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To cite this article: Toni Hastrup, Niall Duggan & Luis Mah (2021) Navigating ontological (in)security in EU–Africa relations, *Global Affairs*, 7:4, 541-557, DOI: [10.1080/23340460.2021.1981144](https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2021.1981144)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2021.1981144>



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Published online: 10 Oct 2021.



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Navigating ontological (in)security in EU–Africa relations

Toni Hastrup ^a, Niall Duggan ^b and Luis Mah ^c

^aFaculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK; ^bDepartment of Government, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland; ^cLisbon School of Economics and Management (ISEG), Universidade de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal

ABSTRACT

Six decades on and several attempts to re-set EU–Africa relations, it is appropriate to take stock of the relationship especially in light of changes in both continents since 2000. This article draws on the idea of ontological security to understand the nature of changes and continuities in the EU’s engagement with Africa. It argues that EU–Africa relations that have relied on a coloniality of power have also been crucial to the EU’s ontological security. However, increasing African agency and new external actors like China in Africa are challenging this security. While challenges to the EU’s ontological security have been viewed as primarily internally constituted, external challenges within a specific context provides the opportunity to rethink what ontological security demands. Importantly, this article highlights why a partnership of equals is an urgent imperative for the future of EU–Africa relations, although it remains elusive.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 April 2021
Accepted 11 September 2021

KEYWORDS

European Union; EU–Africa relations; ontological security; coloniality; agency

Introduction

When the first six members of the European Economic Community (EEC) took that initial step towards deeper integration that has culminated in what is now the European Union (EU), they also agreed “to associate with ... the non-European countries and territories which have special relations with Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom” (EEC, Part4, Art. p. 131, 1957). It was clear that the founding members anticipated keeping a close relationship between the community and their colonies. Indeed, the colonial prism through which to engage with African countries is reinforced by the fact that the United Kingdom was not at the time a prospective member of the EEC. At the heart of this relationship has been the intent “to promote the economic and social development of the countries and territories and to establish close economic relations between them and the Community as a whole” (EEC, Part4, Art. p. 131). The inclusion of soon-to-be former colonies into the integration framework of the EEC is significant since it was not agreed at the time by the almost independent countries themselves. The design of this relationship is thus colonial (Hansen & Jonsson, 2012; Sepos,

CONTACT Toni Hastrup  toni.haastrup@stir.ac.uk

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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2013). The relationship often narrated as “asymmetrical” has its basis in a coloniality of power, which

“articulates continuities of colonial mentalities, psychologies and worldviews into the so-called ‘postcolonial era’ and highlights the social hierarchical relationships of exploitation and domination ... has its roots in centuries of European colonial expansion but currently continuing through cultural, social and political power relations”. (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, 8)

This coloniality of power has been the core basis for the aspiration to reorient Africa–EU relations.

While the field of study EU–Africa relations has often identified this hierarchical relationship as “asymmetrical” in this article, we confront the factual basis for the design of this asymmetry. We argue that the coloniality of power, as the basis and form of the EU–Africa relationship, provides a “fundamental sense of safety [for the EU] in the world”, and is dependent on a status that is maintained by these hierarchical power relations (Giddens, 1991, p. 38). In other words, this hierarchical relationship is a basis for the EU’s ontological security. Yet, in the desire for a change to a less hierarchical partnership and African shifting interests and international partnerships over the past two decades, which has allowed for the emergence of African agency, this ontological security is challenged externally. The external challenge is further exacerbating, as we show, internally, by political and policy fragilities. These challenges to the EU’s ontological security and the EU’s response, we show, have important implications for the future of EU–Africa relations.

This article is a qualitative analysis that draws on academic literatures, official institutional policy documents, think tank papers, and news items. The diversity of sources is also a means to triangulate the data collected and used to support the analysis. In line with scholars such as Kinnvall, Manners, and Mitzen (2018) and Kaunert, De Deus Pereira, and Edwards (2020), the EU will be analysed as a single foreign policy actor. The essay does not deal with the direct relationship of EU member states with African countries. While the historic relationship of some EU member states like France or Portugal contribute to European outlooks in Africa, and is important to understanding bilateral relationship in Africa, the focus on those relationships is beyond the scope of the current analysis.

This article is structured in four parts. It explores why ontological security is a useful theoretical framework to better understand the function of contemporary EU–Africa relations. It situates this analysis in a historical context of continuities and changes in the relationship. Subsequently, it focuses on the changes in the economic and political landscapes within Africa and Europe, and especially how they impact on the EU’s sense of self. Further, it then engages with articulations of African agency and the EU’s responses. The essay concludes with a reflection on the impact of ongoing contestations in future relations between Africa and EU.

Articulating EU ontological security in the context of EU-African relations

The literature has established that from the 1950s until the 2000s, the relations between Africa and the EU (and its predecessor) were asymmetrical at best (Adelle & Lightfoot, 2016; Akokpari, 2017; Haastrup, 2013; 2020a; Carbone, 2021). Despite EU (both

Commission and member states) decades-old development assistance with the continent, Africa has continued to experience poverty and stagnation in terms of social development indicators. During the same period, Europe has thrived with deepening integration and extending its reach and capacities as a foreign policy actor.

Much of the early literature on EU–Africa relations focused on the economic relationship between EU and the group of African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries. This literature focused on economic development assistance, poverty reduction and trade (Brown, 2000; Hurt, 2003; Lister, 1988). Within this set of literature there was a lack of focus on new African institutions created to articulate African agency and represent African interests in the various practices of international politics. As noted by Haastrup (2020b, p. 10), “Africa whether through its states or institutions can only play one role: as receivers of international relations practices rather than active participants”. The development of the comparative regionalism, literature, however, offers a potential entry point to thinking differently about EU–Africa relations (Shaw, 2015; Börzel & Risse, 2016). Except for work such as that of Mattheis (2020) who argues that the diversity of regionalisms in Africa itself demands that we include Africa when conceptualising regionalism, this area too is dominated by the EU. But as Mattheis intimates, thinking via comparative regionalism can help to open the debate on African agency, where African regionalisms are not only images of the EU but grounded in indigenous realities.

Similarly, some of the literature that adopts constructivist IR approaches to EU–Africa relations are able to account for African agency to an extent (see Faleye, 2020). While they focus on weak African states’ interaction with major powers and international bodies, they offer limited explanations on how Africa states can affect change in EU’s Africa policy. A recent intervention by Hurt (2020) has gone some way in balancing the outlook on African agency on its own terms and the relationship with the EU through a Coxian framework. It acknowledges the complexities and constraints of exercising agency. Despite these important engagements, the study of African agency remains underdeveloped (Tieku, 2014; 2021). The dominant literature on EU–Africa relations lacks substantive engagement with expressions of African agency and its implications for the EU’s approach to Africa over the years. An ontological security approach would help to develop our understanding of the importance of African agency in how the EU develops its African policy.

Ontological security can be understood as where “an actor has a consistent sense of ‘self’ by performing actions in order to underwrite its notion of “who they are”” (Zarakol, 2010, p. 3). That self-identity is constituted and maintained through a narrative that gives life to routinized foreign policy actions (Steele, 2008, pp. 2–3). With reference to states, Mitzen argues that as actors, they value these routines as they underwrite their sense of self – that is, that the state might privilege routine over other values, even when physical cost is involved (Mitzen, 2006a).

The same can be applied to the EU as foreign policy actor (Kinnvall et al., 2018; Mitzen, 2006b). Ontological insecurity can be understood as the interruption in the “security of being” found in feelings of fear, anxiety, crisis, and threat to wellbeing (Kinnvall, Manners, & Mitzen, 2020). It has also been described as “fundamentally destabilising and challenging established worldviews, routines and core conceptions of selfhood” (Browning, 2018, p. 337). As an approach, ontological security “provides leverage for understanding how fears and anxieties at ... EU level have psycho-socio-political

effects that shape political movements, [and] policy debates ...” (Kinnvall et al., 2020, p. 250).

Presently, the EU is ontologically insecure as a result of multiple ongoing crises starting with the Eurocrisis, exacerbated by the so-called migration crisis, Brexit and reinforced by the boldness of far-right extremism (see Kaunert et al., 2020; Kinnvall et al., 2018). In this state, the EU is threatened by the sense that it is losing its equilibrium, its sense of self in terms of its external policy. As such, it must gain back this sense of self – to achieve ontological security. In this analysis, we extend the existing analyses beyond the internal dimensions of the EU, to consider how ontological security is understood in the context of the EU’s external relations reinforced by hierarchical power relations, and what it means when this is threatened.

Normative Power Europe as ontological security

Within EU studies, Normative Power Europe (NPE) has long provided a description of the EU self – its ontological identity. NPE assumes an “ideational impact of the EU’s international identity/role” (Manners, 2002, p. 238), which is grounded in the EU’s ability to shape what is expected to be normal in international affairs (Manners, 2002, p. 240). Furthermore, the EU pursues its international relations to bring others closer to its own way of thinking about how the world is and should work (see Pace, 2007; Diez, 2013). And while Manners rejects Therborn (1997, p. 380) suggestion that the EU’s normative role requires coercive force to tell “other parts of the world what political, economic and social institutions they should have”, he agrees with the main thrust of what NPE requires: political influence over external international actors by setting the conditions of social interaction with those actors.

As an approach, NPE, has a profound impact on the conceptualization of EU foreign policy practices (Haastrup, 2020a), including towards Africa (see Langan, 2012; Manners, 2009; Scheipers & Sicurelli, 2008; Staeger, 2016). It allows EU actors to see themselves and the EU as a force for good (Pace, 2007, 1050). Moreover, as argued by Diez, NPE “constructs the EU’s identity as well as the identity of the EU’s others in ways which allow EU actors to disregard their own shortcomings” (Diez, 2005, p. 627). Consequently, NPE is tied to the EU sense of self and, therefore, its ontological security.

But assumptions about the EU as NPE is hardly benign. This is particularly the case when EU advances its material interests as “norms are woven into material interests” (Youngs, 2004, p. 420). Norms are often used by the EU to justify material sanctions due to human rights violations, conflicts, illegal trade or wildlife/environment exploitations. But this is a very selective approach that tends to be pursued towards less powerful and more dependent countries of EU financial support, mostly in Africa (Del Biondo, 2015 Hurt, 2003 Lister, 1988).

The EU, then, notwithstanding its own shortcomings even at the expense of its external others is content because the status-quo of asymmetry reduces fear and anxiety, reinforcing the ontological self. In practice, this is manifested in interests that logically put the EU first, which problematizes the idea of a partnership of equals and support for African-led initiatives. It is in this context that we argue that where there are efforts to reorient EU–Africa relations by prioritizing African interests and manifesting African

agency within the structure of existing EU–Africa relations, there is also a challenge to the ontological security of the EU.

For example, in 2005, the unilateral *EU Strategy for Africa* made a new commitment to move away from a donor-recipient logic to a relationship founded on equality, ownership, and partnership. These concepts themselves were not new. Yet, made in 2005, it appeared to signal an important rhetorical shift in the relationship, paving the way for the state of contemporary relations. The 2005 *EU Strategy for Africa* is important because it formally acknowledged that the unevenness of relations between the EU and African countries had had a detrimental impact on the relationship as it was formulated and existed. The Lomé IV Convention, for example, was adopted in 1995 and included new areas of engagement, including democracy and good governance, the promotion of the private sector, strengthening gender equality and human rights promotion (ACP, 1995). Lomé IV especially opened the possibility for intensified region-to-region cooperation between the EU and Africa within the ambit of EU-ACP relations. The expectation after Lomé IV was that its successor would allow the African side to articulate its priorities more clearly and take on greater ownership within the partnership. The resulting 2000 Cotonou Agreement was discursively presented as a new framework to move away from what had been an asymmetrical relationship. The fact that the 2005 Strategy was developed so shortly after Cotonou suggested that the 2000 agreement did not deliver on its promise to allow for greater articulation of African agency. The consequences of the relationship, in effect, ensured the promises of the Treaty of Rome to economic and social development remained unfulfilled.

Equality in the document is the “... mutual recognition and respect for institutions and the definition of mutual collective interests” (EC, 2005). In practical terms, equality would mean that African norms, practices and interests would hold as much weight as European ones. The second concept was *partnership*. *Partnership* was explained as “developing links based on political and commercial cooperation”, while *ownership* is explained as “strategies and development policy being country-owned and not imposed from the outside” (EC, 2005). In acknowledging the problem of asymmetric relations on the cognitive and material elements of the relationship between EU and African countries, the 2005 *Strategy* provided a pathway to emancipation, in principle. Additionally, it reinforced that Africa had new interlocutors, specifically the African Union (AU).

The 2005 *Strategy* acknowledged the fundamental challenges of EU–Africa relations under the ACP framework. However, the *Strategy* was largely derided by African political elites as an illegitimate basis for change given that it was developed without engagement with African actors (Haastrup, 2013). Thus, while the imbalances of power between the EU and Africa are acknowledged, the will to change them, from the perspective of the more powerful actor was seen to be lacking. EU–Africa relations then continued to demonstrate “colonial patterns of interactions” (Haastrup, 2020a). In this sense, vis-à-vis its relationship with Africa, the EU remained ontological secure.

The seeming failure of the Strategy as vehicle of change precipitated two years of extensive negotiations with African countries to produce a framework that took the three principles seriously (Haastrup, 2013). The 2007 Joint Africa-EU Strategy was the first arrangement in which, on paper, Africans enjoyed a “contribution of equals” since the African side was involved in the drafting process. It expanded the scope of

the relationship and delineated eight areas of cooperation. It signalled a more ambitious EU external relations strategy in Africa, just as much as it did for Africa's vision of international relations. In articulating agency within the JAES, African elites sought to leverage the AU and assert the interests of the continent (Haastrup, 2020a). The success of the JAES in design would alter the relationship between Africa and the EU.

However, despite the promise of the JAES for African agency, substantive change in existing power hierarchies remains elusive. At the time the JAES was being negotiated, the EU went ahead to negotiate interim EPAs with smaller Southern African countries directly undermining the aspirations of regional integration within the Joint Strategy (Bello, 2010, p. 3). From the EU's perspective, EPAs were essential to any relationship going forward with African countries. According to MacDonald, Lande, and Matanda (2013), the EU threatened African states with withdrawing preferences enjoyed since the Lomé Convention, if negotiations did not end. The coercive approach was antithetical to stated objectives of the relationship and reinforced the coloniality of power. Practically, the EPAs undermined African aspirations of regional integration by pushing for sub-regional agreements within the continent that did not map on to the sub-regional divisions recognized by African elites in the form of Regional Economic Communities (RECs). This is significant since the EU has consistently maintained its support for African integration on African terms (see Haastrup, 2013). To date, EPAs still have limited uptake in Africa (European Commission, 2021). The insistence on the EPAs on the part of the EU has contributed to mistrust within the EU–Africa relationship, even as the EU maintains that this is best for the relationship. With the Cotonou agreement coming to an end in November 2021, the EU made the move to “reset” relations, with Africa once again with the *Comprehensive Strategy with Africa* (2020).

The JAES has provided a clear basis for a true partnership of equals, but most of EU–Africa relations occurs outside of the JAES. The EU has continued to insist on the prior format of the ACP as the basis for the relationship. In this context then, the EU has facilitated the maintenance of the status-quo.

This drive to maintain the status-quo in EU–Africa relations and, therefore, ontological security for the EU is, nonetheless, under challenge. One crucial issue is migration. Mitzen (2018) shows convincingly that migration from outside the EU is conceived of in existential terms as threatening. For Mitzen, migration is a stressor to the EU's ontological security (see also Gazit, 2019), and this is manifested in EU–Africa relations. In the 2000 Cotonou Agreement, Article 13, which governs dialogue on migration, sat uneasily within the framework. Van Criekinge (2010) argues that Article 13 was a compromise. The process that led to this compromise reinforces the view that the African and European sides did not agree on this issue and that the principles of equality, ownership and especially partnership failed to be respected. For the EU, there is a preference for more migration and border controls against immigrants from Africa (Martins & Strange, 2019); while external observers see the EU as simply externalizing its borders and interfering in intra-regional migration regimes through its trust funds (Zanker, Kwaku, Jegen, & Bisong, 2020).

Migration is viewed by a significant part of the European citizenry as a significant challenge to the identity of the EU. The EU, through its institutions, has felt bound to reflect policies that stave off this challenge to its identity, even when those policy actions question the EU self (cf. Steele, 2008). For example, the EU (including member states),

through its migration policies and practices, including the recent Emergency Trust Fund, has been accused by academics and journalists of complicity in the Libyan slave markets of mainly Black Africans (Nanjala, 2017; Fekete, 2019 see also International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 9). Presently, the EU has pushed for migration deals signed by the European Commission with five African countries (Niger, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal and Ethiopia) linking EU development aid and trade. While this approach to returning “unwanted” migrants from Europe (EC, 2021) has been challenged on various grounds as incompatible with the values the EU espouses, we suggest that it is, however, consistent with the drive to achieve ontological security. Mitzen (2006a) is thus correct to argue that in the interventions wielded to maintain ontological security, the EU’s normative self is challenged.

The relationship between Africa and the EU clearly demonstrates the limits of the search for ontological security. As Mitzen (2006a) has outlined, the search for ontological security can be perilous, where political actors participate in destructive behaviour. Rossdale (2015) further highlights that ontological security can mask “a violent othering [that is] exclusionary and antagonistic” which is the basis for coloniality. So, the question remains, is the EU’s ontological security to always be at the expense of its African “partners”, even as the search for this elusive security remains damaging?

Practicing African Agency – responding to persistent hierarchies in EU–Africa relations

For the past two decades, Africans have been increasingly assertive about what they want from all partners and less reticent about forging ahead with regional integration plans. Importantly, this process of integration had the intention of harnessing the political power and will of more than 50 countries into a powerful voice in global politics. This is by no means suggesting a perfect formulation of that agency. As Khadiagala (2018) rightly notes, African elites have not always taken advantage of the opportunities to leverage this agency not the least because many African endeavours rely on financial resourcing from the EU (Khadiagala, 2018, pp. 445–447). Yet, the concerted efforts of African elites cannot be ignored.

In April 2000, the first EU–Africa summit was held in Cairo. It was the first time Africa as a group was considered outside of the ACP group in the context of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), bringing together North African and sub-Saharan African countries. A year earlier, member states of the OAU got together in Sirte (Libya) and agreed to disband the organization. They also agreed to create a replacement in the near future. The move to create a new institution was a signal to deepen integration and leverage the level of cooperation of peace, security and development at the service of Africans’ interests (OAU, 1999). The Sirte Declaration underscored the resolve of African leaders to “effectively address the new social, political, and economic realities in Africa and in the world” (OAU, 1999), thus repositioning Africa as a strategic actor no longer taking a back seat in international ordering. The resulting institution is the African Union (AU), created in 2001 and came into force in 2002. The AU has since become an important interlocutor for Africans in the world stage, and especially for consolidating African agency. In 2003, African leaders decided to integrate NEPAD, the New Partnership for African Development, into the AU. NEPAD, a new economic initiative,

was launched in 2001 and was seen as the blueprint for full-scale socioeconomic development of the continent. It was the policy response by African leaders to deal with globalization, trade, and aid for economic development. Similarly, an African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) was also set up to guarantee that African leaders would be accountable to each other for the effective implementation of political and economic reforms (Adogamhe, 2008).

The 2005 *Strategy* was a response to existing tensions. Since the 1990s, academics, activists, African and European political elites have underscored the need to update the relationship between African countries and the EU, particularly as it has been framed in the context of EU-ACP. The Lomé IV Convention (1995), for example, already included new areas of engagement, including democracy and good governance, the promotion of the private sector, strengthening gender equality and human rights promotion (ACP, 1995). Lomé IV opened the possibility for intensified region-to-region cooperation within the ambit of EU-ACP relations.

The expectation after Lomé IV was that its successor would allow the African side to articulate its priorities more clearly and take on greater ownership within the partnership. The resulting 2000 Cotonou Agreement was thus discursively framed as a new framework challenging previous asymmetries. The timing of the Cotonou Agreement also happened as broader changes began to take place in North–South relations (Brown, 2000). Yet, as evidenced by the 2005 Strategy developed soon after Cotonou, the promise of change to allow for a greater articulation of African agency was not forthcoming.

Cotonou's limited ability to result in change was evidenced in part by the introduction of the much-contested Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs). From the EU's perspective, EPAs were essential to any relationship going forward with African countries. According to MacDonald et al. (2013), the EU threatened African states with withdrawing preferences enjoyed since the Lomé Convention, if negotiations did not end. The coercive approach was antithetical to stated objectives of the relationship and reinforced the coloniality of power.

Practically, the EPAs undermined African aspirations of regional integration by pushing for sub-regional agreements within the continent that did not map on to the sub-regional divisions recognized by African elites in the form of Regional Economic Communities (RECs). This is significant since the EU has consistently maintained its support for African integration on African terms (see Haastrup, 2013). To date, EPAs still have limited uptake in Africa (European Commission, 2021). The insistence on the EPAs on the part of the EU has contributed to mistrust within the EU–Africa relationship, even as the EU maintains that this is best for the relationship. With the Cotonou agreement coming to an end in November 2021, the EU made the move to “reset” relations, with Africa once again, as articulated *Comprehensive Strategy with Africa* (2020).

While these collective endeavours have faced and continue to face governance, economic or social challenges, they are the evidence of a growing African agency. Tiekou (2014, p. 513) concretely defines African agency as “the autonomy of African citizens through their lawful representatives, have to act, own, control and lead on issues that affect them”. Bah (2017) further argues that the articulation of agency is accompanied by the creation of new instruments to assert strategic interests. Importantly, the AU is articulated as the

manifestation of such agency and to counter Western hegemonies. The political and policy intentions of the progressive articulation of African agency are perfectly captured in Agenda 2063 (2014), which is designated as “Africa’s blueprint and master plan for transforming Africa ... pursued under Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance” (African Union, n.d.).

More recently, this agency has been reasserted with the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) launched in January 2021. AfCFTA can be read as a success of regional integration and an exemplar of the articulation of African agency. Not without its hurdles ahead (Abrego et al., 2020; Apiko, Woolfrey, & Byiers, 2020; Saygili, Peters, & Knebel, 2019), AfCFTA has increased Africa’s collective bargaining and therefore its ability to manage its relationship with external actors. It is the largest free trade area in the world aiming to connect 55 countries and to create a 1.3 billion-people market by lowering tariffs for about 90 percent of products traded within the area.

According to Franklin Obeng-Odoom (2020), the normative premise for the AfCFTA is unique due to its rejection of traditional right or left leaning theories of trade, and rather the adoption of “non-aligned pan-Africanism”. The EU has contributed for this regional development through its Pan-African Program (PANAF). Until 2019, this program provided more than 60 million EURO to support the creation of the AfCFTA (African Union, 2019). This can be read as the EU leveraging its own experience through support for a grand integration project and thus reasserting its privileged relationship with Africa. Yet, at the core of AfCFTA is the elimination of coloniality. Furthermore, where the AfCFTA calls for a whole of continent integration, the EU’s continued insistence on EPAs challenges this ambition. The AfCFTA as envisioned in Africa is an antidote to the EU’s vision in that this is regionalism on African rather than European terms.

Another signal of rising African agency is the attempt by African countries to actively woo foreign direct investors to broaden options for economic growth and development (Soule, 2020). African countries are positioning themselves as investment safe havens in the attempt to project their global role and meet the domestic demands for stronger infrastructure, jobs and well-being. While the EU-27 remain Africa’s main trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) partner, the competition has been growing in the past decade. China, India, Turkey and Middle East countries provide alternatives to EU roles on the continent, thus challenging the EU’s historic self-identity as “natural partner”.

China especially is seen as a strategic rival and competitor to the EU on the continent. Chinese investment in Africa increase by 43.8% between 2014–2018, and as of 2018 China is now Africa’s fifth-biggest investor. China’s stock of FDI in 2018 was 46 billion US dollars behind that of the Netherlands, France, the US, and the UK (China-Power, 2021). Moreover, unlike the EU, China does not link its development aid or investment policy to human rights reform, good governance or climate change action, usually framed as European values. This has resulted in offering an alternative source of capital for African governments who would be unwilling to introduce such reforms (Duggan, 2020).

However, it is the “success” of the Chinese model of development that threatens the EU’s normative position in Africa. The Chinese model allows for strong state-led development, easier access to finance with little need for democratic rules, respect for human

rights or rule of law, which have consistently underpinned the EU's offers for partnership with the continent. In this way, the Chinese model challenges the NPE model. It does not mean that the Chinese model is better or more beneficial to the aims of African agency. It just offers a marked alternative as China can frame as the enduring EU model as empty promises of substantive change since they have so far been elusive in more than five decades. The Chinese approach moreover allows African leaders the space to develop their own models of development (Hodzi, 2020). We contend then that the Chinese option in particular challenges EU–Africa relations – a relationship that is embedded in the trajectory of European integration itself (Hansen & Jonsson, 2012).

The EU engagement with Africa vis-à-vis China underscores the ways in which ontological security is challenged in the context of EU–Africa relations, based on an articulation of agency that challenges the privileged relationship with African states. Indeed, the EU admits as much in the 2016 Global Strategy (EUGS, 2016), where it notes that it faces an existential crisis that stems from specific actors within the global order. China is one such actor that challenges the EU's vision of global order, especially in the economic realm.

In its strategic outlook for EU–China relations released in March 2019, the Commission noted the following:

China is, simultaneously, ... *an economic competitor* in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a *systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance*. This requires a ... *pragmatic whole-of-EU approach enabling a principled defence of interests and values*. (emphasis added) (EC, 2019, p. 1)

Overall, the increasing exercise of African agency (Soule, 2020) challenges the EU's secure self (see Johansson-Nogués, 2018 Klose, 2020;). We argue, however, that in the attempt to regain equilibrium, or rather in pursuit of ontological security, the EU's responses undermine its overarching aims of good relations with Africa and as an ethical foreign policy actor via the exercise of its norms.

Towards a more equitable future for EU–Africa relations?

Despite the range of areas of cooperation, there is a sense that efforts to fundamentally change the structure of EU–Africa relations have once again failed (International Crisis Group, 2017; Stout, 2020). This latest acknowledgement of failure has occurred in a period characterized by crises for the EU. First, the 2008 economic crisis led to the Eurozone wide financial contagion resulting in a sovereign debt crisis across the Union. This was followed by a security crisis with renewed Russian aggression resulting from conflict in Ukraine in 2014 and the breakdown in the Schengen system during the EU's so-called refugee crisis in 2015. The refugee crisis was soon followed by a more existential threat – the 2016 United Kingdom's referendum and surprise decision to leave the Union, the rise of populist and Eurosceptic parties, and the challenge to democratic principles in member states like Hungary and Poland. The latest crisis has been the human and economic crisis caused by the global Covid 19 pandemic. Beyond this, the EU's investment in a multilateral rules-based order is increasingly challenged by geopolitical stances of dissenting countries, particularly China and Russia, who seek more prominence in Europe's traditional spheres of influence in Africa (Chipman, 2018).

Amid this, the EU is pushing back, as expressed in the Global Strategy of 2016. The Global Strategy sets out five main external priorities: (1) the security of the Union; (2) state and societal resilience in the EU Neighborhood and Africa; (3) an integrated approach to conflicts; (4) cooperative regional orders and (5) global governance for the twenty-first century (ERAS, 2017). As a result of navigating multiple crises with the view to recovering stability and secure the sense of self, the EU has placed increased emphasis on security, resulting in the increased militarization of EU border and migration control (Hoijtink & Muehlenhoff, 2020).

Ultimately, the EU seems keener to focus on economic and trade ties in its relationship with African countries, moving beyond security, migration and development aid. In September 2016, then EC's President Juncker announces during the State of the Union the creation of the biggest diplomacy project aimed at wooing back Africa: the European Investment Plan (EIP) (European Commission, 2017). An ambitious plan to encourage private sector investments in Africa (and the EU Neighbourhood), boost continent-to-continent trade relations and help create millions of jobs. The EIP introduces a 4.1 billion EURO European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFSD) that offers a financial guarantee to a variety of actors from the European Investment Bank (EIB), European Development Finance institutions (EDFIs) to private investors in EU Member states and partner countries. In the same State of the Union, former High Representative Federica Mogherini was very clear about the rationale for EIP: to support EU strategic foreign policy goals (Mah, *forthcoming*).

Politically, the core purpose of this plan was to challenge China in Africa rather than a consideration for those enduring power hierarchies that have long undermined the possibilities of a true partnership. To offer Africans a competitive alternative to China, the logical implication would be to get rid of the EPAs and negotiate relations with African via the AU. As a tool to support EU strategic foreign policy goals, the EIP emerges to de-risk up-front private venture investments in such sectors as transport, utilities, and infrastructure in Africa. At the same time, the EIP is expected to help private venture to deal with “unfair international competition that require action to ensure a level playing field” (EC, 2014, p. 10) and to “tackle the roots causes of irregular migration and forced displacement” impacting the continent (Bilal & Große-Puppenthal, 2016, p.vii). In principle, this would be a win-win situation.

By the end of 2020, the EU had approved its 2021–2027 budget giving it the financial muscle to support its strategic foreign policy goals. The budget includes a new framework for EU development finance aimed at non-EU countries simplifying the current architecture and to scale up the impact of EIP. First, several instruments funding the EU development policy have merged into one, the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) totalling almost 79.5 billion EURO. Second, the NDICI will finance the EFSD+ (an expanded version of the original EFSD) and a new guarantee fund (the External Action Guarantee) with a ceiling of up to 60 billion EURO. This new guarantee fund can also accept contributions from EU Member States, and other third parties, including other countries. The figures involved in EFSD+ and the new guarantee fund reveal how the EU is attempting to boost its financial resources for strategic foreign policy goals (Mah, *forthcoming*).

In the last five years, the EU has gone to great lengths to underscore the importance of Africa, as evidenced by the *Comprehensive Strategy with Africa* (2020), new framework

for AU-EU relations (European Commission, 2020). Moreover, Von der Leyen's first international trip was to Ethiopia, the seat of the AU. Von der Leyen's approach was to convince African elites that going along with European preferences would ensure further investment on the continent. In short, for the EU side, the pathway to true partnership was contingent on African priorities being secondary to the EU's preferences.

The message that the African side heard, once again was that the EU continued to exercise a coloniality of power. African business and political elites stress that in a structure of trade (and broader economic relations) it is only more of the same (Ighobor, 2014). This perception has been reinforced by the process of renegotiating the replacement to the Cotonou Agreement, between the EU and the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS), which had replaced the ACP group. As Carbone (2021) shows, the end result did not pan out in what the AU wanted – a whole of the continent approach. On the one hand, this is explained as due to internal contestations in Africa. On the other hand, the reasons for the contestation are hardly explored, including the EU's bilateral efforts with AU members states to bypass the Commission (see also Anonymous, 2020). During the negotiations, EU representatives like Joanna Drake, deputy director-general at the Commission's DG Environment admitted that in the context of EU–Africa relations, while “‘equality’ was used a lot, ... the point of departure was not equal.” (Fox, 2019).

Conclusion

The EU's external relations practices are inconsistent about its commitment to an enduring relationship with Africa that achieves true partnership. There have been many moves over the years, but not enough to change the dynamic of the relationship. In this article, we argue that after a decade of multiple crises internally and vying for attention in previously privileged spaces in its external relations the EU's ontological security is being challenged. The EU is attempting to mitigate this challenge through the creation or redesign of new international forums and investment policies such as the EIP allowing it to protect its interests maintain its status-quo position within the global order, including as a privileged actor in Africa.

However, the EU's attempt to overcome its fears and anxieties in its relationship with Africa can be at odds with increasing African agency that eschews a coloniality of power. In articulating this agency, African states continue to push for African solutions for African problems. Exercising agency by engaging with more actors, including the EU's rivals, China especially, but also Russia and Turkey challenge the routinized EU–Africa relations as these new actors offer alternatives to the EU presence on the African continent. China can be seen to challenge European extractive practices from the perspectives of Africans and ultimately reducing the EU dominant position as an extra-regional and to date, the main external economic partner for many African countries.

The EU continues to approach Africa by reinforcing coloniality of power. If the rise of African agency is a challenge to the EU's ontological security, then the time is now for the EU to reimagine the boundaries of “self”. If the rise of African agency is a challenge to the EU's ontological security, while the EU's ontological security vis-à-vis Africa reinforces coloniality of power, then the time is now for the EU to reimagine the boundaries of “self”. However, with the move towards interest driven foreign policy codified in the

geopolitical commission and reinforced by militarization¹ and coercive negotiating tactics, the EU is in a conundrum as ontological security will remain elusive.

Positive change within the Africa–EU relationship requires a reconciliation to the broader implications of the colonial past, and particularly as it has shaped the continued exercise of the coloniality of power. As highlighted by an EU member state leader Irish President Michael D Higgins (2020)

there are preliminary tasks to be accomplished at European level, one of the most important being abandoning any affected amnesia as to the brutal colonisation of previous times, the detritus of imperial subjugations which surfaces too often

Thus, without a reckoning on how coloniality is part of the tapestry of the EU's identity, at least in Africa where many are no longer at ease with the status quo, the drive to improve relations will remain aspirational.

Note

1. The EU's 'hard' security engagements in Africa have grown significantly, and departing from previous multilateralism via cooperation with regional organisations to increasing bilateralism with specific countries. This approach undermines the regional approaches favoured by African elites.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author(s) reported there is no funding associated with the work featured in this article.

Notes on contributors

Toni Haastrup is Senior Lecturer in Division of History, Heritage and Politics at the University of Stirling. She is currently joint editor-in-chief of *JCMS: Journal Market Studies*. She publishes on a range of regional practices of security in Africa and Europe drawing on critical approaches. She is co-editor of *The Routledge Handbook of EU-Africa Relations* (2020).

Niall Duggan is Lecturer in the Department of Government and Politics at University College Cork, Ireland.

Luis Mah is a Lecturer in Development Studies at ISEG-Lisbon School of Economics and Management, Universidade de Lisboa. He is also an associate at CEAs- Center for Africa and Development Studies (ISEG) and has been working as a global development advocate and policy officer for NGOs for more than a decade. His current research focuses on the role of development finance institutions and the business sector in addressing sustainable development. He holds a PhD in Development Studies from LSE (2004).

ORCID

Toni Haastrup  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6374-1389>

Niall Duggan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3578-1068>

Luis Mah  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9400-0348>

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