

The EU Changes Course in Africa

by Ronan Wordsworth - April 21, 2025

Since the end of the colonial era, Europe has spent much of its time in Africa on promoting shared values and development – often with little regard for a return on investment. This was due in part to post-colonial guilt, of course, but it also served a more practical purpose: preventing mass migration at the source and standing up healthier markets with which it could trade. Europe thus provided financial support for governments to create the conditions in which human rights can develop by, for example, empowering women, building water and sanitation facilities, developing rural areas and promoting democratic processes based largely on shared values. Brussels' support was donation-based; it left direct political and economic support to the former colonial powers that still had working relationships with their former colonies.

Europe's military practices were conducted similarly. Whereas Washington provides much more direct security through a range of initiatives, including drone operations, special forces engagements and training, counterterrorism operations and lethal weapon support, Europe tends to support local actors through limited training missions, which have strict rules of engagement and generally feature nonlethal aid. For Europe, the operating principles are capacity building, development assistance and shared values.

But circumstances are changing quickly, and Western leaders have been forced to rethink their approach to Africa. The biggest changes came from Washington, which recently gutted USAID, the world's single-largest provider of foreign aid, one that was supported by Europe and was a powerful source of American soft power. Its dismantlement has left a massive hole that Brussels is deciding how to fill – and whether it should fill it at all. Like the EU, the United States worked in Africa to promote good governance, rule of law, respect for human rights, sustainable development, gender equality, education, migration management and green technology. That Washington has removed itself from these practices gives the EU another potential competitor on the continent, one that plans to take a more transactional approach to Africa and one that, presumably, won't attach the kinds of strings Europe attaches to its aid.

Meanwhile, Europe is increasingly wary of supply chain vulnerabilities. It has largely tried to recuse itself from the renewed competition for influence – and resources – in Africa, mostly because it doesn't want to be accused of colonization again. But it seems as though it can no longer afford to

stay on the sidelines. The European Critical Raw Minerals Act, passed by the European Commission in 2023, called for supply chain resilience in a variety of categories and, crucially, established a requirement for some degree of self-sufficiency. And because its reserves of certain strategic commodities are dwindling, Europe is forced to enter extraction and processing partnerships with other countries. African nations, home to many of these critical minerals, have already begun to sign supply agreements with many third parties.

Naturally, one of those third parties is China. Beijing has been active in Africa for years, and it has managed to secure mining deals and access to raw minerals in exchange for infrastructure. More often than not, these deals were purely transactional. Now, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, India and even the U.S. are looking to move into the market and carve out their own share. There are many ways this can be done: bribery of officials, one-sided infrastructure deals, promises of regime protection and security – none of which gel with Europe's values-driven approach. This means there is little room left in the market for Brussels to secure resilient supply chains. Many in Europe are thus considering a more transactional outreach.

Changes in migration patterns have also driven Europe's new approach. Following the migration crisis of the mid-2010s, Europe outsourced much of its border protection to North African states. Voters inside the EU were more than willing to spend money to achieve this goal. The policy was effective, so it's going to be difficult for governments to persuade voters they need to continue to spend money on a crisis that no longer exists. When voter sentiment dries up, so too does EU funding.

The final reason for Europe's new outlook concerns France. Paris has long been the de facto foreign policy leader of the EU, especially with regard to Africa. But several African nations that used to have good relations with France have since spurned their former colonial masters in favor of, say, **Russia**. As a result, France no longer prioritizes the continent as it once did.

Evidence of Europe's transactional approach abounds. Take Somalia. The African Union Transition Mission in Somalia – nominally run by African countries but financed largely by the EU and supported by the U.S. – ended in December 2024, and its replacement has had **trouble attracting new funding**, even as Islamist group al-Shabab advances toward the capital of Mogadishu. That the EU no longer wants to endlessly help here is telling.

The reasons for its reluctance are many. For one thing, the space is fairly crowded. Turkey and the United Arab Emirates are active in Somalia (where they compete against each other for influence) and are able to provide more assistance than they had been in the past. They both pay the salaries

of some armed forces, and a Turkish private military outfit known as SADAT trains Somali special forces. Turkey benefits from the arrangement by getting favorable access to Somali markets and through long-term oil and gas contracts. For all its largesse, the EU has no such financial gain.

The Sahel is another good example. Through various funding mechanisms, including the Common Security and Defense Policy, the European Peace Facility and the G5 Sahel, Brussels has spent more than \$10 billion since 2014 on security and diplomatic missions. The net result has been a halt to the advances of jihadist groups, but any reforms to governance were quickly abandoned when military juntas came to power throughout the region. The security vacuum was filled by Russia, which is now extracting resources in exchange for direct regime security. All the funding that was allocated for democratization and state building seems now like it was in vain, with jihadist groups once again expanding their territory and killing civilians.

Then there is the Democratic Republic of Congo. The government in Kinshasa is beset by problems, none more important than its inability to project power throughout the country's entire territory. Neighboring Rwanda has long been accused of supporting the rebel group known as M23 in the eastern Congo, where the central government has a very limited presence. Rwanda is a partner for Western countries in providing regional security (which explains Rwanda's comparatively strong and disciplined armed forces). China, meanwhile, operates many of the rare earth and critical mineral mines in the country; 100 percent of all mined cobalt and 65 percent of mined copper is bound for China. The deals were signed in exchange for promises of infrastructure investment. In the lead up to elections in 2023, Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi said the deals needed to be renegotiated because China was benefitting significantly more than the Congo was. The president became notably quiet a few weeks later, and the status quo remains.

The EU, for its part, has condemned Rwanda's involvement in the conflict and has considered levying sanctions on some members of the armed forces. But if Rwanda is no longer able to sell critical minerals to the EU, it has plenty of other potential buyers. The EU also pledged last year roughly \$935 million to Rwanda in exchange for access to minerals, including tin, tungsten and gold.

While Europe vacillates about democratic ideals, the U.S. government has looked to negotiate a security-for-minerals deal with Kinshasa under a private security contractor (led by Blackwater founder Erik Prince). Russia and the Gulf states are offering similar services. This leaves Europe out in the cold, unable to ensure access to the raw materials on which its high-tech industry and green transition rely.

Brussels feels an urgent need to reassess its role in Africa. That's not to say it will completely abandon the kinds of initiatives it has funded since the mid-20th century in favor of one-off transactions with no strings attached. But it is to say that Europe knows it needs to strike a better balance if it doesn't want to be the odd man out.

Author: Ronan Wordsworth

[Read more from this author on geopoliticalfutures.com](#)