

ANALYSIS

Henrik Maihack
March 2025

Africa Policy after the German Federal Elections

Five Suggestions

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Africa policy in a multipolar world

Germany's new government enters the second quarter of the twenty-first century with the West divided and weakened. The G7 states now represent less than ten percent of the world's population – and falling. The influence of the Global South is growing.¹ It represents more than two-thirds of the world's population – and rising. When the Cold War ended the G7 still accounted for nearly half the world's GDP. Today it is barely a quarter. Under President Donald Trump the United States appears to be withdrawing from Western-led multilateralism. On the other hand, middle powers like South Africa, Brazil and India are seeking to reform and strengthen the multilateral institutions, as seen during their recent successive G20 presidencies (2023–2025). The members and partners of the BRICS group – which has recently been expanding in Africa – now account for more than one-third of the global economy and more than half of the world's population.² Like others across the Global South, many African countries feel that much needed reform of the multilateral system is proceeding too slowly.

Today no one group possesses the capacity to solve the pressing global crises on its own. Not the BRICS or the G7, not even the G20 or the United Nations. New and more flexible alliances are appearing on the scene, while others fade away. One thing seems certain: the traditional pillars of German foreign policy in the second half of the twentieth century – the Western alliance, close relations with the United States and France, and European integration – are no longer sufficient in a multipolarising world with competing power centres.

Germany, as a highly export-dependent European economy, is going to have to face up to this competition. German prosperity depends on functioning multilateralism and the ability to resolve global crises in an increasingly dangerous world. In the coming period, Germany will be more reliant on flexible partnerships and new alliances with countries outside the West to uphold multilateral rules. Like other regional middle powers – in Africa for example Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana and Kenya – Germany is not powerful enough

to set new global rules on its own. It can, however, reform and defend existing multilateral rules in cooperation with others.

Africa is the continent with the most votes in the UN General Assembly: more than one quarter, or 54 of 193. But – like Europe – it lacks a major global power. In 2050 a quarter of the world's population will live in Africa, Europe's close neighbour. And across Africa – unlike in Europe – the coming multipolar world is viewed with optimism.³ Many African governments welcome the growing engagement of China, India and Türkiye in their continent, and exploit the opportunities offered by multipolarity to their strategic advantage.

If Germany wants to defend and reform rule-based multilateralism – and therewith secure Germany's economic prosperity – African countries will have to be on board. If Germany wants to reduce Europe's dependency on China for critical raw materials, its new government will need critical raw material partnerships with African states. If Germany wants to recruit skilled labour it will have to develop more attractive offers for African societies. And if Germany wants to strengthen Europe's security its new government will have to work more closely with African partners to ensure stability on NATO's southern flank – where armed conflicts and terror organisations are proliferating from the Gulf of Guinea to the Red Sea. In short, the new German government cannot afford not to engage with Africa.

Within the European Union, the new German government will find itself playing an unfamiliar leading role on Africa policy, especially with France having fallen into disrepute in different parts of the continent. A European Africa policy that is primarily French-led – or perceived as such – seems no longer viable. The new German government will need to be quick off the mark. The next joint summit of the African Union and the European Union could take place as soon as the second half of 2025. And in both the AU and the EU, newly elected Commissions are currently taking the reins and setting foreign policy priorities.

¹ The term "Global South" describes the 134 members of the G77 (the developing countries as recognised by the United Nation; see The Group of 77, <https://uat.g77.org/background>).

² The original members when the group was established in 2006 were Brazil, Russia, India and China. South Africa joined in 2010, while the 2024 expansion added Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates. Indonesia was accepted as a full member in 2025. Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Uganda and Uzbekistan became BRICS partners in 2025.

³ Stiftung Münchner Sicherheitskonferenz (2025): *Munich Security Report 2025: Multipolarization*, <https://securityconference.org/en/publications/munich-security-report-2025/>.

Europe's current interactions with Africa are not propitious. Italy is slamming the door on migration, aided and abetted by the EU Commission and African autocrats. The far right's electoral gains in Italy, Austria and the Netherlands have not gone unnoticed in Africa, where there are also concerns over the next French elections in 2027 and a possible turn to the far right. In the eyes of many on the African continent, Europe currently appears to be more interested in keeping African people out than in developing partnerships with African countries. So it is no surprise if Europe – which remains Africa's largest trading partner – is less popular in Africa than the United States or China.⁴ This is increasingly becoming a geo-economic problem for Germany, as it hinders urgently needed partnerships with African governments, businesses and civil society.

That said, treating Africa primarily as a geopolitical chessboard is not going to improve relations either. Whoever ignores Africa's experience with colonialism and proxy wars and engages primarily in order to keep China and Russia out, will have a hard time of it. Germany should take good note of the African Union's theme of the year for 2025: "Justice for Africans and People of African Descent Through Reparations".

Strengthening partnerships with countries of the Global South – including African countries – was an explicit goal of the outgoing German government. Africa was a priority at the highest levels. No previous German government visited Africa so often and regularly. High ranking diplomacy concentrated on democratic regional powers seeking to promote fairer multilateralism. Chancellor Olaf Scholz visited South Africa, Senegal, Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana. One of the last acts of his outgoing government was to update its Africa Policy Guidelines, marking a long-overdue paradigm shift.⁵ This followed an ambitious reworking of the Development Ministry's Africa strategy.⁶ Both documents represent a more strategic approach, naming interests and outlining possibilities for cooperation in a multipolar era. These strategies seek to tackle global crises jointly with Africa, while formulating Germany's interests more clearly and continuing to show solidarity with the objectives of the UN Agenda 2030.

The outgoing government's record also includes concrete initiatives like Development Minister Svenja Schulze's presidency of the Sahel Alliance and an intensification of the process of making amends for Germany's colonial past, as symbolised by President Frank-Walter Steinmeier's visit to Tanzania and Foreign Min-

ister Annalena Baerbock's restitution of looted artefacts to Nigeria. This did not go far enough, and was overshadowed by double standards in foreign policy (especially in the Middle East). But there was still more focus on Africa policy than ever before.

So what next? What did the outgoing government leave unfinished? And what Africa policy should the new government be pursuing? In the following I lay out five suggestions for German engagement in Africa, taking the European context into account. They are by no means exhaustive, but I hope they will spark productive discussions.

⁴ Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Edem E. Selormey (2021): "Africans welcome China's influence but maintain democratic aspirations", in: *Afrobarometer*, 15 November 2021, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad489-africans-welcome-chinas-influence-maintain-democratic-aspirations/>.

⁵ Auswärtiges Amt (2025): *Gemeinsam Partnerschaften gestalten in einer Welt im Wandel: Afrikapolitische Leitlinien der Bundesregierung*, <https://www.publikationen-bundesregierung.de/pp-de/publikationssuche/afrikapolitik-leitlinien-2329638>.

⁶ Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung (2023): *Gemeinsam mit Afrika Zukunft gestalten: Die Afrika-Strategie des BMZ*, <https://www.bmz.de/de/laender/bmz-afrika-strategie/>.

Suggestion 1: Establish a new troika for the Horn of Africa to strengthen the AU

Instability in the Horn of Africa endangers EU's external trade. One in every three shipping containers entering the EU passes through the Red Sea. Currently no region in the world is less stable. Here Germany should step up its engagement and employ novel formats.

The war in Sudan has created the world's biggest humanitarian disaster, with repercussions across the western Sahel. The country is essentially divided in two. In Somalia, only a fragile AU mission stands between the Al-Qaeda affiliate Al Shabaab and control of the capital, while various regions are determined to secede. The new US administration's discussed intention to recognise Somaliland would only accelerate the centrifugal forces there. Ethiopia has mutated from a regional hegemon and valued partner of the West to flashpoint and trouble spot. The Ethiopian government's quest for access to the Red Sea increases the likelihood for war with its neighbours while various regions of the country already suffer from violent conflict. Renewed violence looms in South Sudan, as the fighting in Sudan spills across the border, oil exports have almost ceased, the vice-president is under house arrest and the Ugandan military is in the country. Nor can Kenya fulfil the West's expectations that it will step in to guard order in the region. President Ruto's government is under pressure at home since a wave of protests in 2024, while his regional foreign policy seems overambitious and currently underperforming.

The interconnected conflicts in the different countries of the Horn of Africa have always been regional affairs. Neighbouring countries have often wanted a say in any peace agreement next door. After the end of US hegemony, new external actors with deep pockets are now involved. The region is witnessing a rapid escalation of outside involvement in its armed conflicts, specifically by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Russia and Iran who often support opposing sides in violent conflicts. The UAE profits from the region's gold production, while Russia and Iran want to establish naval bases in Sudan. On top of all this, the international terror network IS has established a presence in the Somali province of Puntland, while the Somali militia Al Shabaab operates on one side of Red Sea and the Houthi rebels in Yemen on the other. Increasingly, the two groups seem to be cooperating, thereby threatening one of the most important choke-points for European shipping, including Europe's crucial trade with China. All these aspects touch on Europe's core interests.

The growing number of external actors has brought forth competing forums in the region. While ostensibly talking about peace, this competition of forums tends to hamper such efforts. This is a typical side-effect of multipolarity. In fact, no functioning peace agreement has emerged in the Horn of Africa since the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan in 2005. Instead there have been generally fragile ceasefires and cautious – and often unsuccessful – disarmament and demobilisation agreements. Too great are the expected rewards of renewed fighting. Neither the AU nor the UN is currently leading peacemaking efforts, especially in Sudan. Neither the EU nor the AU nor the UN will be able to achieve much on their own. New and better-coordinated regional approaches are therefore needed. These will involve new – potentially novel and pragmatic – alliances that are capable of countering the destabilising influence of different external actors. It is clear that any new mechanisms developed by external partners will have to have “ownership” in the region. The regional Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) seems too weak to provide such ownership, so the only current remaining option is close coordination with the AU. The election of Djibouti's former foreign minister, Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, as the new Chairperson of the AU Commission is a promising development, after his predecessor proved unable to advance any effective conflict regulation initiatives in the Horn of Africa. Only a mechanism coordinated with the AU has any prospect of achieving peace in the Horn of Africa.

In light of this situation, the new German government should work to establish a new troika for the Horn of Africa, comprising Türkiye, China and Germany (on behalf of the EU), in order to better coordinate support for peace initiatives and to create concrete incentives for peace. All three countries have an interest in stability in the Horn of Africa. Their different patterns of influence within the region are advantageous. Germany is engaged in various UN missions in the region. It is regarded as an honest broker supportive of civil society, it provides strong financial support to the AU, and it has become the most influential EU member in the Horn of Africa. In the region Germany is also increasingly openly asked what its concrete interests and achievable goals are. Germany needs better and less abstract answers to that question. Despite its heightened overall attention to Africa, the outgoing German government failed to focus adequately on the Horn of Africa. It should now be given greater priority. The Berlin Process on Libya from 2019 to 2021 supplies relevant lessons in

this regard. There, Germany demonstrated the courage to lead a crisis resolution initiative in Africa, even if the outcomes fell short of expectations. The recently published report of the Bundestag's parliamentary inquiry into the lessons from Afghanistan for Germany's future networked engagement also offers concrete starting points for setting more realistic goals.⁷

On its own, Germany obviously does not possess enough influence in the Horn of Africa. Türkiye has strongly expanded its activities in the region and was recently able to achieve unexpected success in mediating between Somalia and Ethiopia. Türkiye is currently probably the most influential NATO member in Africa. Currently, Ankara is turning its attention to the crisis in Sudan – although diplomatic success there will be more difficult to achieve as many regard Türkiye as insufficiently impartial given its partnership with the government in Port Sudan. Meanwhile, nobody in the Horn of Africa wants to get on wrong side of China. China is still involved in UN peacekeeping missions in the region. It maintains a naval base in Djibouti and seems interested in the region's mineral resources. Beijing recently even invited civil society representatives from certain countries in the Horn of Africa to make concrete proposals about how it could support peace efforts. China is also increasingly engaged in activities to strengthen African security forces under its Global Security Initiative, from which the AU is also expected to benefit. At the global level, it is clear that China will remain Germany's competitor and rival. But China has also become one of Africa's most important partners. And in the Horn of Africa China can also become Germany's partner in a pragmatic alliance for the region. It is worth trying at least.

The European Union Special Representative for the Horn of Africa, the German Annette Weber, could play a central role in such a trilateral coordinating mechanism. In that event she would need even more robust support from Germany. In the guise of its Horn of Africa Initiative, the EU already has a framework with resources capable of conducting cross-border infrastructure projects in the region. At the Munich Security Conference Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi offered suggestions to better synergise China's Belt and Road Initiative with the EU's Global Gateway Initiative. That could be concretised in the Horn of Africa. Essentially such a new troika would have to adopt a more transactional approach than Germany and the EU have taken to date in the region. The German Development Ministry could support the process by advancing bilateral initiatives in the region (as it did in the Sahel Alliance). Without economic stabilisation, peace in the region will be impossible.

Such a troika should explicitly back a contact group of influential individuals under the auspices of the AU and supported by the new AU Commission. That would also strengthen the role of the AU itself. The AU could meanwhile tread new paths, consulting not just with the respective civil societies but also with a smaller group of leading civil society representatives and experts to identify the reasons for the failure of most recent peace efforts in the Horn of Africa and to develop new proposals. These will inevitably involve tough compromises. The powerful regular and irregular forces that control territory in the region cannot realistically be expected to end their struggles and disappear without an attractive exit option or the offer of political participation. That presents an obstacle to transitional justice approaches for which many civil society activists advocate.

A new troika for the Horn of Africa that explicitly backs the AU's efforts and representatives and conducts its own summit diplomacy in Berlin, Peking and Ankara would make it harder for the region's various internal and external troublemakers – to continue destabilising the region. While Russia has paralysed the UN Security Council, it might be possible to make better progress in the Horn of Africa if China put its shoulder to the wheel. Russia would likely veto any exclusively Western initiative. All that will require patience: the road to peace in the region will be long and rocky. UN and AU peacekeeping missions operating in the Horn of Africa – and indeed across Africa – often lack the stabilising basis of a functioning peace agreement. Peacekeeping without prior peacemaking is no longer the exception but the rule. In this multipolar age, peacemaking is unrealisable without the involvement of all relevant actors within and outside the region. The new German government will have to rise to that challenge. If the Chinese and Turks fail to show sufficient interest, it would be worth looking for comparable formats with other novel constellations.

⁷ Deutscher Bundestag (2024): Enquete-Kommission "Lehren aus Afghanistan für das künftige vernetzte Engagement Deutschlands", https://www.bundestag.de/ausschuesse/weitere_gremien/enquete_afghanistan/.

Suggestion 2: Deepen relations with the new governments of South Africa and Ghana

South Africa and Ghana elected new governments in free elections in 2024, making them even more important partners for Europe. Germany should deepen its partnerships with both. In May 2024 the African National Congress (ANC) quickly put together a coalition government in South Africa, after losing its absolute majority for the first time since 1994. Ghana saw another peaceful change of government, with Nana Akufo Addo conceding defeat before the official results had even been announced. The new president, John Mahama, was inaugurated in January 2025; his National Democratic Party (NDC) enjoys a large majority in parliament. Both these outcomes are good news for democracy in Africa – and for Germany's foreign policy, security, economic and development interests.

South Africa is the only African state in the G20 (the AU was granted membership in 2023). In November 2025 South Africa will host the first ever G20 summit in Africa. In Pretoria the new German Chancellor will meet the current G20 President Cyril Ramaphosa and his Brazilian and Indian predecessors, Lula da Silva und Narendra Modi. There, at the latest, the new German government will find itself confronted with the joint priorities of the Global South, which are represented comparably coherently in this forum. So the G20 summit offers an early opportunity for Germany to demonstrate that its new government remains capable of strategic dialogue with the Global South.

No other African country puts more sustained and concrete effort into reforming and defending the rule-based multilateral order than South Africa. At the same time Pretoria makes the most of multipolarity. South Africa hosted the 2023 summit that initiated the BRICS expansion. Whatever the differences among them, all the BRICS members and partners are seeking alternatives in a multipolar world. That is exactly what BRICS offers. But that should certainly not deter the new German government from seeking common ground with what is one of Africa's most democratic countries.

The election of Donald Trump as US president and the sanctions imposed by his new administration are forcing South Africa to consolidate its other Western partnerships. Alongside baseless criticisms concerning South African land reforms, Washington is particularly impatient with Pretoria's cordial relationships with Russia, China and Iran. A further deterioration in the trade relationship is certainly in the cards, for example through withdrawal of South Africa's trade preferences under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). That would create serious challeng-

es for South Africa's economy, which is highly dependent on the West. It would also further deepen South Africa's dependency on good trade relations with the EU. Therein lies an opportunity to expand the existing strategic dialogue between the EU and South Africa.

South Africa remains an ideal partner for Germany in Africa. Over and above the shared interest in a more inclusive, more equitable rule-based and value-driven multilateral order, South Africa possesses one of the world's most progressive constitutions, it exports important raw materials (especially to Europe), it exerts strong influence across Africa, and it has a great interest in close trade relations with Europe. Germany and South Africa are each other's most important trading partner in their respective continents. At the same time, Pretoria has direct channels of communication with actors that the West regards as hostile. While Washington has been very critical of this, it can also be regarded as an opportunity because global foreign policy burden sharing in a multipolar world is impossible without such contacts. It is precisely because Pretoria's experienced foreign ministry speaks directly with counterparts in Russia and Iran, and even with Hamas and many others, that it is able to exert a positive influence in crises where the West is directly affected but currently lacks influence over decisive actors. Can any other democracy on earth make that claim? That constellation needs to be employed more strategically in future.

Closer coordination between South Africa and Europe would also be desirable. To that end, it would be helpful if the Germany government avoided damning South Africa next time it decides to bring a complaint before an international court. Pretoria had every right to take Israel to the International Criminal Court. More generally the German government should avoid trying to force South Africa to choose sides or lecturing it about good and bad partners. Instead it should accept that South Africa – like most countries in the Global South – pursues a fundamentally non-aligned foreign policy and will therefore continue to maintain good relations with the other BRICS states and partners. South Africa sees no contradiction with its explicitly formulated interest in a deeper partnership with Europe. At the same time Germany should work with South Africa to advance projects that actually reduce inequality and create jobs. These include for example the (improvable) Just Energy Transition Partnership, better access to international finance and possibly also additional non-reciprocal EU trade preferences. Indirectly that would also strengthen South Africa's democracy and prepare the ground for a stronger partnership.

While South Africa enjoys long-standing influence in Africa, Ghana's is growing. Ghana is presently Europe's most promising West African partner for getting a better grip on the multidimensional and worsening Sahel crisis. Although Nigeria has a much larger population and economy, its credibility in the region was weakened by its rash threats to intervene in Niger in summer 2023 when Nigeria held the chair of the West African Economic Community (ECOWAS). As such some even blame Nigeria for the withdrawal of the military governments of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from ECOWAS. Côte d'Ivoire's future influence will depend on the upcoming elections. Senegal could become an important partner for Germany and the EU in the region after its 2024 elections, although the signals from Dakar to Europe are currently mixed. All these factors enhance Ghana's importance as a partner for Europe.

Ghana is affected directly by the crisis in the Sahel region, with increasing reports of terrorist networks from the Sahel proliferating into its northern regions. Nevertheless, Ghana is stable, and on account of its new government untainted by the mistakes made by ECOWAS in connection with the coup in Niger. Even more importantly, Ghana's new President John Mahama enjoys great credibility in the region. During his first term in office he was not only president of ECOWAS, but also one of the architects of the Multinational Joint Task Force, which achieved lasting improvements in security around the Lake Chad Basin. One of the first foreign policy initiatives of his second term was to improve relations with the post-coup governments in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Just a few days after his inauguration, Mahama invited Malian Prime Minister Abdoulaye Maïga to Accra to discuss possibilities to improve cooperation on regional security. Closer security cooperation between the affected countries would be desirable, also in order to constrain the influence of external actors. Germany should support this. Anti-terror operations by the putschist regimes, in which Russian mercenaries have been involved, have worsened the security situation in the Sahel and hamper the necessary political dialogue within the affected countries.

On the European side, France used to be the most important Western partner for many governments in the Sahel region and West Africa. It has now been thoroughly discredited. The French armed forces have been ejected by the military governments in the three Sahel states, and by the civilian governments in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire. Those who would claim that France's unpopularity is attributable solely to disinformation are mistaken. This has awkward implications for Germany. The Franco-German relationship that is so crucial for the EU in fact endangers the credibility of Germany's Africa policy in the geo-

strategically important Sahel region (and increasingly throughout Africa). The German government cannot be impervious to terrorism, forced displacement and migration, and a steadily deteriorating security situation close to Europe's southern periphery. Berlin needs to have a discreet but even more critical dialogue with France about European Africa policy, while at the same time emancipating its national Africa policy from France. That will be a tricky needle to thread for the next German government. These issues could become even more pressing after the 2027 elections in France.

Equally important is the realisation that stabilisation of the Sahel region can only be achieved through negotiations and political dialogue with putschists and Islamist terrorists. The uncomfortable truth for German foreign policy in the Sahel region is that there can be no stabilisation without two kinds of deal.

Firstly, there needs to be more rather than less strategic political dialogue with the military leaders in the Sahel region. In view of their persistent domestic popularity and their importance for the stability of this vast region, isolating the three military governments in the Sahel would be a great mistake.⁸ The long-term objective of dialogue remains unchanged: transition to civilian government. Europe will achieve more through better intra-EU coordination, traditional diplomacy, discreet confidence-building and concrete development-related incentives than through loud public demands for elections. It is a good omen that the EU's new Special Representative for the Sahel region, João Cravinho, was recently cordially received in Niger. And in Mali internal pressure for a transition is growing. These are both encouraging signs for Europe. Continued engagement should also include expanding embassy personnel in the Sahel countries and stepping up civil society contacts.

Secondly, Germany and Europe are going to have to accept that the political transitions in the Sahel region – which are also supported by threatened neighbours like Ghana – might in the medium term lead to greater influence for Islamist groups in civilian governments. There is a good case that stability in the Sahel region can only be achieved by granting a share of political power in return for an end to the armed struggle. Such stability would enable the expansion of state public services. Precisely that will be key to ending the violence and strengthening the sovereignty that is so important to the incumbent military governments, in full knowledge that true sovereignty will ultimately require democratic legitimation. Germany should support deals of that kind – or at least refrain from criticising them as it did regularly until 2021, taking its lead from France. That would support Ghana's increasingly important diplomacy in the region.

⁸ Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2024): *Mali-Mètre 2024 – Hoffnung auch ohne Licht am Ende des Tunnels*, <https://www.fes.de/referat-afrika/neuigkeiten/mali-metre-2024-hoffnung-auch-ohne-licht-am-ende-des-tunnels/>.

Suggestion 3: Improve economic support for democracies

The big youth protests in Kenya and Mozambique in 2024 emblemise the growing political frustration across Africa.⁹ Increasing numbers of people are increasingly dissatisfied with growing social inequality and exclusion across the continent. Africa's democracies are by no means exempt, with a succession of debt crises, per capita GDP stagnant for a decade and poverty increasing which leads to growing dissatisfaction with democracy – even where it already exists. Further protests will probably follow in all regions of Africa. Surveys by Afrobarometer document growing frustration among young people across the entire continent.¹⁰ Although two-thirds of Africans regard democracy as the only legitimate form of government, party membership and electoral participation are falling among the young. And where governments fail to show democratic accountability, radical alternatives gain ground. Across Africa there is growing support for military intervention in cases of abuse of democratic power, especially among young people. This sentiment is particularly strong in the Sahel region. Today only a minority of Africans live in democracies. Political freedoms are eroding everywhere in Africa, and economic perspectives are grim.

Today less than twelve percent of African employment is in manufacturing. In world regions that have achieved prosperity, the figure has exceeded 20 percent at least for a while. There is just no successful development path for Africa without industrialisation. Every year up to 12 million young people join African labour markets, chasing only three million new jobs.¹¹ Most of them manage little more than eking out a living in the so-called informal sector. That is exactly why industrialisation is an explicit objective of the AU's Agenda 2063. To date, however, that path appears closed. And so most Africans continue to work in the precarious informal sector. By 2035 more than half of Africa's population will be in its rapidly growing cities, where more than 60 percent of residents still live in informal settlements. This phenomenon of urbanisation without industrialisation is historically unprecedented and faces Africa with enormous challenges, especially as the climate crisis adds to the pressures on African economies.

It is increasingly clear that democracies become unstable if they fail to deliver economically. Germany learned that bitter lesson in the twentieth century, and drew the consequences after the Second World War. Germany's contemporary prosperity was built on debt forgiveness, state investment, funding through the Marshall Plan, security guarantees, expansion of public services and reindustrialisation. Redistributive taxation and protection of critical infrastructure and young industries also played a key role (as they did in now-prosperous Asian countries such as South Korea and Japan). Those were the policies that enabled Germany's economic miracle and stabilised its democracy. Exactly the opposite was recommended to African countries in the 1980s, 1990s and 2020s, when they were – and are – required to cut their state budgets and open up their economies.

Debt crises and inflation are currently escalating again, after the Covid pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and increases in Western interest rates. The result is a new round of financial austerity in more than twenty African countries (where the majority of the population has not even benefitted from the projects funded through the borrowing). In most African countries debt is currently growing faster than the economy, with average interest rates at almost ten percent. By comparison, Germany can currently borrow at around two percent. The bottom line: Africa spends more on debt servicing (namely, 2.4 percent of GDP) than on climate initiatives (2.1 percent).¹² That is all the more egregious if we remind ourselves that Africa is hit particularly hard by the climate crisis for which the industrialised West is mostly to blame. Almost one billion people live in African countries that are currently spending more on debt servicing than on health and education. More money is leaving the continent than entering it. Under these circumstances economic transformation is impossible.

Debt restructuring has become a great deal more complicated, because today private creditors hold a large proportion. Nor is the G20's Common Framework for debt treatments effective. Several African governments

⁹ Parts of this section are expanded and updated from: Henrik Maihack (2023): "Wut im Bauch", in: *IPG-Journal*, 13 August 2024, <https://www.ipg-journal.de/regionen/afrika/artikel/wut-im-bauch-7701/>.

¹⁰ Afrobarometer (2024): *African Insights 2024: Democracy at risk – the people's perspective*, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/feature/flagship-report/>.

¹¹ African Development Bank (2016): *Jobs for youth in Africa: Catalyzing youth opportunity across Africa*, https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Images/high_5s/Job_youth_Africa_Job_youth_Africa.pdf.

¹² UNCTAD (2024): "Global public debt hits record \$97 trillion in 2023, UN urges action", <https://unctad.org/news/global-public-debt-hits-record-97-trillion-2023-un-urges-action/>.

have had to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). But the IMF's emergency financing comes with conditions, traditionally requiring tax increases and economic liberalisation. Given the marginal role of taxable employment, governments have only unpalatable alternatives to choose from: to tax their own privileges, to tax consumption or to reduce subsidies on everyday necessities. These regressive measures hit the lower income groups particularly hard. That is why the coming years will most likely see further protests over economic and social grievances and national sovereignty, in particular where debt crises escalate. If Trump's tariffs cause an inflation crisis in the United States, interest rates will rise, potentially leading to a further exacerbation of debt crises in African countries whose debt is dollar-denominated. The response would be another round of IMF-dictated austerity – and more protests.

Enforcing austerity in increasingly impatient African democracies endangers democracy itself. Today a majority still believes in its promises. In many African countries the children of those who experienced the political liberalisation of the late 1980s and early 1990s and the associated deprivations of the structural adjustment programmes are today seeking democratic channels to express their dissatisfaction. Where these exist, as in Kenya and Nigeria, the protesters cite their democratic constitution and demand that election promises be kept. A Chinese one-party state is no model for them. But they have lost faith that their politicians – who are responsible for the austerity policies coordinated with the West – could ever deliver change. In many of Africa's political economies, the kind of economic redistribution or taxation of outflows to tax havens proposed by trade unions and civil society would probably lead to the collapse of existing government coalitions. Those financial flows represent the corrupt glue that holds them together.

Although Europe's interests are currently closely tied to some of these beleaguered governments, offering formats for protected dialogue with protesters is opportune. Some of them can be expected to end up in positions of political responsibility. If Germany is to build political confidence, acquire partners in Africa and protect their democracies, financial and economic initiatives will also be decisive to relieve the debt crisis (with buy-in from private creditors), stimulate state and private demand, and in the medium term restore an attractive environment for foreign investment. Merely making it more attractive to invest – as demanded by German business lobbies – without expanding the fiscal leeway of African governments through debt restructuring would create nothing more than a flash in the pan.

South Africa's G20 Presidency has published concrete ideas for resolving the debt crises. Germany could also support the new continental financial stability fund set up by the AU at the African Development Bank without

great risk. And Germany could lead the way with “safe harbour” legislation offering indebted countries greater protection from aggressive private creditors and enabling debt restructuring processes. There is also an urgent need for low-interest funding for African countries that is structured to avoid creating new debt crises. That will be even more important if Western development budgets are further reduced.

All this is relevant for Europe's interest in stability in Africa. If African labour markets and urban infrastructure continue to function only for a small elite, the political situation will continue to deteriorate. Success or failure in improving access to public goods and good jobs in the growing cities will ultimately be decisive for Africa's political and economic future. So if Germany wants to stabilise Africa's democracies it should work to strengthen both civil society and economic demand. In the medium term that would also benefit export-dependent Germany.

Suggestion 4: Connect the African Free Trade Area more closely to Europe

Economic progress in Africa will certainly require better integration of the markets of the continent's many comparatively small and often landlocked countries. The AU would like to see the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) become the largest free trade area since the establishment of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). From 2035 the AfCFTA could increase Africa's total GDP by about seven percent. As such the AfCFTA creates a new framework for Africa's so urgently needed economic transformation. The AU also hopes that the AfCFTA will lead to a significant increase in trade between African countries, which currently represents less than 20 percent of Africa's total trade. Africa currently attracts just four percent of global foreign direct investment. If anything, the figure has been falling recently, and the investment is mostly restricted to the resource sector. This reveals how Africa's economies still revolve principally around exporting unprocessed raw materials to overseas markets. If one wanted to concretise the work on "colonial continuities" that the German government says is necessary,¹³ a different trade policy would be a good place to start. Changing those dependencies under the auspices of the AfCFTA will be easier than working with dozens of separate states.

Although the process of establishing the AfCFTA has begun, the EU has yet to make adequate concrete proposals for improving the connections between the world's two largest trade areas, or to outline possible incentives. Unlike for example in the context of the Mercosur agreement with Latin American states, there is still no broad foreign policy discussion about the strategic implications of a Europe-Africa deal. Instead Chancellor Scholz's visit to Kenya in 2024 was preceded by the conclusion of a Economic Partnership Agreement with Kenya: yet another bilateral trade agreement that will tend to hinder coherence with the AfCFTA.¹⁴

The EU needs to adopt a more strategic and coherent approach if it is also to intensify its geoeconomic ties with Africa. Europe has almost no alternative, because reducing dependency on China for critical raw materials like copper, lithium and cobalt will certainly require

closer cooperation with African (and Latin American) countries. That is also flagged in the EU's Critical Raw Materials Act, in which Africa plays an important role as the location of one third of the relevant critical resources.¹⁵ International competition for African resources has intensified. The central question is whether the critical minerals of central Africa will be exported via the Indian Ocean to Asia or via the Atlantic to the West. African states like Zambia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) are leveraging this opportunity and seeking to renegotiate resource agreements to their advantage. These renegotiations are in Europe's interest, because to date Chinese companies have profited most.

The EU has recognised this competition, and has prioritised investment in the geostrategically important Lobito Corridor through its Global Gateway Initiative. The Corridor will connect resource-rich DRC, Zambia and Angola to the West. But the project is proceeding very slowly with little to show to date. The EU Commission confirmed its objective of expanding the corridor in early 2025, by strengthening its cooperation with Angola through whose ports the raw materials are to be exported. The United States has also stepped up its engagement in the region. It was no coincidence that US President Joe Biden's only trip to Africa – in the last days of his presidency – was to Angola. The Lobito Corridor is therefore one of the few US projects in Africa that is likely to be continued under President Trump. Even the erratic new US President can have no interest in seeing the bulk of these raw materials going to China.

Europe is late to the game. Currently more than 80 percent of refining of critical raw materials from Africa is carried out in China. They mostly come from countries within the Lobito Corridor.¹⁶ German and European Africa policy is also increasingly influenced by interest in green hydrogen, as underlined by German ministerial trips to Namibia in recent years. But all these projects stand under pressure in the host countries, where governments and citizens expect local processing of resources to create local jobs. Increasing numbers of Af-

¹³ Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung (2023) (see note 6), p. 7.

¹⁴ David Luke (ed.) (2023): *How Africa trades*, London; and David Luke and Jamie MacLeod (2023): *A new trade deal for Africa, please!* Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Geneva, <https://geneva.fes.de/e/how-africa-trades-edited-by-david-luke.html>.

¹⁵ European Commission (2023): *European Critical Raw Materials Act*, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/green-deal-industrial-plan/european-critical-raw-materials-act_en/.

¹⁶ Lina Benabdallah, (2024): *China's role in Africa's critical minerals landscape: Challenges and key opportunities*, <https://afripoli.org/chinas-role-in-africas-critical-minerals-landscape-challenges-and-key-opportunities/>.

rican countries are passing legislation to that effect. Zambia, Namibia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have all introduced legislation to restrict exports of unprocessed raw materials. That makes sense development-wise. Germany should support this and sell itself as the partner of choice for these new emerging industries.

At a time of severe cuts in development funding across the globe it will be more crucial than ever to include development aspects in trade agreements. Europe has an opportunity to build and consolidate the kind of soft power that the United States is currently throwing away by abolishing its development programmes. If Europe wants to become an attractive partner and catch up with China, however, it will have to make a move in its trade and development policy that has hitherto been almost always rejected. That would be to explicitly support and even protect processing industries in African countries. In other words, the EU should support strategic African protectionism, technology transfer and raw material processing by providing funding and granting non-reciprocal trade preferences. Continued tariff-free access to the European market for all African countries would help Europe to maintain its position as Africa's most important trade partner. Europe would have little to lose, but could gain a stronger partnership with Africa and ultimately open up new markets for German exports.

The outgoing German government spoke often about the need for processing in Africa. That sent an important message. Its successor could now create more concrete incentives and attractive funding options: for example tax breaks in Germany or guarantees for German companies that invest in climate-friendly local raw material processing and observe human rights and due diligence requirements in their supply chains. African trade unions rightly expect that new jobs will be well paid and secure. The German Supply Chain Act and the European Supply Chain Directive are therefore more popular in Africa than the debates in Germany would suggest.

On the other hand, European trade policy is unpopular in Africa, on account of the growing role of inequitable climate measures. African governments, trade unions and businesses complain about this in very similar terms to the EU: this is a new form of climate protectionism, they allege, that interferes with trade and is especially detrimental to African countries.¹⁷ The Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) places a climate tariff on energy-intensive products imported from countries that do not yet apply a CO₂ pricing mechanism: initially cement, iron, steel, aluminium, fertiliser,

electricity and hydrogen. This is intended to level the playing field for businesses in the EU, which are subject to higher climate standards, and to incentivise climate protection in the form of less energy-intensive forms of production. If CBAM is expanded as planned to cover all sectors it is expected to reduce African exports to the EU by seven percent (assuming a European CO₂ price of €87 per tonne). That would reduce Africa's overall GDP by one percent. To put it bluntly, the EU's current climate and trade policies are very concretely endangering the goal of fighting poverty in Africa. The CBAM in its current form thus contradicts the Paris Climate Agreement's principle of common but differentiated responsibilities.

The European Commission has said it will review the CBAM by the end of 2027. This creates an opportunity to identify deficits and discuss reforms. A decision will also have to be made on what to do with the associated revenues of €9 billion. Currently they are expected to flow into the EU's regular budget.

It would be more sensible and strategic to employ the revenues to offer African states more and more targeted funding under the Global Gateway Initiative, especially in the field of climate-friendly technologies. Just two percent of global investment in green technologies currently goes to Africa. African companies will also need technical assistance in implementing the CBAM rules. The EU should also grant exemptions from the CBAM where doing so would be beneficial for economic stability in Africa. This would create an African economic space that is more closely networked with Europe but better protected from international shocks. And that would be in Germany's interest.

¹⁷ This paragraph draws heavily on an internal analysis conducted for FES by Manuela Mattheß and Thomas Claes (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung: "CBAM: Grüner Protektionismus auf Kosten Afrikas", 21 March 2024).

Suggestion 5: Inject more pragmatism into value-based Africa policy

Value-based foreign and development policy has acquired a poor reputation in Germany. Fear of war in Europe, the need to rearm, and the resulting reduction in development budgets have all left their mark. In some quarters in Germany development policy in particular is regarded as insufficiently transactional, not geopolitical enough, too wasteful or insufficiently business-focussed. That is often the complaint from the right. Donald Trump's radicalised version of this criticism recently led to the abolition of USAID. The Trump Administration is de facto sabotaging the Agenda 2030. But the EU has also swung to the right and is currently cutting development funding.

The political left, on the other hand, often objects that the values and interests of German foreign and development policy appear overly paternalistic and favour Germany's own economic interests. Double standards in foreign policy are criticised, for example in connection with Germany's Middle East policy. More fundamentally, critics on the left demand decolonisation of development cooperation and the dismantling of neocolonial structures in international trade and finance. These demands connect progressive voices in Germany with those in many African countries. Development policy aligned solely on geopolitical and/or economic interests is viewed with scepticism. The target of 0.7 percent of GDP for development funding is upheld, but it is expected that these funds will be targeted more directly to support local organisations in the Global South. Compensation and even reparations are also demanded. So – to simplify rather – development cooperation is under pressure from both left and right.

The question of whether value-driven foreign and development policy is (too) paternalistic is often one of style rather than substance. The AU shares values and goals like democracy and gender justice with Europe. All the member countries of the AU have supported resolutions to that effect, even if they (like the Europeans) do not always abide by them. Yet the goals represent a valuable frame of reference: they are cited by activists in Uganda and Zimbabwe – and in Hungary and Poland. Radical right-wing evangelical Christians are also active in Africa. Their authoritarian movements are highly organised and enjoy significant funding from the United States. They threaten the social progress that African feminists and

their allies have fought for decades to achieve. On both continents employers and employees tend to have different attitudes towards German and European supply chain laws. Like their German counterparts, African trade unions support the legislation, while certain businesses on both continents are more critical. When considering Germany's future Africa policy, it would be an oversimplification to posit a schism between African and European values and interests.

Despite valid criticisms, it would be disastrous for many in Europe and Africa if the values propagated for decades by the EU and AU – and their concrete support through development cooperation – were to be completely side-lined. In this time of growing geopolitical transactionalism, they remain a solid normative foundation and represent a decisive soft power of the EU – which the United States is losing and China never had. While continuing to guard this foundation, the new German government should however better define Germany's specific interests and explain why Africa policy often entails difficult compromises. The outgoing government's Africa Policy Guidelines were a good start, but need to be further concretised.

The principle that closer foreign policy and development cooperation with autocracies is only an option if it makes peace in a region more likely or is crucial for climate protection or the provision of other global public goods would be a useful principle for future Africa policy. For example, it would open the door for pragmatic dialogue and concrete incentives as soon as the putschists in the Sahel region (see above) take steps towards a political transition. On the other hand, such a principle would mean suspending European cooperation with Rwanda as long as it is responsible for cross-border destabilisation of the Great Lakes region.¹⁸

At the global level, value-based Africa policy means continuing to work with African partners to democratise multilateralism and reduce one-sided dependencies. Better development opportunities will result above all from global cooperation and reforms. This is where the new German government should concentrate its efforts. The South African G20 Presidency has made concrete proposals for improving African representation in multilateral bodies, which Germany should continue to support. Germany also gains if multilateralism is strengthened. The

¹⁸ While European support for the Rwandan armed forces in Mozambique may have boosted counter-terrorism operations in Cabo Delgado, the Rwandan armed forces are also destabilising eastern Congo, where the extra resources they receive make peace less likely.

outgoing German government achieved an important scaling of funds through the World Bank reform during the past three years. This must be continued. It would also be helpful to reform the outdated Bundesbank legislation in order to allow Germany to rechannel IMF special drawing rights to African countries in debt crises (as France does for example). Fundamentally, the various initiatives to reform the Bretton Woods institutions that were supported by the outgoing German government demonstrate that multilateralism is reformable. Beyond that, Germany should use its candidacy for a seat on the UN Security Council in 2027/2028 to support Africa's demand for two permanent seats on the Security Council.

Germany's Africa policy must also continue to reflect critically on Germany's own history and avoid double standards, even if that will not always be easy. Acknowledgement of the colonial past and its lasting repercussions has become the basis for constructive partnerships in Africa. Europe and Germany will therefore also have to take a stance in the discussion on reparations and compensation, which is the AU's motto for 2025. It will not be enough to delegate this issue to museums and cultural initiatives.¹⁹ Illustrating the cross-cutting nature of the issue in Africa, it was the former Ghanaian President Nana Akufo Addo – a conservative with close ties to the German Christian democrats – who played a central role in putting the issue on the AU's agenda. The new German government must respond accordingly. This issue therefore needs to continue to receive high-level attention in Berlin, and credible processes that include government actors – and especially civil society actors – need to be initiated on both continents. At the same time, it will be vital to dynamise the stumbling reconciliation process concerning the genocide committed by the Germans in Namibia and to launch further initiatives to make amends for German colonial crimes in Tanzania and Cameroon.

Fundamentally a modern Africa policy needs a modernised development policy. That will mean critically examining and adapting its external structures. Too often German development cooperation still assumes that Africa's biggest lack is know-how that can and should be supplied by Germans. German advisers regaling African decision-makers with their supposedly superior technical expertise comes across as rather a throwback to a bygone age. But the lesson here is absolutely not to reduce the resources for development policy. Instead Germany must

prioritise more strategically, in particular towards working together with African partners on reforming trade, climate and fiscal policy. This has the potential to transform one-sided relationships that are so often criticised in Africa, and in the medium term to expand the fiscal scope of the African countries, while in the long term reducing the burden on European budgets.

We also need greater openness about what German development cooperation can and cannot achieve in Africa. The African Development Bank estimates that Africa needs to invest €120 to 170 billion annually to enable its urgently needed structural transformation.²⁰ That is incidentally almost the same amount – after adjusting for inflation – as the United States spent on the Marshall Plan for Europe after the Second World War.²¹ By comparison, the German Development Ministry's entire budget for 2024 was just €11.2 billion, and German total direct investment in Africa in 2021 was a mere €1.6 billion.²² German development cooperation will have to target its limited means on improving the global framework for African countries, so as to enable development in the first place.

That would also include European support for a global tax initiative to restrict illegal financial flows and smuggling out of Africa. Every year US\$88 billion leave Africa by illegal channels, or about four percent of Africa's GDP.²³ African countries are therefore urging for better coordination of international tax policy through a tax convention at the UN. This would strengthen tax policy and the UN's legitimacy. The global tax on billionaires proposed by outgoing German Development Minister Svenja Schulze and the South African G20 Presidency would open up important resources. If the next German government retains the Compact with Africa, the focus should be on mobilising resources and reforms suited to increasing tax revenues and creating good jobs in Africa. That has not been the case to date.²⁴

The strength of German development policy in Africa lies in its long-term approach and dependability, which are predicated on both solidarity and self-interest. German development policy is also very good at developing confidence and shared expertise for resolving global crises. That cannot be achieved by the crisis-driven short-termism of German foreign policy and foreign policy debates, especially where Africa is concerned. The next German government also needs to take that into consideration.

¹⁹ Karoline Eickhoff and Ueli Staeger (2025): "Coming to terms with the past? Reparations as a test for Africa-Europe relations", in: *Megatrends Spotlight 44*, 5 February 2025, <https://www.megatrends-afrika.de/publikation/mta-spotlight-44-coming-to-terms-with-the-past/>.

²⁰ AfDB (2018): *African Economic Outlook. Chapter 3 – Africa's infrastructure: Great potential but little impact on inclusive growth*, https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/2018AEO/African_Economic_Outlook_2018_-_EN_Chapter3.pdf.

²¹ I am grateful to Olumide Abimbola for pointing out the comparison.

²² Teniola T. Tayo (2023): *Harnessing the AfCFTA for increased German investment in Africa*, Africa Policy Research Institute, 19 July 2023, <https://afripoli.org/harnessing-the-afcfta-for-increased-german-investment-in-africa/>.

²³ United Nations (2022): *Tackling illicit financial flows in Africa arising from taxation and illegal commercial practices*, <https://www.un.org/osaa/content/tackling-illicit-financial-flows-africa-arising-taxation-and-illegal-commercial-practices/>.

²⁴ Robert Kappel and Helmut Reisen (2019): *G20 Compact with Africa: The audacity of hope*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, <https://www.fes.de/en/shaping-a-just-world/peace-and-security/article-in-peace-and-security/study-g20-compact-with-africa/>.

Conclusion

The new German government would be well advised to keep Africa at the top of its agenda, even in today's high-pressure environment of competing concerns. That will require better and closer coordination within the EU. In a multipolar world where Western influence will continue to decline, Germany can only develop relevant foreign policy and economic influence within the EU framework. At the same time, the next German government needs to explain better to its own electorate why greater influence in Africa is in the interests of Germany and Europe.

Africa has long since arrived in the multipolar world. African governments see this as an opportunity, allowing them to choose their partners freely and pragmatically. While this leaves no room for exclusive partnerships, Germany can certainly pursue strategic and amicable relations with African countries. The new German government can strengthen important partnerships in Africa through new and innovative alliances with a more selective and thus strategic selection of African partners, in close contact with civil society and upcoming leaders who share the objective of democratising the international order. That will require greater courage in setting foreign policy and development priorities, better interministerial coordination, an awareness of where positive influence is possible (and where it is not), and above all commitment and resources.

About the author

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Africa Policy after the German Federal Elections: Five Suggestions

The next German government will play a leading role on Africa policy within the European Union. Good relations with Africa are increasingly important for Europe's external trade, the future of multilateralism and the global standing of Germany and the EU. The incoming German government will have to develop new strategic initiatives in its Africa policy. This contribution puts five suggestions up for discussion:

- 1) A new troika for the Horn of Africa, comprising China, Türkiye and Germany, to work with the African Union to stabilise the region.
- 2) Significantly closer relations with the newly elected governments of South Africa and Ghana, which are crucial partners for tackling global and regional crises.
- 3) Better protection of African democracies through economic support in debt crises and dialogue with protest movements.
- 4) Closer geoeconomic ties between the EU and the African Free Trade Area AfCFTA.
- 5) Principled pragmatism in a strategic value-based Africa policy, acknowledging Germany's historical responsibilities.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

➔ [fes.de](https://www.fes.de)