CIDOB notes internacionals

ISSN: 2013-4428

228
MARCH
2020

THE MAGHREB AND THE EUROPEAN BID FOR AFRICA*

Eduard Soler i Lecha, Senior Research Fellow, CIDOB

* On January 31st 2020, CIDOB brought together experts and policymakers in Barcelona for a discussion entitled "Europe-Maghreb-Africa: Geopolitical vision and policy outcomes", with the support of the Spanish government' Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation. The author thanks all the participants as well as those European and African political leaders who, via face-to-face or telephone interviews, have contributed to informing this document and some of the proposals set out in it.

This is a July 2020 update of an earlier discussion paper published in March.

Africa must be a strategic priority for the European Union. But, what role can the Maghreb play in African EU policy? What room is there for better integrating policy towards the Maghreb - and by extension towards the rest of the Mediterranean partners - within the framework of African policy?

The year 2020 was meant to do for African politics what 1995 did for Mediterranean politics. In other words, conceptual renewal was meant to be completed and, despite the difficulties, opportunities to promote a more ambitious dialogue and cooperation agenda were meant to be maximised.

This bid for Africa requires a new geopolitical imagination that approaches the Euro-African space as a territorial continuum from the Arctic Circle to the Cape of Good Hope. Seen this way, the Mediterranean is a kind of inland lake and multiple regional realities can be promoted instead of the juxtaposition of two blocs.

There are few issues on which all European leaders and institutions agree. That Africa must be a strategic priority is one. The senior EU officials who took office in December 2019 stated as much, as did the member states at the Foreign Affairs Council in the same month. If any doubt remained, Ursula von der Leyen sent a clear message when, rather than choosing Washington, Moscow or Ankara for her first official trip outside the European Union, the new president flew to Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital and headquarters of the African Union (AU). In February 2020 a further step was taken, when up to 20 commissioners travelled to Addis Ababa again for a meeting with their African Union counterparts. On March 9th, the commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy announced the proposed Strategy *with* Africa, rather than *for* Africa. But the consensus that Africa is a priority may be concealing two very different narratives about the continent: Africa as a space of opportunities and Africa as a locus of instability and threats.

Covid-19 has burst onto the European agenda. But while schedules and priorities may be altered, the interest in Africa is likely to be a feature of European foreign action for years to come. That is why we must ask how it may affect the other priorities. This paper wonders what effects – and possible synergies – the new agenda will produce in Mediterranean and neighbourhood

policy, with particular reference to the Maghreb countries. When proposing this commitment to Africa, a recurring argument in the EU's political discourse is that it is Europe's closest neighbour. But if geography is indeed one of the main drivers of this approach, then the nearest African countries might be expected to receive the most attention, among them, the Maghreb countries with which the Union European has maintained a close relationship. So far this is not the case. Not only does the strategy published in March avoid referring to the special position of this "near Africa", the strategy seems primarily to focus on Sub-Saharan African countries.

There are three ways to address the Maghreb's role in the EU's Africa policies. The first is **substitution**, in other words, replacing the old policies towards the neighbourhood (including the Maghreb) with a brand-new Africa policy, on the understanding that one priority has lost importance while the other's is rising. The second, which we might call **segmentation**, sees both as priorities but believes that they should be kept separate, arguing that they are too different to be addressed within a single framework or using the same instruments. The third option is **convergence**, which implies addressing them as part of the same commitment and seeking synergies between the two priorities; in this case a more robust Africa policy cannot be credible without the Maghreb, and one way for the EU to become relevant among its nearest neighbours is by making Africa a shared priority. Formulated like this, it may seem like an attractive idea, but the challenge it poses is neither simple nor straightforward. To explore this path – as this paper advocates – the potential obstacles and risks involved must be properly identified. To ensure we create the best conditions for continuing down this path, we must first understand how we got to this point; what has changed to give Africa as a whole so much weight on the agenda; what the pros and cons are of giving the Maghreb a pre-eminent position; what specific discourse and actions may be considered from now on, and in which of them Spain can play a constructive role.

At a discursive level, this paper proposes a new geopolitical imagination that conceives of the Mediterranean and by extension southern Europe and the Maghreb as connectors of this Euro-African space. In terms of specific action, it raises the possibility of providing this geopolitical imaginary with a physical reality through connected infrastructure, improved political dialogue with the Maghreb countries to better understand their priorities on the African agenda, institutional solutions that allow synergies between this cooperation space and the Union for the Mediterranean, a working agenda adapted to the post-Covid-19 reality, and changing the mindset of working in silos by taking advantage, for example, of the shared commitment to the Sustainable Development Agenda.

How did we get here?

EU relations with Africa are shaped not only by geographical proximity but also by the colonial heritage that, as well as drawing Africa's political map, has conditioned EU policies for over half a century. That some countries – France being the clearest example – have seen parts of Africa or even the whole continent as a *domaine réservé*, has hobbled the articulation of a more ambitious common European policy. Now though, Brussels has more room to manoeuvre. Africa policy is a less divisive issue than relations with major global powers (China, Russia and the United States) and other priorities in the EU's neighbourhood, such as the Arab–Israeli conflict and managing interdependencies with Turkey. At European and member state level this approach has been heavily influenced by the desire to keep Africa within the European sphere of influence, particularly through development policies that often perpetuate an asymmetric donor–recipient relationship.

That some countries – France being the clearest example – have seen parts of Africa or even the whole continent as a domaine réservé, has hobbled the articulation of a more ambitious common European policy.

Europeans have combined different approaches. At times, relationships have been channelled through policies towards the whole continent, either through summits or by building a special relationship with the African Union, to which the EU is a key contributor. The second approach is what is known as the ACP (Africa–Caribbean–Pacific) framework, which regulates trade relations but also channels a significant chunk of support funding. However, this framework does not deal exclusively with Africa and does not include the African countries with Mediterranean coastlines (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt). EU relations with those five countries fall under the umbrella of Euro-Mediterranean relations and the European Neighbourhood Policy and despite the desire to promote regional cooperation, levels of south-south integration – in terms of trade, for example – remain among the world's lowest. The third approach is based on building spaces for cooperation with subregional initiatives. This is the case for the Sahel, where the EU supports structures such as the G5 (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger), and for West Africa, where the Economic Community of West Afri-

can States (ECOWAS) is the EU's preferred partner. On top of all this are the strictly bilateral relations with individual states, with special attention given to regional powers such as Nigeria, South Africa and Ethiopia.

What these approaches share is the production of an asymmetrical agenda in which what is discussed, fundamentally, are the challenges Africa faces as a continent and their impacts on the EU, and almost never the reverse. These forums and mechanisms for political dialogue and cooperation are rarely used to address key issues on the global agenda. This could be changed. In fact, the new Strategy with Africa presented by the European Commission in March refers on several occasions to the need for cooperation on multilateral and global issues to be at the centre of this new relationship. However, expectations must be properly gauged. Wherever there is consensus, this dialogue would make it possible to set joint priorities and articulate concrete strategies and proposals that could be raised in global forums. On other issues, however, the interests and priorities do not always align and different visions may exist within one of the blocs. In these cases, this dialogue can serve to bring positions closer or even to avoid creating false expectations.

What has changed?

Every initiative in the international arena will be reviewed in light of the **global effects of the coronavirus crisis**. Not only must a health crisis be managed, so too must its effects on economies, mobility and international cooperation. Euro-African, Euro-Mediterranean and Euro-Maghrebi relations are no exception. Some African countries may be of a mind that, despite the precariousness of their healthcare systems, they have a good chance of better surviving the pandemic due to their younger populations, warm climates potentially reducing the risk of contagion, and because they introduced containment measures when case numbers were lower than in southern Europe. But the economic consequences will be impossible to avoid: vulnerable groups will be hit particularly hard (internally displaced persons, groups dependent on international aid and above all workers in the informal economy); and the damage to the tourism sector and oil prices may leave many African economies – including those in the Maghreb – in positions of enormous fragility. On the one hand, this bleak diagnosis may push the EU to develop aid programmes for specific countries or sectors. On the other, it may create conditions that lead the EU and organisations like the AU, as well as the member states of both regional blocs, to jointly promote multilateral responses to the health crisis (e.g. in terms of vaccines) and its economic by-products.

Before Covid-19 broke out, 2020 looked to have all the ingredients of a re-foundational moment in relations between the EU and African countries. The coincidence of six factors seemed likely to create a favourable **institutional dynamic**: (1) a new European leadership that made Africa a priority in its inauguration in late 2019; (2) the scheduling of the Euro-African Summit at the end of the year, which both blocs had set as a key date for making a qualitative leap in bi-continental relations; (3) the expiry in 2020 of the Cotonou Agreement, the framework for relations with the ACP countries; (4) the launch of the African Continental Free Trade Area, initially scheduled for July 2020; (5) the final stretch of the negotiations over the new multi-annual European Union budget (2021–2027), among the novelties of which is the implementation of a single financial instrument (the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - NDICI); and (6) the commemoration in November of the 25th anniversary of the first Euro-Mediterranean conference, which should prompt reflection on how to update and strengthen relations with the countries in this area, including those in Mediterranean Africa. The post-Covid-19 situation will force some of these to be postponed and priorities to be reviewed, but we are nevertheless at a time of convergence between the political will to give more prominence to Africa and the institutional calendars that provide the spaces to do so.

The post-Covid-19 situation will force some priorities to be reviewed or postponed, but we are nevertheless at a time of convergence between the political will to give more prominence to Africa and the institutional calendars that provide the spaces to do so.

At least as important as the coincidence of these institutional factors are several underlying trends shaping how Europe approaches relations with Africa. The most important is **Africa's growing attractiveness** based on objective data and future forecasts. In 2020, Africa represents 17% of the world's population but just 3% of its GDP. However, its relative economic weight is expected to increase. Population growth will contribute, but so will other factors such as advances in trade integration, which some estimates claim will raise intra-African trade flows by 50%; the reduction of extreme poverty levels that would lead to higher levels of consumption; accelerated urbanisation processes associated with rapid increases in productivity; and, finally, the growth forecasts for some African countries, which rank among the world's highest. Before Covid-19 forced a downward revision of all estimates, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Senegal, Ghana, Tanzania and the Ivory Coast were all expected to grow by more than 6% in 2020. As always, there are counterpoints.

Some African economies show anaemic growth (Angola has been in recession since 2016 and South Africa grew by just 0.2% in 2019, while Nigeria has grown by less than 3% since 2015). Another important aspect is higher inequality, with Sub-Saharan Africa second on a global scale behind the Middle East and North Africa, according to the *World Inequality Report*.

On the other hand, the strong economic figures often overshadow Africa's **progress in the political arena.** Major advances have been made on regional integration, with the African Union and its dependent bodies a case of gradually advancing regionalism at a time when this type of process is either stagnant or in decline in Latin America, South Asia and the Arab world. Various countries' political transition processes are also politically significant, with that underway in Sudan particularly relevant for directly challenging both Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab countries of Mediterranean Africa. Along the same lines, the emergence of new leaders with projection beyond their own country should also be mentioned. The most obvious example (although there are others) is Abiy Ahmed, prime minister of Ethiopia and Nobel laureate for his contribution to the peace agreement with Eritrea and his drive for national reconciliation processes, as well as his involvement in the negotiations that allowed the transition to begin in Sudan.

In Europe, the narrative about Africa as a continent of opportunity and competition with other global powers coexists with a contrasting narrative about Africa as a space of vulnerabilities and a possible source of threats to European security.

Africa's economic and political effervescence has also translated into increased attention from various international actors in what can be seen as a **geopolitical competition for Africa.** The European Union is far from alone in strengthening its cooperation programmes and political dialogue frameworks with the continent, with China the clearest other case. As well as strong interests in the supply of raw materials, China is aware of the African market's growth prospects. But it is not alone. Russia, India, Turkey and the Gulf states have also reinforced their Africa policies. The exception is the United States, which has shown no particular interest in Africa during the Trump administration – although a reversal of this trend should not be ruled out. A kind of "gold rush" is underway, with global and regional powers looking to strengthen their presence in Africa before rivals can unseat them. Far from strangers to this dynamic, African countries often even prefer it, believing that in a competitive climate they can extract better trade-offs from potential partners. The growing international interest in Africa has rung alarm bells in Europe. Largely because it is feared that countries considered hostile (Russia) or possible systemic rivals (China) will compete for traditional spheres of influence. Moreover, the growing tension between France and Turkey in the Mediterranean risks being replicated in Africa. Although the effects remain to be seen, Brexit (or the UK's departure from the EU) also decreases the EU's relative weight and adds another potential competitor. The EU's approach to this competition wavers between the conviction that it starts from a position of relative strength to the fear of losing such a position. European Union data presented when unveiling the Strategy with Africa in March 2020 say that the 27 account for 32% of Africa's trade with the world (compared to 17% from China and 6% from the United States); foreign direct investment is five times greater than that from Beijing and Washington; and EU official development assistance is almost half of the world's total. Jean-Claude Juncker, former president of the European Commission, was one of the leaders who most transparently proposed the European commitment to Africa as a counterweight to growing Chinese influence. The French president, Emmanuel Macron, on a visit to East Africa in March 2019, similarly came to describe Chinese policy on the continent as "predatory".

In Europe, the narrative about Africa as a continent of opportunity and competition with other global powers coexists with a contrasting narrative about **Africa as a space of vulnerabilities and a possible source of threats to European security**. While the big Asian economies read the demographic growth data in Africa as an indicator of future economic growth, many European capitals interpret them in terms of possible migration flows. The security agenda, today focused on cooperation in the anti-terrorist fight and migration control, conditions the European partners' approach to Africa. Europe believes it is more exposed to destabilisation processes in Africa than the other actors with interests in the continent. Furthermore, they consider that insecurity in Africa and the humanitarian crises it produces may alter internal political dynamics in Europe through the rise of xenophobic and Eurosceptic movements, and challenge the European project's progress on issues such as the free movement of people. Taken to the extreme, it could be said that Africa policy is subordinated to migration policy which, in European terms, is in turn subordinated to 27 national policies.

The securitised and securitising narrative becomes more evident in nearest Africa. Unlike relations with the rest of the continent, a clear imbalance exists in the approach to the Maghreb and Egypt, where the scales tip towards the catalogue of risks rather than the opportunities. In fact, while Sub-Saharan Africa tends to prompt interest and enthusiasm sometimes described as Af-

ro-optimism, the Mediterranean and the Maghreb seem increasingly to provoke the opposite. The optimism that resulted from the Barcelona Process in 1995 and the ambitious objectives of turning the area into one of peace, shared prosperity and exchange have given way to scepticism and even fatigue when they run up against the various blockages to the attempts to reinforce or revitalise these relationships. Frustration with the outcome of the Arab Springs did not help either – politically or institutionally. In 2011 the EU approved a review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) based on the desire to support the processes of democratic change, but soon afterwards, in 2015, it replaced the ENP with another focused on the need for stabilisation. This review process also gave greater importance to the concept of "the neighbours of the neighbours" – a category that included the rest of the African continent and sensitive areas such as the Sahel and the Horn of Africa in particular. This idea, which ultimately implies that a clear line cannot be drawn between "near Africa" and the rest of the continent, was also reflected in the European Union Global Strategy adopted in 2016. That document sets the goal of contributing to the achievement of cooperative regional orders and addresses Sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb countries and the Middle East under the same heading, and specifically mentions the growing interconnections between North Africa and the rest of the continent.

At the same time, **the countries of the Maghreb have been paying increasing attention to Sub-Saharan Africa.** In the case of the two leading countries, Morocco and Algeria, it has been competitive. Their Africa policies end up being an extension of the existing rivalry between the two regimes, which contrasts with the strong cultural and human ties between the two societies. While Algeria has focused on the countries in its immediate surroundings (the Sahel) and on issues on which it feels strong (security, intelligence and, to a lesser extent, higher education), Morocco has launched a policy of broader horizons towards West and Central Africa: extensive commercial and diplomatic deployment, visa relaxation, a strategic commitment by the national airline (RAM) and even the promotion of Morocco as a religious point of reference that contrasts from the Gulf state models. Africa is one of the spaces where this rivalry most clearly materialises. Separately, they court potential allies and promote alternative cooperation projects in sectors as diverse as energy and the fight against terrorism; regional integration organisations become spaces in which to overshadow the other. In this sense, Morocco rejoining the African Union in 2017 (from which it had withdrawn in 1984 in opposition to the organisation's support for the Polisario Front) was a turning point.

Finally, the Euro-African agenda – and the role the Maghreb may play in it – will also be influenced by the evolution of **the European Union's own priorities and institutional commitments**. The EU is engaged in two transitions towards a green digital economy – energy and technology. This led, between the end of 2019 and the first months of 2020, to the announcement of the European Green Deal, the commitment to the goal of climate neutrality, and various measures within the framework of the European Digital Agenda. It is to be hoped that these major priorities will also permeate the cooperation frameworks with other international actors such as African and Mediterranean countries. At the same time, we must be aware that African interlocutors may perceive the green agenda as an attempt to introduce a new form of environmental protectionism, and the digital agenda as a platform for waging a geopolitical competition with China in which they prefer not to take sides. On the other hand, commitments made in multilateral forums, such as the Paris Agreement on the fight against climate change and the 2030 Agenda with its Sustainable Development Goals, may be starting points for working together.

> Diplomatic efforts may temporarily be shifted to Sub-Saharan Africa, but proximity and the fact that the EU relations with the Maghrebi countries are particularly close on trade, migration and energy suggests that sooner or later the EU's interest in its closest neighbours will return.

Pros and cons of including the Maghreb in Africa policy

As stated in the introduction, there are several ways to approach the role of the Maghreb in the commitment to Africa: substitution – Africa replaces and at best absorbs the Mediterranean and by extension the Maghreb as a priority; segmentation – addressing them as two equally important subjects that require separate frameworks; and confluence – looking for synergies between the two, considering that the EU cannot be relevant in the rest of Africa if it is not relevant in the Maghreb.

The second route (segmentation) describes the current situation; the other two would involve strategic reorientation on the part of both the European Union and its member states. Substitution would involve a radical shift in the European Union's external action, which has paid particular attention to the Mediterranean since the then European Economic Community launched its embryonic European Political Cooperation. In this sense, the change might be considered to contravene the Treaty on European Union, Article 8 of which specifies that "The Union shall develop a special relationship with

neighbouring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation". Diplomatic efforts may temporarily be shifted to Sub-Saharan Africa, but proximity and the fact that the EU relations with the Maghrebi countries are particularly close on trade, migration and energy suggests that sooner or later the EU's interest in its closest neighbours will return.

It must therefore be asked whether there is scope to better integrate policy towards the Maghreb – and by extension the other Mediterranean partners – within the framework of Africa policy, and look for synergies between the two so that they not only combine but multiply. To do this, the pros and cons of exploring this holistic approach should first be identified.

African countries and, in this case, the African Union must feel that they are co-creators of the new framework.

Five potential **pros** stand out:

- Uniting the Maghreb and the Mediterranean within a broader comprehensive strategy could help overcome the sense of fatigue associated with political and diplomatic relations with Mediterranean neighbours. It would also help generate greater interest among all European partners, as all can agree to prioritise the pan-African agenda but may not feel so strongly about relations with the Maghreb countries.
- At a time when the top decision-makers are absorbed by many other issues – even more so since Covid-19 – bringing African and Maghrebi policies under one umbrella may make it easier to devote time at the highest decision-making level.
- This comprehensive vision would lead towards the implementation of the single financial instrument at European level (NDICI) and could therefore contribute to the better use of available funds and synergies with the European External Investment Plan (EIP)
- This approach would take advantage of the positions of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Mauritania as interlocutors with the other African countries and make them essential actors in the bi-continental dialogue. This role could be played not only by governments, but also their economic, social, cultural and even religious actors. And, if successful, it could provide a broader (Euro-African) framework from which to foster dialogue and cooperation between governments and social actors in the Maghreb.
- Finally, it would allow an integrated perspective to be taken on issues such as the nexus of insecurity between the Maghreb and the Sahel, shared environmental emergencies, the articulation of bicontinental transport and energy infrastructure projects, and migration flow management.

To this we should add an equal number of possible **cons**:

- The creation of expectations that are impossible to meet. This is a recurring problem with European external action that the literature calls the "capability–expectations gap". In this case, it could mean a willingness to make a qualitative leap in relations with Africa without knowing what the necessary resources are for the commitment and without having foreseen a health and economic emergency that may completely alter the initial plans.
- The inability to articulate a model that is more attractive than that offered by other international actors. To avoid this, the specific nature of the European offer must be emphasised: a greater focus on the comprehensive development of societies as a whole, the durability and sustainability of the commitment and the need to address shared challenges. It should not be approached as an alternative framework that partners are made to choose – this could lead to an even more aggressive reaction on the part of those who feel under attack.
- The risk of losing the specific or preferential nature of close relations with the Maghreb, whose countries are much more integrated with the EU than the continent's other countries. To avoid this, mechanisms will have to be found that recognise this uniqueness.
- The possibility that intra-Maghreb rivalries will have a negative impact on the development of Euro-African dialogue and end up permeating cooperation discussions and frameworks, which then become forums for projecting and perpetuating this rivalry.
- The risk of overshadowing the Mediterranean dimension at the very time the Barcelona Process turns 25, and thereby making Eastern Mediterranean countries feel excluded or replaced.

Which actors should form the coalition and what role should Spain play?

The year 2020 was meant to do for African politics what 1995 did for Mediterranean politics. In other words, conceptual renewal was meant to be completed and, despite the difficulties, opportunities to promote a more ambitious dialogue and cooperation agenda were meant to be maximised. Precisely because the memory of 1995 is so present, in 2020 it seems appropriate to draw some conclusions that could inspire both the development and design and execution of this African commitment, as well as the claim that the Maghreb should have a special role.

Twenty-five years ago, an alliance was formed between a number of European countries with a shared belief in the need for greater ambition in Mediterranean policy. France, Italy and Spain from the south were later joined by Germany, whose support proved decisive in providing this framework with budgetary muscle. European institutions – the European Commission and the General Secretariat of the Council – also took leadership roles, as did several figures within them who took it upon themselves to row in the same direction. Because it was constructed as a partnership, the Barcelona Process imposed no agenda or objectives on Mediterranean participants – these were reached through discussion. Civil society and cities were mobilised on both shores of the Mediterranean, helping to give it more legitimacy and heft.

Following this example, while Europe's Africa commitment will need to be driven by the countries with the greatest interests and influence on the continent, it must not be left solely to them – the collaboration of the other European states is essential. African countries and, in this case, the African Union must feel that they are co-creators of the new framework. If possible, the positions should be even more symmetrical than those of the Mediterraneans in 1995. It will also be essential for states and institutions to push in the same direction. Leadership at the highest level will be important in this, but so too will advisers and technical bodies. Inspired by the experience of 25 years ago, the involvement of civil society and non-state actors should also be considered – in this case, cities could bring great added value – not only to contribute ideas at an intergovernmental level, but to develop and promote decentralised frameworks for Euro-African cooperation. Taking the idea of giving the Maghreb a leading role in this shared commitment and making it a reality will require a process of dialogue and agreement with Maghrebi capitals on this bi-continental approach. These capitals and their governments must encourage social and economic actors, as well as other cities, to engage and even lead initiatives.

Spain can play a constructive role in this coalition of actors, and gain greater influence in both Africa and the EU. Spain's connection with Africa is clear, especially if we consider that the Canary Islands is geographically African and the Strait of Gibraltar a natural bridge connecting the EU with continental Africa. And Spain is no newcomer to African politics. Of the countries with an extensive diplomatic presence across the continent, Spain has less colonial stigma associated with it than other actors. In terms of political strategy, Spain is engaged in implementing its third Africa Plan, whose goals are a good fit with both the European approach and the priorities of its African partners. This plan presents the continent as a great opportunity for Spain and Europe, focussing on four areas: peace and security, sustainable development, strengthening institutions and orderly, regular and safe mobility. With regard to nearest Africa – the Maghreb – Spain's policy has been channelled through the strengthening of bilateral relations, especially with Morocco and Algeria, through what is known as the "buffer of interests" aimed at cushioning potential tensions and promoting a more ambitious Mediterranean policy. Its growing interest and involvement in the Sahel – not only in terms of security, but also in promoting development and cooperation policies in the field of migration – means Spain is well aware of the links between its Maghrebi neighbours and the rest of the African continent.

Taking the idea of giving the Maghreb a leading role in this shared commitment and making it a reality will require a process of dialogue and agreement with Maghrebi capitals on this bi-continental approach.

And to do what? A new geopolitical imagination and an innovative institutional framework

Throughout 2020 – and especially as the EU–Africa Summit approaches – ideas will emerge for initiatives targeting Europe's commitment to Africa and, in parallel, Africa's commitment to Europe. The final part of this document will make a number of proposals for increasing the Maghreb's presence in strategic discussions, while avoiding the risks discussed above. These are proposals that, in line with what I have described, could mobilise an extensive constellation of actors in which Spain can and must play an important role.

The first concerns conceptual innovation. The commitment to Africa requires a **new geopolitical imagination** that approaches the Euro-African space as a territorial continuum from the Arctic Circle to the Cape of Good Hope. Seen this way, the Mediterranean is a kind of inland lake and multiple regional realities can be promoted instead of the juxtaposition of two blocs. In this Euro-African continuum, the countries of southern Europe and the Maghreb, as well as the trans-Saharan routes and the Nile Valley are the connecting points – a nervous system that coordinates this diverse but interdependent Euro-African reality.

This vision must emerge from the discursive plane and be given practical realisation. Five different paths could be taken. The first is **extending European transport and energy networks to Africa, including the whole of the Mediterranean** in order to give them a Euro-African dimension and prioritise those that unite the two

continents. This would be a kind of Silk Road, European-style, that would also complement the Chinese projects connecting the Mediterranean and East Africa with Asian economies.

The second is to engage in **political dialogue with the Maghrebi governments to better understand their priorities on Africa** and Euro-African relations, and to explore the mechanisms for promoting them jointly. At first, this could be based on bilateral contacts but it would ideally prepare the ground for a territorial discussion. To do this, instead of creating new frameworks, existing structures such as the 5+5 Dialogue could be explored, and the European institutions would have to be closely involved.

The third path involves finding **institutional solutions** that avoid duplication and allow synergies to be sought. As many of the countries that must be involved in the forums to promote Euro-Mediterranean relations will also be present at the EU–Africa Summit, it would be efficient to explore interactions between the two institutional frameworks. If possible, mechanisms might be found to enable the Union for the Mediterranean, through its Secretary-General and co-chairs, to take part in the preparatory work for the EU–Africa Summit. This should be accompanied by a partnership between the African Union and the Union for the Mediterranean, articulating mechanisms so that some of the projects currently being developed with a Mediterranean outlook could be opened up to the participation of African countries and regional organisations.

The fourth path is to **ensure relevance and to put managing the effects of the Covid-19 on the** agenda. In the short term this involves sharing information, good practices and even healthcare resources. In this area, it is particularly important to note that, thus far, Africa has set a very good example in terms of coordination and prevention, meaning traditional North–South divisions ought to be rethought. In the medium term – which in this case means within a matter of months – there is a need to come up with financial relief mechanisms, support programmes for vulnerable groups, and coordination on vaccines and accessible treatments. The opportunity must be taken to ensure that the scope of this cooperation is not limited to Covid-19 but includes other diseases. Finally, in the somewhat longer term, a deep Euro-African discussion will be needed on the role of bi-continental cooperation in reconstruction plans – for example on reindustrialisation – and in the joint promotion of resilience strategies to handle new crises and emergencies. In each and every one of these areas, the countries of the Maghreb can play a constructive role that would positively affect their capacity for influence in both Europe and the rest of Africa.

Finally, the synergies in Euro-African, Euro-Mediterranean and Euro-Maghrebi relations make even more sense in the light of the **shared commitment to the sustainable development agenda**, which inspires and structures many of the interregional cooperation efforts and which may need to be revisited following the ravages of Covid-19 and the lessons learned from this crisis. The tendency to work in silos and bureaucratic inertia will not disappear overnight. Connections and bridges must be created so that at least those working on the Maghreb and those who engage with the rest of the African continent do not do so behind each other's backs.