

Policy Paper

Rebooting Italy's Africa Policy Making the Mattei Plan Work

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In Brief

After decades of relative disengagement, since the 2010s Rome has given Africa unusual room in its foreign policy considerations, with new high-level meetings and proposals. The Mattei Plan recently launched by the Italian government fits into this trend and aims at bringing it to the next level, strengthening political investment in the region.

Based on Italy's priorities, attention to Africa should not come as a surprise: because of geographical proximity, Rome perceives both the need to address potential geopolitical challenges and the opportunity to act as a link between African countries and the rest of the European Union, an idea expressed through the oft-evoked metaphor of "a bridge between Africa and Europe". Several Italian concerns call for an involvement in the region. Migration remains a pivotal issue in the domestic and European political debate, regardless of the actual ups and downs of migrant flows. High levels of energy import dependency also push Italy towards developing the north-south axis of supply, searching for new deals with African producers. Trade and investment relations with Africa, still very much untapped, could offer Italian companies fresh opportunities in emerging frontier markets. Geo-strategic considerations too, especially in unstable and increasingly crucial areas such as the Sahel, invite Italy to respond and reassert its middle-power status.

Rome is not alone in seeking a renewed relationship with Africa, as numerous similar efforts have been launched by the European

Union (EU) and other EU member states since the 2000s, leading to the flourishing of policies, strategies and plans centring around Africa. Though Brussels seeks to distinguish itself from other global competitors as a more valuable and reliable partner, however, it is not always the case that European and African priorities coincide, leading to mismatches and misunderstandings.

Between late 2023 and early 2024, the Italian government presented the Mattei Plan as an initiative for the structural renewal of relations with African countries animated by a "new method", which aims to "foster development in African countries" through the establishment of political and economic partnerships based on a "non-charitable" approach and through a continuous engagement of Italian and African actors of different natures and at different levels. Much remains to be seen how the conceptual and operational assumptions of the new Plan, still in its early stages, will translate into a fully-fledged long-term strategy, how its initiatives will materialise and what they will eventually deliver to African countries and to Italy itself.

This paper frames the Plan in the broader context of Italy-Africa relations and of Italian and EU policies towards the continent, with a particular focus on the dynamics of, and the relation with, sub-Saharan Africa. It highlights the key components of the Plan and suggests some caveats in the effort to establish more constructive relationships with African partners. Such caveats begin with the need to understand the proposed initiatives against the backdrop



of the megatrends that are shaping changes and challenges in the region's development processes, and to best align them with the interests, priorities and strategies already identified by African countries and the African Union. Failure to do so will be detrimental to the effectiveness of the Plan and to constructive dialogue with African partners.

To best move forward, the Plan should make an extra effort to take into account past experiences and the lessons learned from what other countries have done, as well as to build the consensus necessary for Italy's Africa policy to be sustainable in the long term; it should reinforce and enforce impact assessment tools that are consistent with well-defined strategic objectives; it needs to engage reliable Italian and African actors through an efficient and inclusive process; and it should seek and maintain a frank and respectful exchange with African partners, building initiatives that are realistic, shared and fruitful for all parties involved.



BOX 1

FRANCE'S APPROACH TO A NEW AFRICAN POLICY

Alain Antil

Against the backdrop of increasing anti-French rhetoric across parts of Francophone Africa, the relative failure of the counterinsurgency operation in the central Sahel (Operation Barkhane) and diplomatic rifts with several Sahelian countries, Paris has been rethinking its relationship with the continent for several years now. As a former imperial power that has seen its colonial domain in Africa gain independence between 1956 (Morocco-Tunisia) and 1977 (Djibouti), France has invented two successive roles for itself in Africa since 1960, particularly in French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa.

FRANCE'S TWO ROLES IN AFRICA (1960s -2010s)

The first role, showcased during the Cold War years, was that of a *Gendarme de l'Afrique*, policing the regimes of most of the former colonies and other French-speaking countries to protect them against any opposition or attempts at destabilisation. This protection was both military and diplomatic, as Paris spoke up for its protégés before international bodies, particularly the United Nations, the IMF and the WB. In return, Paris granted itself a right of review when appointing presidents and demanded from its African partners their unwavering support at the UN, as well as virtual exclusivity in economic relations. The economies in question accordingly became the private preserve of major French companies.

Between the 1990s and the 2010s, Paris gradually carved out a new role for itself in sub-Saharan Africa. This resulted from a combination of geopolitical and political developments (the end of the Cold War and gradual democratisation of part of the continent, diversification of African countries' partners and a rapid increase in Paris's links with non-French-speaking African countries), as well as resounding failures such as its blind and belated support for the Habyarimana regime, responsible for the genocide in Rwanda. Added to this was the fact that new generations of French politicians wanted to move away from *françafrique* practices. For all these reasons, Paris gradually began envisaging a new role for itself. Although the French military presence was maintained, each operation now took place within an international framework, with support from the UN and African regional and continental organisations. At the same time, Paris acted as a "framework nation" for EU countries on African issues in security matters as well as on major aid, debt relief and diplomatic issues, to the extent that France's partners often saw the "Europeanisation" of its Africa policy as a "Frenchification" of the EU's Africa policy. In any case, Paris's aim was to shift its policing role to that of advocate, still able to use its dynamic diplomatic expertise to serve the continent.

CLEANING UP THE POST-COLONIAL RELATIONSHIP AND LOOKING TOWARDS THE REST OF AFRICA

France's effort to reinvent its stance towards Africa has accelerated since the mid-2010s for different reasons. Strong demands for a change in Paris's attitude have been clearly expressed by civil societies as well as by the ruling élites of French-speaking African countries. The downward spiral in the security situation in certain Sahelian countries, where Paris led international efforts, accelerated the crisis of the French African policy. Under the Macron presidency, this has translated into a stepping up of the anti-French narrative, followed by a diplomatic crisis with three Sahelian countries. This led Paris to review its African policy: work is still in progress, but certain aspects have been ongoing for several years (and already made explicit, notably in Macron's Ouagadougou speech back in 2017). It was quite evident that the constraints of bilateral relations between France and certain countries limited this transformation in practice.

Reaching out to civil society and young people. Aware that France was perceived as an unwavering supporter of corrupt regimes and deemed jointly responsible for the underwhelming economic situation of French-speaking African countries, Macron invested in initiatives to redress this image. First, he made substantial changes to French Official Development Assistance (ODA) policies, increasing aid for culture, music, sport and education. In October 2021, he organised an edition of the decades-old Africa-France summit using a new format, devoted to "African civil societies", with no president invited. Another initiative was the creation, in 2017, of the Presidential Council for Africa (CPA), a body made up of prominent (mostly "economic") figures from the very active Franco-African diaspora.

Working on memory issues. Emmanuel Macron also tried to "fix" relations with certain African countries that had been damaged by the atrocities and despoilment of the colonial and post-colonial eras. His approach was two-

pronged. Firstly, following a trend also seen in Belgium, the United Kingdom and Germany, he accelerated the restitution of artefacts looted during the colonial period. Secondly, he promoted work by French historians, in cooperation with their counterparts in the countries concerned, on painful historical periods. With varying degrees of success and progress, these campaigns are being developed with Algeria, Cameroon and, of course, Rwanda. The process is most advanced in the latter case and has led to a spectacular diplomatic rapprochement under the Macron presidency.

Reforming the classic tools of French influence in Africa. The most remarkable measures have been the reforms of the CFA franc. Measures such as the end of the obligation to deposit a quota of foreign currency with the French Treasury and France's withdrawal from the Banque Centrale des États de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (BCEAO) tempered the most questionable aspects of Paris's role in the governance of this currency. The second area of work, promoted in particular by the Director of the French Development Agency (AFD), is to gradually move away from traditional aid towards other forms of partnership, which would help reduce the perceived condescension of French operators in Africa. The last task is to carry out an in-depth reform of France's military stance towards Africa. Unlike other European colonial powers, France has a history of frequent military interventions on the continent (more than fifty military operations since the times of independence). It also always maintained military bases in certain countries (currently in Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Gabon and Djibouti). President Macron has asked a former minister, Jean-Marie Bockel, to put forward proposals concerning these bases. Proposed changes could involve the elimination of certain bases or a reduction in personnel.

Looking to the rest of Africa. While France's former colonies have greatly diversified their partnerships over the past two decades, thus escaping a post-colonial head-to-head



confrontation, France's presence on the continent (particularly its economic presence) has largely been redeployed beyond French-speaking countries. If one looks at trade, investment and the presence of French companies, French interests are more prevalent in Nigeria, South Africa, Angola and Kenya than in Franc zone countries, even if Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal remain important. Macron believes that the new economic, diplomatic and security partnerships should be with countries with which there is no colonial past. As a symbol of this development, Paris recently announced that the next France-Africa summit (2026) will be held in Kenya.

France as a global hub for Africa. In all these developments, Macron's thinking seems to have been influenced by two intellectuals: the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe and Rémy Rioux, the Director of the French Development Agency (AFD). One of the possible roles that the Élysée would like France to fulfil vis-à-vis Africa is to continue to act as a sort of advocate, but also to strengthen its position as a global hub. This would offer a setting to discuss and work out partnerships with Africa and the debt distress and financial needs of African economies, which is one of the region's major problems. The summit on the financing of African economies (18 May 2021) followed by the Summit for a New Global Financial Pact (22 and 23 June 2023) and the "Choose Africa" summits (aimed at financing African companies) held in 2020 and 2023 are clearly part of this agenda.

Against inertia, and recognising global geopolitical developments, the case for a strategic stance. While it is not yet time to fully take stock of these relatively new trends and initiatives, it can nevertheless be said that they have come up against different realities.

Barkhane: a ten-year exception to a trend of military withdrawal. After falling from 30,000 to 6,500 between 1960 and 2014, the number of French troops present on the continent began to rise again during Operation Barkhane in the Sahel (2014 - 2022). Barkhane was one of France's largest military operations in Africa and

the last to be carried out by a Western country as part of the "war on terror" in the region. The reduction in France's military footprint on the continent will continue. From now on, it is to be expected that cooperation will be more low-key and less politically exposed. France has also set itself other military priorities (preparing for high-intensity warfare and the "Indo-Pacific Strategy").

A look back at the Chadian dilemma. Paris's attitude towards N'Djamena illustrates uncertainties about its military stance, especially regarding Moscow's growing presence in the region. If the French army were to abandon its N'Djamena base, it would look like a political and security let-down in Chad. The various high-level meetings held in Chad and Russia in the past months are intended to show that Paris could easily be replaced. Moscow finds the prospect of a more structured deployment in Chad attractive, as the country is strategically located right in the middle of its various African theatres of operation (Libya, Sahel and Central African Republic). All in all, it is highly likely that Paris will opt for continuity, i.e. support for the Chadian regime, despite evident shortcomings in terms of democracy and accountability now that the country is under de facto dynastic rule.

Bilateral relations are often stronger than principles. Whatever the developments and projects that will be undertaken, existing bilateral relationships often trump principles due to a kind of path dependency – leading Paris to engage in contorted arguments and double-speak. Can we condemn the putsches in the Sahel and endorse dynastic succession in Chad?

Despite much rethinking, new initiatives and reduced resources, France will remain one of the continent's main and most influential partners, notably as a country with links that now extend to non-French-speaking states, as a global hub for discussions on African issues and as an advocate and protector for the region.

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