Asteris Huliaras (*)

The Illusion of Unitary Players: EU, China and Africa

In the media and policy-circles but also in academic debates, the European Union and China are often viewed as unitary actors that have clear-cut strategies and follow coherent policies towards Africa. The EU is often portrayed as a unitary and purposive actor that defines the scope and depth of its relations with Africa and China is described as a conscientious player that efficiently implements a strategy of 'geopolitical expansion' or, more moderately, of an action plan for 'peaceful rise'. These perceptions produce and sustain a new 'scramble for Africa' narrative: Africa is represented as a geopolitical arena where foreign powers compete for influence. This paper disputes these perceptions. Europe's relations with Africa are not primarily a Brussels affair and Chinese policy towards Africa is far less monolithic than outside observers assume. However, these different (the first unifies a regional organization and the second a state) misperceptions paradoxically converge to create and strengthen the same flawed story.

EU and Africa

EU-African relations are framed by the Cotonou Agreement, which covers a 20-year period from 2003 (Babarinde & Faber 2005). For the first time, the term 'partnership' features strongly in the agreement: it appears 52 times within the text and a further 9 times in the annexes. Also the scope of the partnership increases, moving beyond trade and aid to include an important political dimension: for the first time in the history of the relationship, co-operation between the parties is made conditional on the ACP (Africa, Caribbean and Pacific) group of countries meeting certain political standards (respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law).

The Cotonou Agreement is not the only indication of change to a multidimensional and more systematic relationship between the EU and Africa. In 2000 the first ever EU–Africa Summit was held in Cairo with the participation of all 53 African countries and the then 15 EU member states. In December 2005, the EU adopted a new strategy with the title 'The EU and Africa: Towards a Strategic Partnership'. The purpose of the document was to create a comprehensive, integrated and long-term framework for EU–African policy, a 'grand strategy' for Europe's relations with the continent. The overarching goal was to support Africa's efforts to reach the UN Millennium Development Goals by 2015 and to make Europe's partnership with Africa more efficient. The strategy was built around four pillars: good governance, peace and security, trade and health, and education and a safe environment. Although the document was more a holistic political statement than a clear guidance for day-to-day relations, it marked the beginning of a number of

important EU initiatives like the adoption of a Joint EU-Africa Strategy' in the second EU–Africa Summit that took place in Lisbon in December 2007. The Strategy claimed that Africa and Europe should 'move away from a traditional relationship and forge a real partnership characterised by equality and the pursuit of common objectives'.

In the relevant documents (Agreements, Summit Declarations, official communiqués, the Joint Strategy and the Action Plan) the European Union and Africa are treated as unitary actors that have agreed to foster a closer relationship. Despite a lot of references to the business community, NGOs and other civil society actors, EU member-states and African countries are very rarely mentioned. The EU is portrayed as a single entity, a unitary player, a coherent and purposive actor (Jørgensen, 2004b: 12) that defines the scope and the depth of the agenda, sets targets and negotiates with 'Africa'. The message is clear: the two 'regions' frame the relationship and their member-states follow the guidelines. Press and academic reports quite often follow the same line: Europe and Africa are treated as unitary players.

However, what is being described as 'interregional' is a deeply fragmented, unequal and complex network of bilateral relationships. And what looks as a growing partnership is in several respects an illusion. Indeed a hybrid kind of an interregional relationship does exist. However, in official, media and academic circles is grossly overstated, portrayed as 'strong' while in several respects being 'weak', understood as 'new' while being quite old, described as proceeding from an 'old' to a 'new partnership' while in several ways what has been previously been built is being deconstructed and replaced by a network of fragmented deals. In truth there are vast differences between rhetoric and reality, between words and deeds, between expectations and capabilities.

Of course all these should not come as a surprise to long-term observers of EU's external behaviour. The Union's external activity – in all domains – was and still is highly discursive. In almost all foreign policy statements the Union 'is being constructed as a unit which defends its own interests and has an obligation to take on responsibilities in the light of international challenges' (Larsen, 2004: 67). EU-African relations are no exception. However this paper argues that this construction of actorness is more present and widespread in the representations of the EU-African relationship than in other cases.

This reflects some of the specific characteristics of the relationship: first, its vastly asymmetrical nature that allows the EU to play a powerful role in defining the scope and content of relations, secondly, the role of African leaders that search for an 'equal status' with their European counterparts and, thirdly, the definition of EU foreign policy towards Africa by a very limited number of EU member-states. The next paragraphs are devoted in proving the illusion of actorness by focusing on the three main items of the Euro-African agenda: aid, trade and foreign policy.

Aid, Foreign and Security Policy and Trade

First, aid. In 2004, the European Commission and the EU's member states provided $14,062 million, or about 55%, of all aid to Sub-Saharan Africa. This is an impressive percentage of all donor efforts and is often quoted in the EU website and is widely reproduced in the Union's official

documents. However, a closer look shows that the EC (through mainly the European Development Fund) provided only a fifth of this amount, or only 11% of all donors' assistance (EC/OECD 2006, 21). The World Bank (through IDA, its soft loan instrument) provided about 15%, the United States 14% and France (an EU member state), through its bilateral programme, 12% (EC/OECD 2006, 21). By 2006, the EC was the fourth donor to Sub-Saharan Africa – behind the US, the United Kingdom and France (EC/OECD 2008). In short, the bilateral assistance policies of the Union's member states towards Africa continue to be far more important than the policies of the Brussels institutions. Moreover and despite official declarations, the EU continues not to function as a platform for coordination among the Member States. The Commission 'simply acts as "the 28th" Member State, conducting its own aid policies, rather than serving as the hub for donor coordination within the EU as a whole' (Hettne, B., F. Söderbaum and P. Stålgren: 45). The EU's Africa aid policy is far less 'Europeanised' than many people realise.

Secondly, Common Foreign and Security Policy. This is a complex arena with a lot of closed-door discussions. So let's focus on the most high-profile initiatives: peacekeeping. The EU as a bloc has until recently been unable or unwilling to get involved in African conflict situations. It was only in June 2003 that the EU Council of Ministers decided to send EU military forces in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (Faria 2004, 20–30; Olsen 2004; Olsen 2008, 163). This was the first time that the EU was sending troops outside Europe. Operation Artemis, as it was called, had as its main objective the stabilisation of the security conditions in the conflict-ridden Ituri province. France acted as the 'framework nation' for the operation, providing most of the 1,850 troops and the mission's commander. The operation was considered reasonably successful. In December 2004, the European Council decided to deploy a European police mission in the DRC. This was the first EU civilian crisis management operation on the continent. Two years later, during the DRC election campaign and with a Security Council mandate, the EU deployed 1,100 soldiers in and around Kinshasa. Although this time Germany was in command, one third of the troops were provided by France (Chivvis 2007, 33). This operation was also successful (Chivvis 2007, 33). The third European Union mission to Africa and the EU's most ambitious military operation to date took place in Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR) in February 2008. The idea to send troops surfaced in June 2007 after a failed attempt by the French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner to establish a 'humanitarian corridor' through Chad to Darfur (IISS 2008a, 251). Authorised by a UN Security Council Resolution, the EU force deployed 3,700 soldiers (France contributed 2,000) (IISS 2008). The mission was designed to complement the UN–AU force in Darfur and aimed to protect the almost 500,000 refugees in eastern Chad, facilitate aid delivery and provide security for UN staff (IISS 2008). In March 2009, following a well-established pattern, the European peacekeepers handed over their operations to a United Nations force (BBC 2009). The three European military missions in Africa were considered as particularly important because they provided excellent examples of successful EU–UN cooperation, they showed the significance of the new European Security and Defence Policy and they proved that the Union is able to plan its own military operations without resorting to NATO support (as was the case of all ESDP deployments in the Balkans) (Bagoyoko & Gibert 2009, 796). However, all EU military interventions in Africa were not a result

of a systematic EU conflict-resolution policy but were initiated by France in order to promote national objectives. In a sense, Paris simply 'used' the EU to intervene in Francophone Africa by avoiding the charge of neo-colonialism. Moreover – especially Operation Artemis - was promoted by Paris in order to show the European 'strength and unity in the wake of the divisive clash over the Iraq war' (Chivvis 2007, 28). France wanted to demonstrate EU capabilities without NATO in order to show to Washington that the EU was an independent actor capable of solving problems by deploying its own military force (Gegout 2009, 407–408). In short the EU involvement in African security issues it is a direct consequence of France's decision to 'Europeanise' its own Africa policy for mostly tactical reasons.

Finally, trade. The EU is undoubtedly a single actor when it comes to trade policies. After all, its 27 member-states negotiate as a single bloc within the World Trade Organization (WTO). For decades African countries enjoyed a number of non-reciprocal advantages when trading with the European Union. However by the mid-1990s it became clear that the trade arrangements between the EU and Africa clearly contravened WTO rules. In early 1998 the EU member states adopted a proposal to replace the existing non-reciprocal trade preferences with regional Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) and gave the Commission a mandate to negotiate. Much emphasis was given to regional economic integration among African countries (Farrell 2005, 266). Indeed, this emphasis on regionalism was based on WTO rules which, although they do not allow for non-reciprocal agreements, do allow for agreements between economic blocs (Flint 2009, 85). The EU announced that it would negotiate with particular groups of ACP states: five in Sub-Saharan Africa and one in the Caribbean. The negotiations began formally in 2002 with an official deadline of the end of 2007. From the very beginning, there were many critics of the new EU policy whose voices gradually became louder. Many observers argued that the EPAs would have serious negative consequences for African countries at several levels. Some of these critics argued that the new regionalisation imposed by EPAs would cancel out decades of regional integration efforts in Africa. Although existing sub-regional organisations in the continent have overlapping memberships[1] and limited complementarity, 'the approach taken by the European Commission to the EPA negotiations is likely to exacerbate a situation that is already inchoate and fragmented' (Farrell 2005, 269). Others claimed that the agreements were another example of the asymmetric nature of EU–African relations, a relationship of two groups with 'very unequal political and economic strength' (Farrell 2005, 280). The new EPAs framework, they noted, was more a diktat than a true partnership (Flint 2009, 79). Although the deadline of 31 December 2007 elapsed, of the former ACP group only the Caribbean Region signed a full EPA with the EU. The Commission tried to accelerate negotiations by entering into bilateral talks with some African countries, thus moving away from the initial regional approach. In total, 20 ACP countries agreed to sign interim agreements that met WTO rules, while 43 countries decided, for different reasons, not to sign any agreement at all (Flint 2009, 89). Nigeria, Gabon and the Republic of Congo have abandoned

[1] Of the 53 countries in Africa, only 6 are members of just one regional organisation; 26 are members of two groupings; 20 simultaneously belong to three; and 1 (the Democratic Republic of Congo) is a member of four (Flint 2009, 86).

the process altogether, and South Africa decided not to sign an interim agreement (Flint 2009, 90). Thus, the whole process has created much tension. A declaration of the ACP Council of Ministers accused the European Commission of 'enormous pressure' that runs 'contrary to the spirit of the ACP–EU partnership' (Flint 2009, 90). There is much truth in this claim. Articles 37.5 and 37.6 of the Cotonou Agreement make it clear that EPAs will only be negotiated with countries which 'consider themselves in a position to do so' and that the EU will examine 'all alternative possibilities' (Flint 2009, 89).

In Search of Explanations

In the previous paragraphs we have shown that the EU is far from being the main conduit of Europe's relations with Africa. In several respects it is a secondary actor. Its member states still provide much more aid bilaterally than through Brussels while the EU's foreign and security policy towards Africa is largely defined by the interests and views of a single member-state (France). And even in trade relations, instead of strengthening 'interregional' arrangements built over five decades, the EU 'deconstructs' regional boundaries, focusing at the very end more on state actors than on 'regional' partners.

On the other hand, the African partner is almost non-existent. Despite the impressive number of regional (like the African Union) and sub-regional organizations (like SADC, ECOWAS. IGAD etc.). Africa is very far from speaking with a single voice. It is the EU that defines the 'partner' region, first by deconstructing the ACP group, then by creating new African trade blocs and, finally, by looking to other, less 'regional', solutions. However, declarations, official documents and statements continue to portray EU-African relations as a growing and deepening interregional partnership. Academic papers and the Press also tend to reproduce the illusion. The question is why. In our view three factors can offer an explanation.

First, the deeply asymmetric nature of the EU-Africa relationship. In contrast to other regions (like Asia), the European Union has an immense power in both defining the scope and the content but also in framing the nature of EU-Africa's 'interregionalism'. Mary Farrell has argued that the choice to promote interregionalism both actively and discursively is a means to establish channels to convey values, establish priorities and even promote special interests (Farrell 2005). This has been described as 'soft imperialism' (Hettne and Söderbaum 2005). But interregionalism is also a means to promote Europe's identity and it is in a sense an end in itself. In the words of an observer, 'the EU's "interest" in (…) engaging in interregionalism cannot be understood in isolation from its own identity' (Söderbaum 2007: 197). As Europe's international identity is both 'active' and 'reflexive ', the ways the EU is constituted and constructed affects the ways it is represented in its international relations (Manners and Whitman, 2003). In short whatever the reasons that explain the portrayal of the relationship as 'interregional', they should be searched at the European part of the relationship than at the African one.

Secondly, representations of the relationship as 'interregional' serve African leaders' interests. The EU 'model' is in fact a template for recent African efforts of regional integration. The African Union with its Pan-African

Parliament, its Commission, the Executive Council of Ministers, the Permanent Representatives Committee, the Court of Justice and the Peace and Security Council mirrors the EU structure. Indeed African regionalism is shallow. What is clearly missing is the lack of political will of national leaders to delegate sovereignty to their newly formed supranational institutions and to think 'regional' when it comes to resolving issues in security, development, trade and economic growth. But the idea of an interregional relationship, allows them to pretend that national sovereignty has already been transferred. Moreover, it gives them the opportunity to describe the deeply asymmetric relationship as a 'partnership' of equals. In parallel, the EU can praise its 'normative' power, its ability to export its 'model' worldwide (Manners 2002). Nicolaïdis and Howse (2002) seem to be close to reality when they argue what the EU is in fact projecting is an '*EUtopia*', rather than the EU *as it is*.

Third, representations of EU-African interregionalism seem to reflect the interest and strength of some powerful member states within the Union. Very few of the EU member states rank developments in Africa relatively high in their foreign policy agendas. For all the new member states, and many of the older ones, Africa is almost non-existent in their list of external priorities. This situation has led to totally different priorities being given to Africa by the 6-month rotating presidencies (Huliaras & Magliveras 2008, 411). This situation creates more opportunities for a conflation of views and interests of the big member states that rank Africa relatively higher in the agenda (Olsen 2004, 434), especially France, Great Britain and Germany. In a strange way, the lack of interest for Africa has increased the opportunities for developing a common agenda. But this also has given more opportunities to European institutions to represent EU activities in Africa as a common European policy. The changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty and the creation of a European Council president, a beefed-up 'high representative' who chairs meetings of EU foreign ministers, and a new foreign service (External Action Service) may further increase the coherence of the EU's Africa policy, especially since the programming units of both the Commission Directorate General for Development (DG DEV) and of the EuropeAid Cooperation Office (AIDCO) will be transferred to that service. Particularly in the case of the EU's Africa policy, this may turn out to help streamline the policy process. However, it is probably too early to make any predictions. What is certain is that the new institutional architecture will strengthen rather than weaken the perception that the EU has a common African policy and that its relationship with Africa is a well-structured interregional partnership.

Chinese-African relations

Within the last decade, the growth of Chinese-African relations has been both unprecedented and impressive. China has not only become Africa's most significant trade partner, but also an important investor and a generous donor. The Press talk about 'China's great leap into the continent' and analysts study 'Beijing's Safari' (Abramovici 2004; Kurlantzick 2006). A journalist entitled his article 'Why China is Trying to Colonise Africa' (Blair 2007). Several western commentators were alarmist. A headline read 'How China's taking over Africa, and why the West should be VERY worried' (Malone 2008). Two analysts were more specific about the Chinese threat: they wrote that 'access to important raw materials and energy sources … [is] "locked up"

by Chinese firms' (Brookes & Shin 2006). In short as two academics have argued the discourses (especially the journalistic ones) on China's engagement with Africa largely

> 'drew on a range of Orientalist discourses and present China as a monolithic "beast" with an insatiable appetite for African resources. Politically they depict a totalitarian state that has been let 'loose' in the 'dark continent' and is impervious to and somehow beyond the logics of western rationality, humanitarianism and the agendas of international "development" (Mohan and Power 2008: 26).

Indeed, the strengthening of relations with Africa was a conscientious decision. Mainly aiming at securing access to natural resources, the rapprochement was promoted not only through Africa-China summits and official visits by high-ranking Chinese officials to Africa but also with more concrete measures like development aid and the encouragement of state enterprises to invest in Africa. However, this is only part of the story. Africa was not passive in the rapprochement. Quite the contrary: several African countries have actively courted Beijing and/or Chinese companies.

Many Actors

Probably more than one million Chinese have moved to Africa within the last decade. Tens of thousands were workers and managers in Chinese state enterprises involved in public works throughout Africa. However, most of them were petty traders that have very little to do with the Chinese state (Rice 2011). Many of them have arrived on tourist visas and stayed on illegally – especially in southern Africa. Others were workers who found at the end of their contracts that they had the opportunity to establish themselves in the restaurant business or in retail (Mung 2008: 98).

Large Chinese companies often get assistance from the state-owned China Export-Import (EXIM) Bank for their African activities. However, most of them have developed their own agendas and are far from being the marionettes of the Beijing government (Davies et al 2008: 21-22). Even state-owned and state-run enterprises often behave as autonomous agents, promoting their own agendas. After all Chinese public institutions do not enjoy direct lines of authority over these state companies and Beijing is not always in a position to dictate the policy of state-owned enterprises. Many state enterprises are often left on the vines of bankruptcy by the Ministry of Commerce if their venture proves unsuccessful.

Several commentators have noted how state-owned enterprises have often 'hijacked' China's diplomatic initiatives in Africa (especially in Sudan), pursuing profit at the expense of broader government policy objectives. (Gill et al 2007a: 10; McGregor 2008). For example, the National Development and Reform Commission, which oversees China's energy sector, showed sensitivity on human rights and excluded Sudan from a list of countries in which Chinese oil companies were encouraged to invest in 2007. However, the China National Petroleum Corporation ignored the new policy and acquired new assets in Sudan anyway (Downs 2008: 43). Furthermore, government agencies, including the State Council, the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chinese embassies, the State-Owned Assets Supervision,

the Administration Commission and, above all, the provincial governments have different views on and interests in Africa as well as different leverage and varying capacities to see these interests served in official policy. Especially provincial governments are key players in Africa since four-fifths of all Chinese firms investing abroad, making provincial governments key players in Africa (Jacobson 2009: 414).

There is already evidence that there are increasing tensions between the various government agencies involved. Moreover, as Chinese state enterprises are more and more interested in profit-making in their international operations it becomes harder and harder for the Chinese state to maintain a coherent strategic and regulatory hold over them (Gill 2007: 10). Most experts agree that in the immediate future, we should expect that the tensions between stated national objectives and corporate interests will likely increase' (Gill & Reilly 2007: 49). So the view that China is a unitary actor complete with a master plan for geopolitical expansion is intrinsically flawed and one must be very careful not to associate every action with the central state apparatus' (Fiott 2010: 1).

In Search of Explanations

However, as Ian Taylor has correctly observed, much of the past literature on Chinese relations with Africa adopts a 'realist' perception, treating all Chinese actions as calculated moves by Beijing geopolitical strategists (Taylor 2010). Probably, the best explanation for this flawed perception is that most of the experts on the Chinese-African relationship are Africanists and not Sinologists. It is highly unusual to see so many papers on the Chinese-African rapprochement as you see in this conference in a similar academic meeting on Chinese studies. Generally speaking, until very recently the study of the China-Africa connection has neglected Chinese-language sources and the significant and expanding body of literature on Chinese foreign relations. Much of the literature on the subject had a perception of 'outside in' than a perception of 'inside out'. As a result Chinese 'power' was highlighted at the expense of the 'inside out' view that emphasized China's 'vulnerability and dependence rather than power' (Large 2008: 57).

Moreover, even Sinologists until relatively recently tended to overestimate the importance of state economic activity in China. Of course, the Chinese state is vast and its role is extremely important in the economy. However, until recently many analysts underestimated the fact that China's economic vigor owes much to a multitude of vigorous very private entrepreneurs that 'often operate outside not only the powerful state-controlled companies, but outside the country's laws' (Economist 2011). It is no coincidence that Chinese companies in Africa care little about rules and regulations (Economist 2011a: 66). In the apt words of an analyst: '

> 'When one considers the immense difficulties that the central overnment encounters in its attempts to oversee the enforcement of many laws in China due to the opposition of enterprise managers as well as the close relationship they cultivate with local officials, one can surmise the weak position of a diplomat sitting in the Chinese Embassy in Khartoum or any other African capital when he tries to make Chinese businessmen heed Ministry of Commerce regulations in Africa' (Jacobson 2009: 416).

Thus, China is not the monolithic unitary actor that makes rational decisions based on preference ranking and value maximization and follows a coherent strategy of 'peaceful rise'. Moreover, Chinese presence is not the same throughout Africa. In countries like Angola, Nigeria and Sudan Beijing's policy is clearly focused on energy security. This is not the case in several countries of Southern Africa were private Chinese companies and petty traders play a crucial role. So it is wrong to treat Africa as a single entity. Factors like mineral-richness, level of income, nature of regime and foreign policy affect very much the content of African countries' relationship with China.

Conclusions

The portrayal of the EU-Africa connection a highly institutionalised interregional relationship is flawed. The EU is not even the main conduit of European-African relations. Bilateral relationships between EU member states and individual African countries continue to be far more important (especially in aid and foreign policy spheres). However, the view that the European Union has a concrete, coherent and systematic Africa policy is permanently reproduced in declarations, agreements and official communiqués, dominates media reports and even influences the academic debate. The EU is continuously misrepresented as a unitary actor.

In the case of China a realist perception has framed debate, incorrectly treating China as a unitary actor and simplistically describing China's Africa policy as coherent and systematic. Paradoxically, these liberal (in the case of EU) and realist (in the case of China) misperceptions converge to produce the same narrative: a story of geopolitical competition. Journalists talk about 'Europe's [failure] to deal with the scramble in Africa' (Holslag 2007). Evem Politicians often share this view. In November 2006 the German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated that

> '[t]he Europeans should not leave the commitment to Africa to the People's Republic of China'85 and that the European policy towards Africa should not be conceived as based on 'charity arguments, as it has been in the past, but on our stalwart interests'.[2]

American and European commentators talk about a new 'scramble for Africa', writing about the dangerous challenge that the Chinese 'geostrategy' is posing to western political and economic interests and predicting such an 'intense competition' for influence that 'may even lead to war'.[3] This narrative is also reproduced in the academia. For example, an academic confidently recently wrote that 'the emergence of China as a force in Africa complicated the tussle between the EU and the USA over the "who controls Africa"' (Campbell 2008: 89). Indeed, these perceptions are intrinsically flawed, oversimplifying an extremely complex reality that contains a multiplicity of different actors (both state and non-state) with different agendas and different priorities. Private actors do not follow guidelines and do not obey to geopolitical strategists.

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[2] Quoted in Godoy (2006).

[3] For a critical review of these ideas see Xu Yi-Chong 2008.

State institutions do not share the same views or have the same interests. States and regional organizations pretend to control policies and direct actions but in reality they are only part of a very complex picture.

(*) Professor, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Peloponnese, Greece, e-mail: huliaras@tellas.gr

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