

The Illusion of Unitary Players: EU, China and Africa

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In media reporting and in academic papers the European Union and China are often treated as unitary actors that are trying to build closer “bilateral” relationships with an area called “Sub-Saharan Africa”. The EU is usually portrayed as a single entity, a coherent and purposive actor that defines the scope and the depth of the agenda, sets targets and negotiates with the “non-Mediterranean” part of the continent. And China is being portrayed as a coherent actor that implements efficiently a very clear strategy of “geopolitical expansion” or, more moderately, of an action plan for “peaceful rise”. However, a very large part of Europe’s relations with Africa is a state-to-state affair (where a very large number of non-state actors is involved) while Chinese “policy” towards Africa is far less monolithic than outside observers assume (Chinese companies have their own interests). However the misperception of unitary actors heavily influences the discussion about the international relations of the continent, leading to a narrative of a “new scramble” for Africa and constantly reproducing the almost 150-old image of the “magnificent African cake” (King Leopold II). The paper examines the causes and the consequences of these misperceptions that frame the debate on the continent and lead to patronizing generalizations, resounding clichés, imprecision and untruths.