

Special EDITION

The Decline of America Soft Power in Africa: A Strategic Opportunity for the European Union (EU) and Germany

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Abstract

The world is changed. The withdrawal and self-isolation of the United States of America (U.S.) has left a soft power gap globally and particularly in Africa. The European Union (EU) is however sticking out as one of the alternative partners of choice for Africa, hence US withdrawal might be an opportunity for EU to engage more assertively in Africa. For that, EU has to examine the role it wants to play in the future and adeptly combine its economic and political power as it engages the world and particularly, Africa. In the short-term, Germany will have to take a leadership role by filling the soft power gap, which can be achieved by recalibrating its domestic narrative and approach to Africa. German foreign actions have to mirror the rising self-confidence of the African partners with the objectives to gain the support and trust of the African public, to join efforts with Africa in the international system and to build a long and stable partnership beneficial for both Europe and Africa.

The Ephemeral Opportunity

The recent reduction in United States foreign aid represents a notable development in the landscape of international development assistance and global soft power competition. In 2025, the U.S. government announced a withdrawal of approximately USD 12.7 billion in aid allocated for Sub-Saharan Africa, alongside reductions to various global assistance programs (Maclean, 2025). In certain regions, the aid constituted a significant portion of humanitarian support as, for example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, U.S. foreign assistance previously accounted for an estimated 70 percent of the total humanitarian funding (Maclean, 2025). The implications of these reductions are twofold: in the short term, they are likely to intensify humanitarian needs, and in the long term, they may contribute to shifts in geopolitical alignments as African states explore alternative partnerships (Ndeto et al., 2025). Simultaneously, the EU and its member states are experiencing a series of structural challenges. These include among others economic stagnation, technological

changes and political fragmentation linked to external conflicts and migration-related concerns (European Parliament, 2025). Such dynamics have coincided with a rise in populist and right-wing political movements across the EU (Szczerbiak et al., 2024), while at the global level U.S. credibility in international affairs has eroded and a more multipolar global order is emerging, resulting in the perception of a relative decline of the West. Despite the urgency of diversifying its foreign partners and its comprehensive engagement in Africa to safeguard its wealth and prosperity, the EU struggles to consistently align its foreign policy with both its internal and external interests (Martin, 2024).

Recent empirical data provides insights into the potential avenues for recalibrating European-African engagement. Between April 17, 2025 and June 9, 2025, the HORN international Institute for Strategic Studies conducted a survey using the SoSci Survey platform (Leiner, 2025) with

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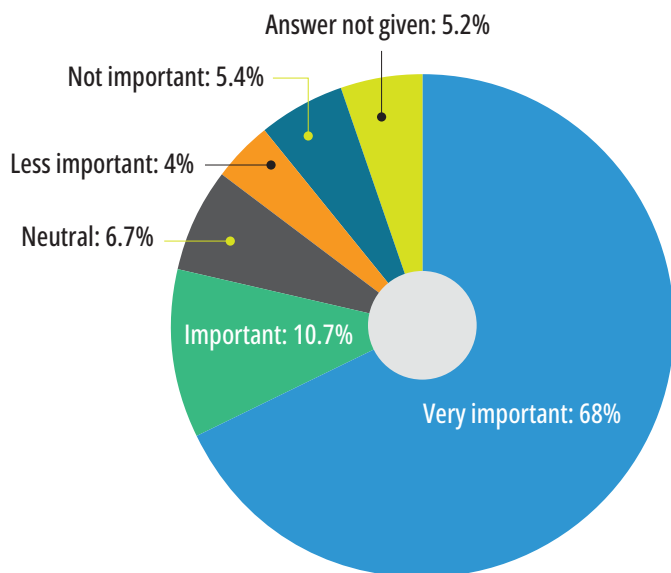
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75 participants from Kenya. As the majority of the participants can be identified as experienced professionals from an area related to foreign affairs and development cooperation, their perception provides insight into current dynamics. The findings show a preference among respondents for partnerships with democratic states (78.7 percent), which underscores from a strategic standpoint the potential for the EU, being perceived as a leading promoter of democracy and an advocate for human rights (Veron, 2025), and its member states, particularly Germany, to enhance their influence.

Preference for states to be democratic as prerequisite for future cooperation



Investing in economic cooperation frameworks that generate reciprocal benefits as promoting stability and economic growth in African partner countries, could in turn contribute to addressing some of Europe's internal challenges (Tust, 2024). Furthermore, sustained engagement may facilitate collaboration in reforming global governance institutions to better reflect the evolving geopolitical realities and the interests of the Global South (Shiferaw et al., 2023).

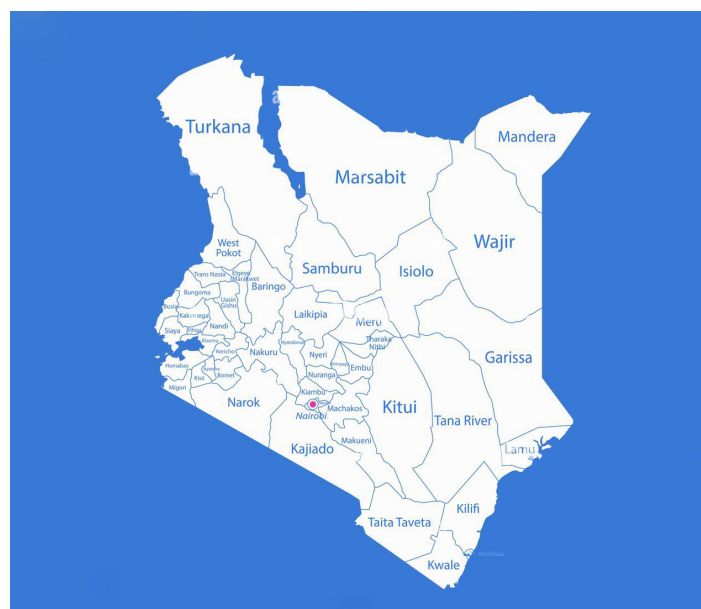
In light of the evolving global context and the retrenchment of U.S. engagement, the EU engagement should adopt a new strategic approach.

USD 12.7 billion in aid allocated for Sub-Saharan Africa

The Struggle for Influence

The EU is not the only actor with the potential to exert influence internationally. From a realist perspective, international actors seek to maximize their own power and secure their national interests, such as security, economic prosperity and political stability. In this context, Africa has historically served as a strategic arena in which both established and emerging powers have competed to expand their influence and access vital resources. This geostrategic competition persists today in the form of renewed global competition for critical minerals, markets and political alliances in Africa (Carmody, 2016).

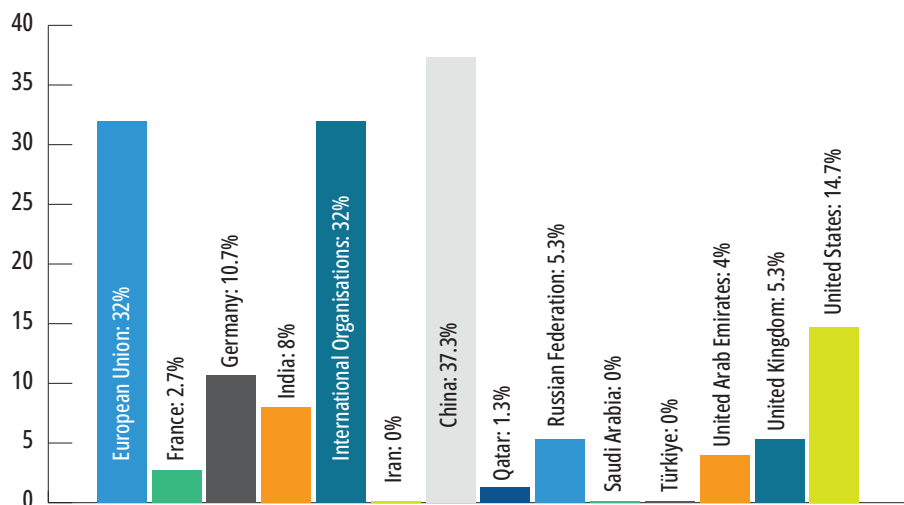
The participants of the survey (Leiner, 2025), of whom 91 percent perceive general foreign engagement in Kenya as positive, were asked to identify their preferred future cooperation partners as only 51 percent expressed satisfaction with the past order of engagement of foreign partners in Kenya. The majority put the states from West Asia into the middle field likely because they are seen as either distracted or not capable of providing the necessary services. For example, although the United Arab Emirates (UAE) invested USD 636.9 million in 2023 making it one of the larger investors on the continent (United Arab Emirates: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023), only 4 percent perceived them among the three biggest future partners. The Russian Federation has demonstrated limited capacity to fill the void left by the withdrawal of French and European engagement in the Sahel region (Brown, 2024), which is mirrored by only 5.3 percent identifying them as a greater future actor. The U.S. is no longer



Administration map of Kenya

interested in filling the gap, although 14.7 percent would like them to do so. Apart from the United Kingdom at 5.3 percent and India at 8 percent, this leaves the EU with 32 percent and the People's Republic of China (China) with 37.3 percent, as shown below.

Preference for foreign actor among the three largest future cooperation partners



The Decline of the West?

Both EU and China maintain extensive and robust relations with the continent and are among the most influential economic and political powers in the world. While China has increasingly articulated a coherent global strategy to expand its political and economic influence (Calabrese, 2024), the EU remains uncertain about its strategic direction in the coming years, for example regarding trade agreements (Meunier et al, 2019). Given its structural dependence on imported strategic resources, demographic challenges, and the ongoing need for diversified markets and labor partnerships (European Parliament, 2025), the EU has two distinct paths. The EU can either increase its influence, prosperity, stability and growth through deploying financial, diplomatic and institutional resources, consolidating its global influence and fostering its strategic interests, or the EU would risk a reduction in global relevance and economic influence (Shiferaw et al., 2023).

The survey data collected in Kenya (Leiner, 2025) suggest that as historical relations between Europe and African states are not uniformly perceived as the most equitable or mutually beneficial, they can aggravate the first trajectory. Issues such as the continued influence of the CFA Franc in West and Central African countries (Herrera, 2022), calls for the restitution of cultural property, and debates around historical injustices, underlined by the AU theme for the year 2025 "Justice for Africans and People of African Descent Through Reparations" (African Union, 2025a; Onditi, 2025), remain unresolved points of contention. However, international relations are not static and can be mutually improved through honest diplomacy and dialogue, as well as equitable and constructive partnerships as outlined by the third AU-EU

Ministerial Meeting in May 2025 (African Union, 2025b).

The feasibility of this outcome is contingent on the self-perception and strategic posture of individual member states. While some EU countries position themselves as „middle powers“ and adopt foreign policies that are reactionary or reliant on broader multilateral frameworks, others allow dependencies and foreign involvement in their domestic affairs. Simultaneously, concerns over accusations of neocolonialism paralyze further European states in their foreign actions, resulting in the decrease of engagement. These dynamics can be explained with a lack of self-confidence in terms of Europe's past and current successes and Europe's future role (Dennison et al., 2021).

Yet, Europe continues to exert considerable influence in cultural, scientific and normative domains. From the perspective of institutional liberalism, the EU remains an illustrative example of how rules-based cooperation and economic interdependence can foster peace and stability among 27 diverse member states. With an internal market characterized by achieving absolute gains for the member states, the EU remains an attractive partner for trade relations worldwide and simultaneously appreciated for being an advocate for human rights (Veron, 2025).

Furthermore, while discourse on the „decline of the West“ has gained prominence, it often reflects relative rather than absolute decline. The rise of other global actors, such as China, India, or regional coalitions, does not necessitate a corresponding loss of influence for the EU. Rather, a strategic reorientation away from the USA could enable the EU to maintain a central role in shaping global governance frameworks by finding its own unique path (Curran 2025).

Germany's political and economic recovery after World War II, as well as the peaceful reunification in 1990 are a widely recognized model of institutional and societal resilience

The German Role

Germany is positioned to assume a pivotal role in this discourse, as the EU is reliant on the approval of its member states for larger policy decisions. Being the largest economy within the EU and a principal actor in European integration processes alongside France, Germany exerts significant influence on the external policies of the EU (Bulmer et al., 2019). This influence is reflected in the survey results (Leiner 2025), which indicate a comparatively higher preference for Germany (10.7 percent) as a large future cooperation partner over France (2.7 percent), yet with both countries falling behind the preference for the EU. Consequently, with France not able to pursue the European interests and the EU being internally undecided, Germany holds the most favorable public perception and soft power appeal for engagement in the next years. The gradual reduction of the U.S. engagement places added expectations on Germany to fill emerging leadership vacuums (Besch et al., 2025), particularly in regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, where strategic partnerships are becoming increasingly contested.

Germany's historical legacy presents both challenges and opportunities in fulfilling this role. While the demand for Germany to confront and address the consequences of its colonial past is growing both domestically and internationally (Grieshaber, 2021), Germany's political and economic recovery after World War II, as well as the peaceful reunification in 1990 are a widely recognized model of institutional and societal resilience. This legacy enables Germany to act as a bridge-builder for and facilitate a future European engagement on the continent.

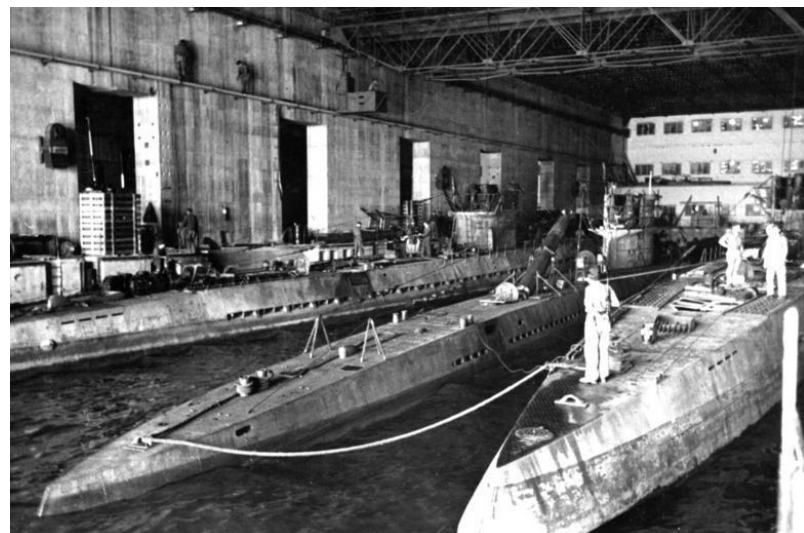
Despite this potential, German foreign policy continues to be shaped by tensions between normative self-perceptions as peaceful and civilian power and external calls for more assertive strategic leadership (Demirtas et al., 2018). In regards to the increasing uncertainty with the US and the rise of new actors, Germany needs to reconcile their approach and self-perception in foreign policy.

A new Domestic Narrative

In recent years, Germany and its Western allies have experienced growing alienation within parts of the Global South (Veron, 2025), which has in turn contributed to the increasing influence of other actors. Given Africa's strategic significance, this trend could pose long-term political and economic risks on the future of Europe as some countries tend to perceive any western engagement negatively (Dehner, 2025a). Simultaneously, public skepticism within Germany has also intensified questioning the efficacy of development cooperation and viewing foreign aid expenditures as insufficient for the pursuit of domestic interests (Schneider et al., 2025).

Refraining foreign policy to prioritize national interests over charitable motives at the center of the foreign policy as a new narrative would resolve these problems. This shift would not entail the abandonment of values such as democracy, human rights, or the rule of law, which remain integral to Germany's external image and normative identity (German Federal Foreign Office, 2025). Rather, it would require a more contextualized and pluralistic understanding of these principles, acknowledging their varied expressions across different sociopolitical environments.

Communicating this narrative both domestically and internationally is essential to foster trust. A clear formulation of the German national interests will facilitate future negotiations and give partners an opportunity to engage in more transparent and mutually beneficial partnerships with Germany. Moreover, reestablishing domestic public support for development



Germany industrialization recovery after the World War II
(Photo Credit: Bundesarchiv Bild)

policy necessitates a clearer demonstration of its long-term economic and political value for Germany itself. Development cooperation should be framed not as a charitable undertaking, but as a strategic investment to Germany's own future prosperity (Tust, 2024).

Such a realignment will likely require significant resources, sustained diplomatic engagement, and long-term strategic planning. Overpromising short-term returns risks strengthening anti-democratic forces that are critical of foreign engagements. Conversely, transparent communication about goals, costs, and timelines may improve public understanding and foster broader support for Germany's role in global cooperation.

The Need for Recalibration

The European Union, and Germany in particular, are capable of surpassing other powers due to their unprecedented economic and diplomatic reach. However, as African states demand partnerships grounded in reciprocity, credibility, and equality (Herrera, 2022), and question existing models of cooperation (Ba, 2024), the recalibration of cooperation strategies appears increasingly necessary. A realignment of Germany's domestic narrative to prioritize strategic interests could support such an approach, ensuring that both parties derive tangible benefits from collaboration.

Criticism of EU development projects arises from both European and African stakeholders, as neither of the respective national interests are being fulfilled (Martin, 2024). Although being a large financial contributor in Africa, the EU is not securing reciprocal strategic advantages, which can be exemplary observed in the case of Somalian oil contracts which were awarded to non-European actors despite significant EU development assistance in the region (Wordsworth 2025). Simultaneously, due to its current self-perception, the EU has often refrained from promoting its development successes in African countries.

This suggests a disconnect between European intentions and how they are perceived on the ground, largely due to communication styles, conditionality, and the failure to visibly align development support with local needs and interests (Veron, 2025). As a result, the survey data (Leiner, 2025) indicates that only 29 percent of the participants identify the EU as the most significant past partner of Kenya, despite the EU spending approximately 24 billion Euro on Sub-Saharan Africa from 2021–2023 (European Parliament, 2023). In contrast, China (68 percent), pursuing a more transactional

and interest-driven engagement models, was viewed as the most significant partner.

A Change of Behavior

These findings underscore a critical need for a strategic reassessment of both the objectives and modalities of German and European engagement in Africa. Rather than assuming a role as a directive or instructional actor, whose foreign aid is tied to normative and unwanted conditionalities, the EU and Germany should adopt the role of supportive partners who empower local partners and respect contextual needs. Such a shift may enhance the legitimacy, sustainability, and strategic utility of European and German development cooperation in Africa.

The diversity of the African continent poses a critical challenge to EU's current, more standardized engagement model. As Africa comprises 55 member states within the African Union (AU), with vast differences in geography, socio-political structures, and levels of economic development (Reents, 2024), a „one-size-fits-all“ approach is unlikely to produce sustainable or inclusive results. Drawing on internal EU governance principles the European Commission has shown that policy directives are more effective when contextualized and implemented at local levels (EUR-Lex, 2025). Adopting this differentiated approach in external relations may similarly enhance the relevance and impact of development interventions, with a general guideline being the promotion of national interests. Entities such as embassies, development agencies and affiliated non-governmental actors should be equipped not only to implement programs but also to conduct community engagement, gather situational intelligence and foster local partnerships instead of centralizing those tasks in the capital.

The survey's participants (Leiner, 2025) also indicate a desire for international organizations (32 percent) to play an expanded role in national development. Germany, in particular, can strengthen its engagement by forming partnerships with actors such as the papacy, which are widely respected across Africa and perceived

Drawing on internal EU governance principles the European Commission has shown that policy directives are more effective when contextualized and implemented at local levels

as politically neutral (Dehner, 2025b). These actors can serve as bridge-builders and legitimacy enhancers, amplifying the acceptance of German and European initiatives.

Collaboration with traditional authorities, local civil society organizations and faith leaders offers another mechanism to enhance trust and local buy-in as these actors are often closely tied to their communities and may act as interlocutors between external agencies and local populations (Dansoh et al., 2020). While Germany may not have the capacity to support every initiative, it can prioritize programs that align with both German strategic interests and local development goals. In cases where shared values are present, value-based projects may be mutually advantageous and further strengthen bilateral trust. As a consequence, Germany's foreign policy behavior aligned with a coherent domestic narrative focused on strategic interest may improve its credibility both abroad and at home.

Objectives for the Practical Implementation

a) Public Support and Local Legitimacy.

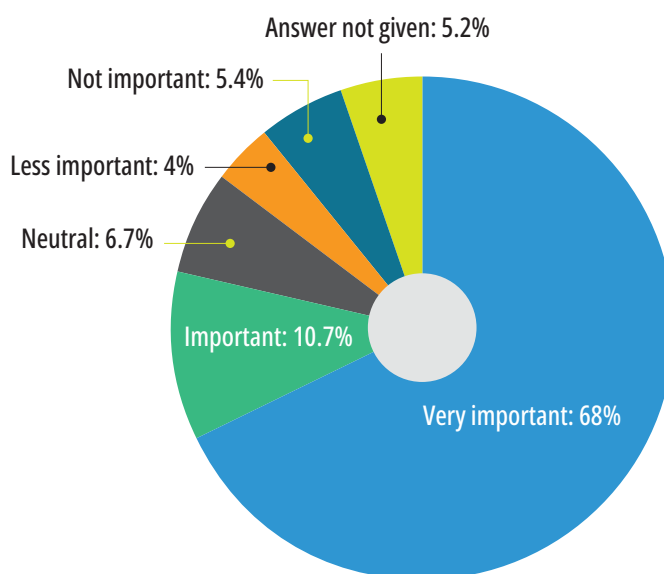
To build a sustainable and mutually beneficial partnership with African states, Germany, and in the long-term the European Union, should prioritize public support in its foreign engagement strategies. Public legitimacy is a critical political asset, not only in democratic but also in authoritarian regimes, where leaders seek to maintain power by responding to the needs of their populations. As demonstrated by the Russian Federation's growing influence in Africa, foreign powers that fulfill unmet demands can significantly enhance their political standing and public image. This trend is primarily driven by Russia's capacity to meet specific demands that Western actors have not fulfilled, thereby enhancing both its public perception and political influence in the region (Reva, 2025).

On the other hand, engaging with external actors lacking public legitimacy can have destabilizing effects. The recent military coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger illustrate that unpopular partnerships can lead to regime change, especially when they are perceived as externally imposed or misaligned with domestic interests (Brown, 2024). Consequently, any external actor seeking long-term cooperation must first secure public trust. In this context, Germany and its democratic partners are well positioned to support essential sectors in ways that are broadly beneficial

to the public, and thereby improve their credibility and influence across African societies.

The survey (Leiner, 2025) indicates a desire for an increased cooperation in policy fields with direct impact on the daily life of the local population, with -health-, -infrastructure- and -economic cooperation- leading, while cooperation in -humanitarian assistance- and -statecraft and governance- are relatively falling back. Regarding the implementation of the projects, 88 percent and 90.6 percent find the respect of respectively human rights and environment important, while the demand that local companies and individuals are benefiting is for 76 percent and 68 percent important, respectively.

Compliance of human rights for development projects



These findings highlight the necessity for Germany and the EU to adopt a demand-driven approach, focusing on sectors where impact is visible and locally appreciated. This approach also implies that European policies with unintended negative consequences must be reassessed. One example is the EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which has raised concerns over potential negative externalities for African exporters (Gilder et al., 2024). Without adequate mitigation measures, such policies risk contradicting the EU development goals and undermining its credibility. Strengthening dialogue and cooperation with African partners could prevent contradictory actions and promote policy coherence. These frameworks should also include local civil society

actors and private sector stakeholders to ensure inclusive representation of interests.

By aligning foreign engagements with locally identified priorities, and addressing potential contradictions between domestic and external objectives, Germany and the EU can enhance their image as legitimate, respectful, and responsive partners. This improved perception can also be leveraged in multilateral forums to advance shared interests and promote inclusive reforms of the global order.

b) International Partnership

From a realist perspective, the EU and Africa should unite in their efforts to oppose the new power centers pursuing the establishment of hegemonic spheres of influence. Both EU and Africa have an interest in maintaining and strengthening the current international system based on mutual respect and shared values in order to foster trade and development (Jetschgo-Morcillo et al, 2024). However, persistent institutional imbalances such as the unrepresentative structure of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the impasse within the World Trade

Organization (WTO) are demonstrating the necessity of the reform of the international system.

Germany has long advocated for reform of global governance institutions, notably in its support for a restructured UNSC that better reflects contemporary geopolitical realities (Germany UNSC, 2025). Simultaneously, African states have consistently called for equal representation, particularly through the “Ezulwini Consensus” of 2005 (African Union, 2005), while the survey data (Leiner, 2025) indicates that 80 percent of the participants see credible efforts for the reform of the international system as an important prerequisite for future cooperation. By aligning these interests, Germany, the broader EU, and the AU could form a credible and influential coalition for institutional reform. This partnership would not only enhance Africa’s global standing but also reinforce Europe’s position as a constructive global actor committed to equity and collaboration.

Critically, this includes acknowledging and integrating African demands for equal representation and influence within global institutions as this is essential not only



European and African foreign ministers pose for a group photo at the European Union-African Union ministerial meeting in Brussels, May 21, 2025. (Photo Credits: AP Photo/Geert VanGeert Vanden Wijngaert)

for building trust but also for reinforcing the principle of equality that must underpin any future EU-Africa partnership. At the same time, this partnership should provide benefits for the prosperity and growth in Europe and Africa by focusing on what would serve the interests of the regions as expressed in the third AU-EU Ministerial Meeting (African Union, 2025b).

Symbolic steps toward greater international engagement can be taken in the short term. Germany is currently campaigning for a non-permanent seat on the UNSC for 2027, and the recent election of former Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock as President of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) presents an opportunity to highlight African issues at the global level (GermanyUNSC, 2025; Mishra, 2025). Germany should demonstrate that the conflicts in Africa, and not only the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, are important for the international system and the German foreign affairs and have to be brought to a bigger public attention.

The survey data (Leiner, 2025) supports the view that African public opinion favors such alignment. Respondents indicated that a clear and active stance on African conflicts is an important or very important prerequisite for future partnerships (65 percent), while, by contrast, only 35 percent of respondents emphasized the importance of partners condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This divergence underscores the need for Germany and its European allies to publicly address conflicts within the African continent and to change their perception on Africa if they are to be viewed as genuinely engaged and equitable actors.

c) *Building a Long and Stable Partnership*

In 2004, the EU introduced the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) aiming to build a 'ring of friends' around the EU to provide the EU with stable and democratic partners increasing the security and prosperity inside the EU as well (European Commission, 2004). Despite these ambitions, the program evolved through subsequent developments, particularly in the southern and eastern neighborhoods, to a 'ring of fire' due to escalating instability and conflict (Taylor, 2015). Nevertheless, the core institutional liberalist logic underpinning the ENP that economic interdependence, cultural exchange and political cooperation foster peace and stability remains conceptually valid. The EU itself provides a unique example that these dynamics

can transform relations between former adversaries into enduring peaceful cooperation (Anastasiou, 2007), suggesting potential for applying similar approaches in the EU's external engagements.

The failure of the EU's 'ring of friends' strategy partly stemmed from the EU's own asymmetrical mindset (Köhler, 2019), which fostered resentment among partner countries and ultimately contributed to their pivot toward alternative international actors (Brown, 2024). Similar sentiments are increasingly visible among African youth today, as illustrated by the military coups and political realignments in countries such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. To establish a sustainable and equal partnership, a fundamental shift in perception is crucial as Europe must acknowledge African states as equal partners, with their own experiences, innovations, and lessons to offer (Köhler, 2019). Such an approach would also more closely align with the professed European values of self-determination, sovereignty, and equality among nations.

Changing perceptions is not an endeavor that can be legislated or imposed as it is a gradual process built on mutual learning, trust, and respect. However, policy can play a supporting role by fostering intercultural exchange programs, such as educational sponsorships and youth mobility schemes between Africa and Europe. In Germany, domestic narratives surrounding Africa should evolve, highlighting Africa's innovation, resilience, and contributions, instead of the dominant portrayals of crisis, corruption and dependency (Köhler, 2019). Municipal twinning programs, cultural festivals, diaspora engagements and school curricula reforms can support this shift by providing students and the public with a more comprehensive and current understanding of African societies, which would lay the groundwork for a change of perception.

Germany should demonstrate that the conflicts in Africa, and not only the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, are important for the international system and the German foreign affairs ...

Conclusion

While such changes require sustained investment and time, they are vital. As the survey data (Leiner, 2025) suggests, African publics value reliability, mutual respect, equality and sincerity in international partnerships. The world is changed and Germany and the EU must adapt to access a strategic opportunity.

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