to several of the fastest-growing economies in the world; financial technology and telecoms are booming on the continent; African minerals are increasingly in demand; and Africa has great potential to improve its agricultural output.

This focus on investment has been accompanied by an abrupt and drastic cut in Britain’s aid budget, from 0.7 per cent of GNI to 0.5 per cent. Given that the country had multilateral commitments it could not abandon at short notice, this translated into a cut for most African bilateral programmes of more than 60 per cent from one year to the next. The announcement in November 2020 came hard on the heels of the government’s decision five months earlier to merge DFID into a new Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office.

There was a perfectly good case for integrating DFID and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office more closely, especially in overseas missions – and, indeed, for reducing aid in favour of investment in Africa. But with a characteristically cavalier destructiveness, Prime Minister Boris Johnson threw away any potential benefit of defining a new strategy in favour of an arresting phrase and a cheap headline, using the occasion to throw some ‘red meat’ to the diehard opponents of aid on his own backbenches and to appeal to the two-thirds of British voters who thought aid spending was too high. His references to the aid programme as a “giant cashpoint in the sky” and his view that Ukraine and the Western Balkans should receive more aid than Tanzania and Zambia seemed calculated to add insult to injury. In Africa, they went down like a lead balloon.

These decisions badly damaged African leaders’ trust in the British government as a reliable partner. The aid cut, the abolition of DFID, and the rebranding of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and CDC Group all signalled that British aid was now to be used in pursuit of Britain’s interests, not those of the poor or the recipient countries. As several observers have argued, the cuts are more a public signal of Britain’s international weakness than its commitment to a global role.

## Security cooperation

Since independence, Britain had sought to maintain good contacts with African military officers, mainly through their sponsored attendance at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and the Royal College of Defence Studies. The closeness of these relationships has been limited by post-colonial and anti-apartheid sensitivities, the tendency of some African militaries to take a direct role in politics, and Britain’s reluctance to play as active a military role as France in Africa. The military intervention

in Sierra Leone in 2000 was an exception. But, in a few African countries, Britain remains important militarily.

Britain has maintained an exceptionally close military relationship with Kenya since 1963 in the form of a regularly renewed defence treaty that allows up to 10,000 British troops to train in Kenya every year and to provide training support to the Kenyan military. In recent years, especially since al-Shabaab attacked the Westgate shopping mall in 2013, this support has particularly focused on counter-terrorism training – with some success. Despite controversy over the behaviour of British soldiers training in Kenya, the relationship looks set to continue whoever wins the Kenyan presidential election this year.

Britain has also supported Nigeria in the fight against Boko Haram, but with rather less success. Following an agreement in 2018, this led to the first UK-Nigeria security and defence partnership meeting in London in February 2022. Future training will focus particularly on community policing, respect for human rights, and the role of women in the police force, as well as counter-terrorism cooperation.

Both Kenya and Nigeria border countries where terrorist activity poses a growing threat to political stability. In the Sahel, the UK has supported France’s Operation Barkhane since 2018 with the deployment of three Chinook helicopters, and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). London recently committed to provide political support to the multinational Takuba Task Force that was planned to replace Barkhane, and to deploy 250 reconnaissance troops alongside MINUSMA soldiers – though it is still unclear how these activities will be affected by the coup in Mali earlier this year and the French withdrawal from the country. In the Horn of Africa, the UK has been one of the strongest advocates of EU support for the AU Mission to Somalia (AMISOM). As penholder for Somalia on the UN Security Council, the UK negotiated an extension of the mandate and continues to provide financial support to the country alongside the EU. But, without AMISOM, Somalia could quickly succumb to chronic instability and a resurgent al-Shabaab. And the decision on the mission’s future is now more in the hands of the AU and the EU than the UK.

## Soft power

The Integrated Review made much of Britain’s status as a “soft power superpower”, citing the influence of the BBC and the British Council (both of which are threatened by government cuts), as well as the royal family and Premier League football.

Britain’s cultural influence in Africa is indeed wide and deep, but that is not enough in itself to turn



the ‘soft’ into ‘power’. That requires a political gearing mechanism. And the relationship is more reciprocal than many realise: Africa’s cultural influence in the UK is growing faster than vice versa.

Millions of Africans watch Premier League matches every week, as much to follow the fortunes of African players as the teams themselves. The Ivorian ambassador to London used to point to a framed photo of footballer Didier Drogba on his mantelpiece, explaining: “he is the real Ambassador of Cote d’Ivoire to this country”. The most famous Egyptian in Britain is undoubtedly Mohamed Salah. And more Africans will have heard of footballer Harry Kane than Johnson. More still will have heard of the Queen, and there is an immense reservoir of affection for her and the (still widely trusted) BBC among Africans of an older generation. London, too, retains its powerful attraction as a place to visit, study, and work.

But none of this automatically translates into support for the British government’s policies or votes at the UN. For that to happen, London would need to improve the political gearing mechanism and admit that the abolition of DFID, savage aid cuts, and apparent neglect of Africa have severely dented that so-called soft power.

Britain’s diplomatic network in Africa is extensive, with missions in all but 13 countries, and includes some excellent staff who maintain effective and influential contacts. But these can only be fully mobilised with visible political backing. Britain’s ever-changing cast of Africa ministers tour the continent assiduously, but remain junior and transient figures. The British royals are popular in Africa, but have no political power. Without the regular engagement of the foreign secretary and prime minister, the gearing will not be effective.

Nevertheless, one area remains of crucial importance to soft power: education. Britain continues to have a world-class higher education system, which many Anglophone African students aspire to attend. In 2020 around 25,000 students from Africa were studying in British higher education (75 per cent of them from Nigeria). And, over many years, this experience has had a lasting influence on the attitudes of African elites, who often go on to senior jobs at home or abroad. A few stay in British academic or private sector jobs, bringing skills and an African perspective to the country. The British government’s policy is to encourage overseas students to attend educational institutions in the UK. Accordingly, in 2020, the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office sponsored 401 Chevening scholars from sub-Saharan Africa to study in the UK. However, there remain two impediments to this effort: the high costs for overseas students – with a relative lack of scholarships to fund poorer students – and the persistent difficulty in obtaining a visa. Since the government cracked down on so-called visa factory language schools a decade ago, it has become harder to secure one, particularly for short-term academic study visits. This has stimulated a significant shift of African

students towards the US (which is easier to access), China (which is cheaper), and even to Ukraine (where internationally recognised degree courses were both cheap and easy to access).

British universities are beginning to respond to this trend by directly building partnerships with African universities. Rather than create overseas branches as they do in the Middle East or Asia, they are increasing the capacity of partner universities in situ, to help strengthen African higher education in ways that are more accessible to most local students. As this approach is beneficial and sustainable for both parties, the British government should increase its support for such partnerships, especially by facilitating visits to and from Africa.

Soft power also works in the other direction. Africa has growing cultural influence in the UK in everything from music and literature to cinema and TV – not just through the African diaspora but throughout British cultural industries and consumer choices. Events such as [Film Africa](#) and [Africa Writes](#) attract growing audiences, while UK concerts by leading African musicians sell out in hours.

This goes hand in hand with changes in political attitudes. The Black Lives Matter movement stimulated in 2020 a renewed interest in facing up to Britain's own history, reflected in recent reports and investigations by the [Commonwealth War Graves Commission](#), the [National Trust](#), and private companies. The question of the restitution of cultural property, particularly of the [Benin Bronzes](#), has also resurfaced. These demands for greater honesty and transparency about the past come from communities in the UK as much as from African countries themselves. And Britain's reputation among Africans and those of African heritage everywhere will suffer if the government is unresponsive to such demands. An effort to ensure that Africa is accurately represented in the British school curriculum, as recently recommended by the [All-Party Parliamentary Group for Africa](#), would be a good place to start.

## People

The most dynamic element of Britain's evolving relationship with Africa has been the growing population of African origin in the country. In colonial times, the British migrated to Africa; in the post-colonial world, the flow has reversed. Recent [estimates](#) put the total African diaspora in the UK at more than 1.4 million. The [2011 National Census](#) identified 3.3 per cent of the British population as being Black/African/Caribbean/Black British and another 1 per cent as mixed African/Caribbean/White heritage. As a share of Britain's estimated 2021 population of 68.4 million, this equates to around three million people in Britain with some African heritage. The largest grouping of these people is in London, but there are also growing communities across the country, including in Birmingham, Bristol, Liverpool, Cardiff, and Edinburgh. People of African heritage work

in all sectors and make up around 2.5 per cent of the total NHS workforce – accounting for a disproportionately large share of nurses. In practice, Africa – like south Asia – has become an integral part of what Britain is.

Many in the African diaspora in the UK maintain close and active links with the countries where they have family ties. Flights to and from west Africa are some of British Airways' most lucrative routes. These connections are often commercial as much as familial, with organisations such as AFFORD encouraging the diaspora to support African development efforts. The British government, too, has been keen to create links with the diaspora as a way of connecting with the continent – but, to be effective, this needs to involve more listening and less talking. Britain's African diaspora is one of its major geopolitical and economic assets – a fact that the government has taken too long to recognise.

One issue in particular dominates Africans' views of Britain: visas. A 2019 report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Africa highlighted the visa problems that African visitors face in the UK. Its conclusions are borne out by conversations with Africans across the continent. No other topic creates more animosity towards the UK than the expensive, time-consuming, uncertain, and occasionally even humiliating experience of applying for a visa to visit the UK. The British authorities have made improvements in response to the report, while covid-19 travel restrictions temporarily eased the pressure on the visa system. But the issue has not gone away: it continues to have an outsized influence on perceptions of Britain across Africa.

## **Future UK-Africa partnerships**

Three factors will shape the trends discussed above: geopolitics; domestic politics (in both Africa and the UK); and global policy issues, particularly health, climate, conflict, and demographics. In many of them, Britain's interests are mirrored by Europe's.

Since independence, African nations have asserted their own agency in international affairs – individually, as well as collectively through the AU and its predecessor. They are now considering how their interests are best served in a world that is becoming more multipolar. There is undoubtedly a struggle for influence on the continent, but it is a struggle that will be decided by Africans themselves. To be courted by world leaders – be they from Washington, Beijing, Moscow, Istanbul, Berlin, or Brussels – is to realise the power of choice. The recent round of summits with Africa have included, in 2019, Russia's in Sochi and, in 2021, France's in Montpellier, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in Senegal (the first away from Beijing), and Turkey's in Istanbul. With the AU-EU Summit also having taken place in Brussels in February 2022, can Britain compete?

It depends on what African leaders are looking for. Investment and trade: certainly. Respect: of course. Support on health and climate: obviously. Security: sometimes. Lectures: certainly not. European Council President Charles Michel's proposal that the EU and Africa form a new 'alliance' was not welcomed – this was not what African leaders wanted. Though 28 African states voted for the recent UN General Assembly resolution demanding that Russia withdraw from Ukraine and only one (Eritrea) opposed it, 17 abstained and eight were absent, reluctant to vote against a nation with whom they had close links – even if it was trampling on the sovereignty of an independent state and trying to reimpose imperial rule from Moscow. Even more abstained from voting on (23) or opposed (9) a resolution to remove Russia from the UN Human Rights Council. Contrast this with the unanimous African vote against the UK on the Chagos Islands resolution in 2019 (when only five countries in the world backed the British position), and the overwhelming African support for the Indian rather than the British candidate for the International Court of Justice in 2017.

Real friends are there when you need them – and that cuts both ways. African leaders may prefer a trip to London to one to Moscow, but the UN votes suggest that Russia carries more clout in Africa than the UK – for all its aid, investment, and education. With UN Security Council reform again in the air, it is worth asking: if there was a straight vote between the UK and Russia for a seat on the Security Council, who would gather the most African votes?

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has changed global politics. Alliances are becoming more important. And both Britain and the EU need to build robust partnerships in Africa if they are to demonstrate the value of, and thereby preserve, a multilateral system based on international law rather than the law of the strongest. Most African countries, with relatively small economies and limited military capabilities, have much to lose if the multilateral system that gives them a vote and a voice is replaced by a global system of patrons and clients. Africa did not fare well in the cold war – which brought it conflict and corruption rather than growth or good governance. Africa's growth story only began after the cold war ended.

But not all Africans see it that way. For many in the street, and some in government, the West has had its way in the world for too long: the global system is still stacked against Africa, Africans are still poor, Western countries failed them yet again in their response to covid-19, and a change is overdue. China and Russia provide some African leaders with what they want – investment and security, with no questions asked. France is already facing a backlash in west Africa, where its counter-terrorism campaigns are widely accused of being more neo-colonial than supportive. And just when Africa needs extra support to deal with the impact of covid-19 and rising world food prices, the UK is reducing its aid budget. Therefore, domestic political pressure in a growing number of African

countries may drive governments to reject old partners and seek new ones. There is a battle of narratives in Africa. Neither France, Britain, nor the rest of Europe can take African sympathy and support for granted.

British domestic politics could also drive it away from Africa. Opinion polls confirm that there is extensive public support for aid cuts and the closure of the border to foreigners, including refugees. And the Johnson government is likely to stick by these policies. There is currently no British minister willing to make the case in cabinet for prioritising closer links with Africa. The Conservative Friends of International Development were defeated in their efforts to push the government to return to a 0.7 per cent of GNI target for aid spending. Seen from Africa, there seems to be little chance that the British government will genuinely listen to Africans' concerns and address their needs.

And yet, if some aspects of global and domestic politics risk pulling the UK and Africa apart, there are global and local crises in which African countries would look for support from Britain if it was willing to work hand in hand with the rest of Europe, as it has on Ukraine. This could create a basis for a new and lasting partnership.

The most urgent of these issues are health, climate, conflict, and demography.

The covid-19 pandemic revealed the desperate need to upgrade **Africa's health capabilities**. Despite major investment in African healthcare in recent decades – especially to combat AIDS, Ebola, malaria, malnutrition, and to improve maternity care – the West is widely seen to have failed to deliver adequate vaccines in Africa's hour of need. African countries are determined to develop their own pharmaceutical industries. And the EU and Britain should take the lead in supporting this, as British universities are in supporting African higher education. British-Swedish firm AstraZeneca, for example, has the potential to increase its investment in Africa, which would promote vaccine equity and reduce the risks that future outbreaks will develop into pandemics.

COP26 underlined the shared interests of African and European countries in tackling **climate change**. Africans are among the first to suffer the consequences of climate change, while Europeans want to accelerate action to mitigate these effects. COP27 in Egypt provides an opportunity to reinforce the unity of purpose with unity of action. Thanks to the widely respected work of COP26 President Alok Sharma, Britain had a leading role in Glasgow. To carry weight in Sharm-el-Sheikh, it will need to act in concert with the EU. Africa's and Europe's green agendas are not identical but, as the AU-EU Summit declaration demonstrated, they have common ground. And the EU can back up its climate goals with far greater investment than Britain alone can mobilise. On the other side, Africa's ability to influence both China and India is critical to limiting the speed of climate change. Sharma would be well-placed to organise a partnership along these lines with both Africa and the EU, if the

government gave him the support to do so.

Nevertheless, adapting to climate change requires a degree of **stability and government effectiveness** that, in parts of Africa, appears to be under strain – not least from the impact of climate change itself. Across both the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, intensifying pressure on resources appears to be exacerbating jihadism, banditry, political instability, and a wider decay in governmental capacity to maintain law and order. These trends could lead to greater disorder and displacement – which, in turn, would put further pressure on established governments and accelerate what is in some places already becoming a process of state disintegration. Political disagreements risk degenerating into uncontrollable conflict, precipitating ever larger movements of people that destabilise neighbouring countries. Britain could certainly play a constructive role in working with African institutions to reduce these risks and build on the successful growth story elsewhere on the continent. But, by acting alone, it lacks critical mass. Britain can only provide support and apply pressure that will make a difference by working with the EU and the AU.

Africa's remarkable **demographic growth** underpins all three challenges. Unlike most other continents, Africa will continue to experience a rapid increase in its population. This is thanks to the revolution in healthcare since the 1960s. Africans' median age of 19.7 means that there will be an expanding labour force for many decades to come. The key question concerns what they will do. Population growth can stimulate economic activity, but only if it is accompanied by the mobilisation of physical resources (such as land, water, and energy) and investment (in infrastructure, transport, manufacturing) to create jobs and other economic opportunities. If young Africans cannot find a livelihood where they are, they will move to a place where they can. That is the history of human society. It will not stop because of the relatively recent invention of national borders.

All this has a direct impact on the EU and Britain. Both have a choice between supporting more rapid economic growth in Africa or preparing to welcome more African migrants. As all have learnt in different ways from the covid-19 and Ukraine crises, it is impossible to insulate one region from events in another, however far away it may feel. To address these problems, the UK needs to work closely with other European countries – as well as with the US, the AU, and the UN – to support political stabilisation in these regions. This should involve more effective international coordination to prevent external powers, including Gulf states, from exacerbating local conflicts – a problem that has plagued peace efforts in Libya and the Horn of Africa.

## The EU's role

It is already clear that it is hard to separate British policy on Africa from that of the rest of Europe. Of

course, seen from Downing Street, Britain is competing for business and influence with its European rivals. But, frankly, there are bigger games in play – and Britain risks losing out if it chooses to go it alone (as the recent ECFR report ‘[Beyond Global Britain](#)’ makes clear).

As an EU member, the UK was considered a heavyweight on African affairs with considerable influence on EU policy, alongside France and Germany (which, under former chancellor Angela Merkel, also prioritised Africa). Since Brexit, EU Africa policy has become decidedly more French and Mediterranean. This is not necessarily to Britain’s – or Africa’s – advantage.

The European Economic Community, the EU’s predecessor, inherited strong links with Africa from member states that formerly held African colonies, but without some of the historical baggage. It initially focused on aid and trade, through the Lomé and then Cotonou conventions – the latter seeking to strengthen the link between economic development and good governance. From the first EU-Africa Summit held in Cairo in 2000, the formation of the AU in 2003, and the agreement on a Joint Africa-EU Strategy in 2007, the relationship aspired to become an equal partnership. This partnership was reaffirmed at a successful summit in Brussels in 2014, but then tested by the migration crisis in 2015. The latter culminated in the [Valletta Summit on migration](#) in November 2015, which set out the five pillars of policy that both sides endorsed and established a trust fund to help finance the resulting initiatives.

The most recent [AU-EU Summit](#), attended by 40 African and almost all EU heads of state or government, reaffirmed the partnership and set out a joint vision for 2030. It was a substantive affair. And its timing, just ahead of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, was fortuitous. There were intense negotiations over the wording of commitments on migration and intellectual property rights for pharmaceutical products. This is because what was said mattered.

The relationship now revolves around six key issues, including those identified above:

- **Trade:** the EU remains Africa’s [largest trading partner](#), accounting for more than 30 per cent of trade in both directions, compared to China’s roughly 20 per cent. The bulk of Africa’s exports continue to enter the EU duty- and quota-free, governed by the Everything but Arms agreement or by economic partnership deals for middle-income countries. Africa is keen for the EU to adjust its trade regime to support the establishment of the AfCFTA. And the two sides are working at the WTO, now with an African secretary-general, to reach an agreement on intellectual property rights for pharmaceutical products. The EU and Africa are neighbours. And, in trade, geography still matters. For each, the other is a logical, compatible, and accessible economic partner whose market has great potential for growth.

- **Aid and investment:** the EU and its member states are collectively the largest donors to and investors in Africa. According to the most recent figures, in 2019, they provided nearly €20 billion in development assistance to African countries (€5.8 billion from EU institutions), and the total stock of EU investment in Africa amounted to €241 billion. Under the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2022-2027, EU institutions have committed another €29 billion (\$31.6 billion) in aid to sub-Saharan Africa. And, with the demise of DFID, the EU has now become a key player in setting global standards for international aid. Under the new Global Gateway investment package, the EU has allocated €150 billion to investment in the continent. At the recent AU-EU Summit, European leaders pledged to increase their efforts to meet Africa’s vaccination needs through COVAX – though they should go further to support African pharmaceuticals manufacturing. Britain remains a crucial investor in Africa, particularly in the extractives sector. And the private finance that can be mobilised through the London Stock Exchange and London’s financial institutions could greatly amplify the effectiveness of the Global Gateway initiative if the UK was willing to work with it.
- **Climate:** the European Green Deal is not wholly aligned with African interests in its determination to reduce investment in and consumption of fossil fuels. The summit conclusions addressed this by recognising that Africa needed an “energy transition that is fair, just and equitable”, taking account of Africa’s requirement for electricity generation by a range of means. A sizeable share of Global Gateway investments will be directed towards energy and support for mitigation and adaptation in Africa’s green transition. As suggested above, coordination between the EU, the UK, and Africa on climate will be vital to ensure a successful outcome for COP27.
- **Migration:** since the Valletta Summit, the EU has made a concerted effort to invest more in tackling the root causes of migration, albeit rather less in providing legal pathways. But migrants keep arriving in Europe. And the politics of the issue is now shifting only because of the war in Ukraine. As indicated above, it is an issue on which the EU, the UK, and Africa need to conduct a three-way discussion.
- **Security:** the EU began its security role in Africa in the 2000s, primarily by funding AMISOM and using EU training missions to build up state capacity in Somalia, the Central African Republic, and Mali. The former proved effective in expelling al-Shabaab from Mogadishu, but the latter have failed to create effective national security forces. More recently, the EU has provided financial and logistical support to the G5 Sahel. But that too is in question given the coups in Mali and Burkina Faso, as well as some African leaders’ apparent preference for



Russian rather than EU help. For the reasons cited above, a more effective response to political instability is needed. Britain's experience would be invaluable in crafting a more effective policy for the EU.

- **Governance and values:** for decades, the EU – like the UK – has underlined the importance of transparent and accountable governance in building an effective partnership with African countries on aid, trade, and security. Some African governments resent the human rights conditionality the EU has attached to its assistance (as exemplified by various disputes over the International Criminal Court's role in Africa). Such conditions have also done little to restrain governments in Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, or Uganda. But many African civil society organisations and political opposition groups rely on the EU to help constrain the behaviour of autocratic governments. While the union's relations with some African governments may be strained as a result, this has enhanced its credibility with citizens of many African countries.

On many of these issues, the UK and EU are almost entirely aligned and would strengthen each other by working together. The British government's apparent belief that it will carry more weight by approaching African countries independently of the EU is not borne out in practice. Of course, British diplomats can join forces with their EU colleagues on an ad hoc basis, but this would be less effective. The government currently discourages participation in EU coordination meetings, an approach that makes no sense in a world where influence matters more than posturing. Common UK-EU positions would demonstrate to Britain's African interlocutors that it still had influence within the EU, thereby enhancing the country's capacity to achieve its objectives in Africa.

The consequences of Britain's refusal to reach a formal post-Brexit foreign policy coordination mechanism with the EU are now apparent. Without institutional mechanisms to support this process, such coordination is ad hoc and rushed. Bilateral engagement with individual member states is a time-consuming and clumsy alternative to such mechanisms.

Britain could easily begin to address this issue in Africa by allowing its ambassadors and high commissioners to liaise with their EU counterparts on a more regular basis. More efficient still would be to create a formal coordination mechanism in Brussels that would bring the UK into the room when it mattered most. Despite the bad blood created by Brexit, most European countries would welcome this.

## Conclusion

Britain retains great assets in Africa and in its African diaspora. But, having neglected both, the

country is now paying the price in diminished influence and reduced business. It needs to change policies and priorities if it is to reverse that trend. The key to this is for the government to listen to what Africans are saying – including those who are now an integral part of British society – and to address their concerns, not merely seek to impose its own policies on them. This is now a matter of domestic and international politics. Listening and responding is very much in Britain’s national interest – if only the government would admit it.

Britain’s position in the world depends on real power, hard security, and economic benefits – not on wishful thinking. Waffle in Whitehall and Westminster has no clout in Africa. And Britain’s global influence depends as much – if not more – on African and South Asian opinion as on the views of China, with whom it is currently engaged in a stand-off, and the US, which too often takes Britain for granted. Having friends still matters in global politics. It is essential for Britain to build fruitful partnerships with African countries domestically and internationally. This is obviously true of Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya, which are courted by all major players and can pick and choose their partners. Therefore, Britain should make a particular effort to court Francophone and smaller Anglophone countries that global powers regularly ignore – Malawi, Botswana, Zambia, Gambia, Uganda, Somalia, South Sudan, Côte d’Ivoire, Senegal, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A real commitment to Africa’s interests and progress would produce big political dividends.

The transformation of the international order caused by Russia’s war on Ukraine makes Africa’s role in the world more important than ever. Some African countries will be tempted to equivocate or play one great power off against the others. This is a dangerous and potentially damaging game, as Russia’s involvement in Syria has demonstrated. It is fundamentally in the interests of Africa’s democracies, Africa’s development, and arguably all African people to enhance global stability rather than encourage or tolerate continued conflict.

This is profoundly in the self-interest of both Britain and the EU. By acting separately, they weaken their ability to support Africa’s development. The case for democracy, liberal values, and an open economy needs to be argued, demonstrated, and won in public debate. By allowing its influence in Africa to fade, and by distancing itself from the European mainstream, Britain has limited its ability to affect the outcome of that debate in ways that have serious consequences for its role in the world.

Britain’s assets in soft power, security engagement, financial expertise, and political understanding could have far greater impact if they were linked to the EU’s resources and economic clout. The longer Britain continues to separate itself from the EU by avoiding close coordination on policies that are in their mutual interest, the faster its influence in Africa will diminish. A dogmatic commitment to autonomy will only hasten its irrelevance. Some in government may find such advice unpalatable, but

ignoring it will only hasten Britain's decline. If Britain cannot work with its friends and neighbours, it will swiftly lose the respect of all.

Investing in Africa still makes economic sense, as the continent's economies and populations are growing. And Africans will welcome it: faster economic growth is essential to manage the demographic shift, the impact of climate change, and the risk of conflict on the continent. These are important issues for all concerned.

Therefore, in practical terms, the key recommendations are:

- The British government should consult and otherwise engage more directly with the African diaspora on its Africa policy, including on visas.
- The UK should make common cause with the EU and Africa in the preparations for COP27.
- The UK and the EU should begin an intensive joint dialogue with all African countries on how to accelerate growth and to generate jobs for young Africans.
- Britain should encourage its representatives in Africa to liaise more closely with their European colleagues, and should accelerate negotiations for a foreign policy coordination mechanism in Brussels.

Above all, both the UK and the EU need to make a greater political investment in Africa's future – starting right now, before it is too late.

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