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Maurizio Carbone

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When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers: the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and the decentring-recentring conundrum in EU-Africa relations

Maurizio Carbone

Politics and International Relations, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, Scotland, UK

ABSTRACT

This article argues that to better understand the evolution of EU-Africa relations it is necessary to decentre the EU's external action and concurrently recentre Africa's international agency, while also interrogating the rise of new powers in Africa. Decentring Europe and recentring Africa means challenging the assumptions that Africa needs Europe more than Europe needs Africa and that African states should align with the EU in international settings in defence of the existing global order. By provincializing the EU and engaging extensively with African voices, this article uses the Russo-Ukrainian conflict to unpack key divides between the EU and Africa on whether and how to isolate Russia, explore its consequences for food security in Africa, and expose some contradictions in the EU's energy policy. It concludes that reconstruction in EU-Africa relations means that the EU should make grounded efforts to treat Africa as a true partner, not an afterthought.

KEYWORDS

African agency; decentring agenda; EU-Africa relations; EU foreign policy contestation; Russo-Ukrainian conflict

Introduction

The European Union (EU) has, since the early 2000s, repeatedly expressed intentions to rekindle its relations with Africa, with a view to moving away from donor-recipient dynamics towards a partnership of equals. This was the overarching objective of the long-awaited summit of the heads of state and government of the EU and the African Union (AU) held in Brussels on 17–18 February 2022, but expectations were largely unmet due to clashes over trade, migration and COVID-19 vaccine nationalism and the vagueness of the commitments made. Nevertheless, the two sides agreed to take concrete steps towards more strategic collaboration, particularly in international settings in defence of multi-lateralism and the rules-based global order. Less than a week after the conclusion of the AU-EU summit, Russia invaded Ukraine. This act of aggression generated a resolute response from the EU, which applied sanctions on Russia. The response of African states to a series of resolutions tabled at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly appalled European diplomats, who expected their closest partners to align with them: half of the AU Member States abstained or did not cast their ballot. Major frustration in European

CONTACT Maurizio Carbone ✉ Maurizio.Carbone@glasgow.ac.uk 📠 Politics and International Relations, University of Glasgow, 1218 Adam Smith Building, Glasgow, Scotland G128RT, UK

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capitals was also caused by the mission to Sochi to meet President Vladimir Putin undertaken in late June 2022 by the AU's Chairperson Macky Sall and the AU's Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat, who sought to find a solution to the negative impact of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict on Africa without the intercession of the EU. Meanwhile, in an attempt to reduce their dependence on Russian gas, several EU Member States turned to Africa to secure fresh deals which contradicted the EU's position on fossil fuels expressed earlier in the year at the AU-EU summit.

All these events, some observers have noted (see Bangura 2022; Haastrup 2022; Lopes 2022; Ògúnmodéde 2022), seem to exemplify the EU's treatment of Africa for far too long: 'paying attention to it when they want or need something, neglecting it when they don't, and expecting it to see the world through Europe's eyes' (*Politico*, 3 June 2022). This article, accordingly, uses the conflict that started in Ukraine on 24 February 2022 as a case study to interrogate the behaviour of the EU vis-à-vis Africa and seeks to ascertain whether any significant shift towards a more strategic partnership has finally materialised. Existing literature has shown how relations between the two sides started as a colonial arrangement before evolving into a North-South construction that has enabled the EU to largely impose its preferences over weaker 'partners' – with Africa subsumed into a broader cluster of states, which also included Europe's former colonies in the Caribbean and Pacific, known as the ACP Group. This however does not mean that, at several points in time and at different levels, various African actors have managed to resist and reconfigure EU policies. The process launched in the early 2000s which had the objective of complementing and eventually replacing the ACP-EU framework with a more comprehensive AU-EU strategy, however, has delivered only in part (Adebajo and Whiteman 2012; Carbone 2013; Kotsopoulos and Mattheis 2020; Haastrup, Mah, and Duggan 2020). Nevertheless, it can be safely stated that the conduct and analysis of the EU's relations with Africa are prone to Eurocentrism. At the level of policies, the EU has often treated Africa as an afterthought rather than a true partner. In terms of knowledge production, an overwhelming majority of scholars has concentrated on important themes such EU capabilities, coherence and effectiveness, or the thorny binary of interests vs. norms, and when external factors are included in their analyses, these are generally considered to be side factors that may or may not influence EU actions and policies (Haastrup 2020; Sebhatu 2020; Orbie 2021).

This article, accordingly, engages with and contributes to the decentring agenda in the EU, which has called for 'a paradigm shift that decentres the study and practice of Europe's international relations . . . to make sense of our multipolar order and reconstitute European agency in a non-European world' (Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013, 283; see also Keukeleire and Lecocq 2018; Kinnvall 2021; Wolff et al. 2022). To do so, it contends that it is crucial to investigate Africa's agency in international affairs (e.g. Brown and Harman 2013; Bischoff, Aning, and Acharya 2015; Chipaike and Knowledge 2018; Soulé 2020; Coffie and Tiky 2021) as well as reconsider Russia's growing assertiveness in Africa (e.g. Daniel and Shubin 2018; Stronski 2019; Matusevich 2021; Lanfranchi and de Bruijne 2022). It further posits that alongside the call to decentre the EU's external action is a complementary need to recentre Africa's international agency, which is part of a general development in International Relations scholarship that has probed the marginalisation of the Global South by Western mainstream perspectives on world affairs (e.g. Acharya 2016; Tickner and Smith 2020). The EU decentring agenda thus provides an

analytical framework which combines self-reflexivity and learning from other contexts with a view to recalibrating the EU's relations with third actors (Keukeleire and Lecocq 2021). However, this approach is not without its challenges, the first being that most Western scholars (including this author) have been trained within Western paradigms of International Relations and European studies. In this regard, a key feature of this article is that it promotes African voices, deliberately privileging perspectives of African scholars, official positions of African states and the AU, interviews and speeches by African policy-makers, and African news sources and think-tanks analyses,¹ while taking into account another pitfall of the decentring approach, that is the risk of leading to processes of 'othering', oversimplifying or artificially creating differences between 'the West' and 'the Rest' (Keukeleire and Lecocq 2018; see also Wolff et al. 2022). The conclusion of the article reiterates the central argument, pointing to the fact that the EU can no longer take Africa for granted, as African leaders have increasingly sought to diversify their external partnerships beyond traditional Western powers and do not wish to sacrifice their interests on the altar of a global power competition – indeed, they are fully aware that, to use an adage of the Kikuyu people of Kenya, 'when elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers' (see also Adebajo 2022; Ògúnmodé 2022).

Rethinking EU-Africa relations in times of contestation

Relations between the European Union and Africa have historically developed and been studied through the prism of the ACP-EU cooperation framework in its different iterations, including the Lomé Convention (1975–2000), the Cotonou Agreement (2000–2023), and before these the Yaoundé Convention (1963–1975) as well as specific provisions in the Treaty of Rome (1957).² Existing academic work has largely projected a critical view of how the EU has interacted with Africa: with minimal oscillations, asymmetry has been an underlying constant, in terms of policy-making processes and, consequently, policy substance. More specifically, it is widely accepted that African states have demanded better terms of trade and more generous support for development and peace efforts and the EU has sought to secure access to markets and resources and more effective management of migration, yet the terms of engagement have, almost always, been determined by the EU. The EU has consistently proclaimed that its initiatives are underpinned by dialogue and African ownership, whereas in reality it has often imposed conditions on aid and pursued its neoliberal and market liberalisation agenda, to the point that the EU-Africa partnership has been portrayed by many as clientelistic and neo-colonial (Adebajo and Whiteman 2012; Babarinde 2019; Haastrup, Mah, and Duggan 2020; Kotsopoulos and Mattheis 2020; Nshimbi 2020). There are of course exceptions, with various progressive initiatives undertaken over the years. For instance, the Lomé Convention, at least initially, attempted to incorporate some of the South's claims for special treatment in international trade as well as favourable provisions on development cooperation. Yet, the Lomé preferential trade arrangement only benefited a handful of African countries, and the launch of a new trade regime with the Cotonou Agreement supporting trade liberalisation and regional integration has not fared much better: the conclusion of the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) has been resisted by most African countries, which see them as perpetuating uneven development and introducing new forms of colonialism (Ngangjoh-Hodu and Matambalya 2010; Iloraha and Ngwakwe 2015;

Oloruntoba 2016; Akokpari 2017). Similarly, the self-proclaimed identity and portrayal of the EU as a normative power, particularly for its attempts to promote human rights and democracy, has been marred with tensions, not least because the EU has been accused of not taking into account the diverse value systems among African states (Rutazibwa 2013; Staeger 2016).

The decision to hold periodic summits between African and European heads of state and government since 2000 – together with the adoption of the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) in 2007 – was hailed as the decisive moment to finally address the legacy of colonialism by treating Africa as a single continent (beyond the artificial division between countries north and south of the Sahara) and amending the asymmetrical nature of the ACP-EU partnership. Despite these grandiose aspirations, every single summit has been characterized by confrontations, with new challenges (e.g. migration, climate change, sexual rights, democratic governance, and growing competition between old and new powers) gradually placing ‘additional strains on the relationship that has increasingly lost its lucre and lustre’ (Khadiagala 2018, 434). Some significant achievements can be recorded in the area of peace and security: the EU may have instrumentalised Africa to test its own global actor ambitions, but it has also supported numerous Africa-owned military missions and strengthened the role of the AU as an international actor. Nonetheless, African states have increasingly diversified their security and defence partnerships, particularly in the Sahel where Russia has emerged as an alternative to the EU.³ Meanwhile, with a view to countering the rise of new powers (not only China), since the late 2010s the EU has launched an array of initiatives, generally without adequate consultation with its counterparts, aimed at spurring economic growth and creating jobs in Africa. Yet, the lack of adequate response to Africa’s requests for facilitated export of high-valued finished goods, together with misgivings over unequal vaccine distribution during the COVID-19 pandemic and over the impact of climate change, has stymied EU attempts to regain lost ground in Africa. Importantly, it has further delayed the attempted transition from an arrangement that was conceived to address issues of mutual concern into a strategic partnership that seeks to tackle global challenges (Mangala 2018; Haastrup, Duggan, and Mah 2021; Carbone 2022). The EU has its own weaknesses, but it cannot be ignored that the AU suffers from limitations linked to political, institutional, and financial bottlenecks: notably, AU Member States hold different levels of commitment to Pan-Africanism and not rarely their positions in international settings have diverged significantly (Carbone 2018; Nshimbi 2020).

Decentring the EU’s external action

An important trait in the field of EU-Africa relations is the prevailing Eurocentrism. In fact, the starting point of most investigations is how the EU engages with Africa, with the latter being seen as a passive recipient of the policies of the former – and in most cases, ‘African agency is a bystander in the EU’s engagement with the continent’ (Haastrup 2020, 514). One way to overcome Eurocentric approaches is to decentre the analysis of the EU’s external action, including towards Africa. The aim is not to produce research that simply prioritises African perceptions of EU policies, presents critical analyses that dismiss the legitimate aspirations of the EU to be a new kind of power in world politics, or suggests that the EU should abandon the pursuit of its values and interests and adapt to the

geopolitical frames of great powers such as the USA, China, or Russia (Bachmann and Müller 2015; Staeger 2016; Wolff et al. 2022). It is rather to demonstrate that the way knowledge and policies are generated may fundamentally need rethinking (Keukeleire and Lecocq 2021), acknowledging how Eurocentrism may shape the views of scholars and policymakers and calling into question the fact that the image that the EU often seeks to project is a sort of 'EU-topia', a model that others are asked to follow (Lenz and Nicolaïdis 2019).

Decentring the EU's external action involves three steps: *provincializing*, which means challenging assumptions that consistently place Europe at the heart of global affairs and recognising the particularistic rather than universal nature of European perspectives and agendas; *engaging*, which entails listening to and learning from how non-European actors experience and respond to events and challenges, irrespective of the EU and its propensity to export civilisation, but without jettisoning the emancipatory promise of European approaches to global governance; and *reconstructing*, which requires recalibrating policies after having identified pitfalls in EU policy frames, strategies and programmes, and highlighting the potential of shared commitments regarding peace and prosperity, without being oblivious to the fact that the EU and its Member States may seek to advance their own interests (Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013, 2021).

Embracing the decentring agenda means accepting that the 'EU project' is inextricably linked to the colonial past of European states and its consequences, thus overcoming the myth that purports the creation of the EU as a kind of 'virgin birth', as well as eschewing any neo-colonial behaviours requiring other regions and states to converge with EU preferences and practices (Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013; Keukeleire and Lecocq 2018; Langan 2018; Nshimbi 2020; Kinnvall 2021).⁴ Such habits have persisted after decolonisation, yet they are rarely acknowledged in mainstream analyses of EU foreign policy and EU-Africa relations – which however does not imply that existing studies are not critical of the EU's presence and activities in Africa (Sebhatu 2020; Orbie 2021). In a sense, the EU-Africa partnership is not only asymmetrical, but also exemplifies a coloniality of power which perpetuates uneven and exploitative patterns of interaction beyond the end of formal colonial practices (Haastrup 2020; Haastrup, Duggan, and Mah 2021; Kinnvall 2021). Post-coloniality shapes the self-positioning and perceptions of African states within the EU and vice versa (Kotsopoulos and Mattheis 2020), and thus it often appears that 'Europe is the initiator and driver of solutions to most of Africa's problems. Africa rarely owns the solutions or processes of formulating them' (Nshimbi 2020, 16). The ambition, therefore, is to integrate Africa's agency in Africa-EU relations and show that it is not a 'deficient actor in perpetual resistance against European neo-colonialism' (Staeger 2016, 987). This is even more crucial in a multipolar world as emerging powers strategically frame their international outreach as an alternative to Western neo-colonialism (Fisher Onar and Nicolaïdis 2021).

By decentring the EU's external action and decolonising EU-Africa relations it is possible to better appreciate why and how the EU has faced growing contestation in international affairs. This contestation, which is intertwined with considerations linked to the type of actor the EU is and the values and principles that it seeks to promote internationally, has attracted increased interest in EU foreign policy analysis. The issue at stake is not just policy contestation (that is, criticism of the EU's actions and policies), but also polity contestation (that is, its right to exist and act), and can result in challenging

the EU's presence and relevance in international politics by seeking to delegitimise its authority (Johansson-Nogués, Vlaskamp, and Barbé 2020; Petri, Thevenin, and Liedlbauer 2020; Biedenkopf, Costa, and Góra 2021; Aydın-Düzgit and Noutcheva 2022). Relatedly, the contestation of the EU (and its foreign policy) is part of a wider trend involving the erosion of the Western-led liberal international order, with emerging powers at the forefront of calls for a new, post-liberal global order – and in these characterisations, the EU is invariably part of the West and is being indirectly challenged by virtue of its association with the USA (Börzel and Zürn 2021; Abumere 2022).

Recentring Africa's international agency

In parallel to the decentring agenda in the EU, a significant strand of literature has finally debunked the prevailing framing of Africa 'as a politically empty space' or 'passive or supplicant actor in international politics', though there have been also loud voices dismissing 'Africa's marginality in world politics as nonsense' (e.g. Brown and Harman 2013; Bischoff, Aning, and Acharya 2015; Coffie and Tiky 2021). The underlying assumption was that relatively weak states on the continent would accept the legitimacy and authority of more powerful external actors, and therefore the majority of contemporary approaches to Africa's role in international politics has reproduced (at least) one of two tropes. The first focuses on different ways in which individual African states in a deeply asymmetrical international system leverage their strategic value to major powers to gain influence or secure resources which otherwise would not be available to them. The second concentrates on how African states engage in international institutions and employ collective strategies through the AU or other regional bodies to promote their interests and achieve specific policy outcomes. Much less attention has been paid to how African states proactively and fundamentally seek to change the rules or frames of references within international negotiation processes (Fisher 2018).

In fact, over the past decade, the active engagement of African states in international affairs has grown exponentially and various African actors have played a pivotal role in the fields of trade, security, migration, and climate change. Thus, the need to recentre African actors as significant agents in international settings and in their relations with other international players has become an imperative (Murithi 2014; Munyi, Mwambari, and Yloenen 2020; Soulé 2020). There is no consensus on what Africa's agency precisely entails and many definitions have been floated, some of which point to its resistance to external demands or highlight how African actors have successfully navigated hostile international contexts or somehow sought to influence international policy outcomes; yet, these are rather narrow perspectives, largely influenced by post-colonial reflexes, which do not engage Africa in its own terms (Haastrup 2020). Rather, Africa's international agency, simply but effectively, refers to 'an African actor's ability to negotiate and bargain with external actors in a manner that benefits Africans themselves' (Chipaike and Knowledge 2018, 1). The emphasis on Africa's international agency has been helped by the rise of new powers, which has given African actors considerable leeway to choose between different actors and engage with them more profitably. There is no shortage of literature on the role of China in Africa, but much less academic attention has been paid to Russia's increased prominence and how this has impacted on the EU. One point to note, however, is that scholars from the North tend to emphasise negative aspects, whereas scholars from

both Russia and Africa accentuate positive traits: clearly, these divergences further signal the importance of the decentring agenda.

Interrogating Russia's engagement with Africa

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had supported liberation movements in various newly independent states in the decolonisation period, for more than a decade Russia showed limited interest in Africa, not least because it was facing significant economic problems of its own. A change of direction began in the mid-2000s when it started being more assertive in international affairs, but its interactions with different African states intensified as a consequence of the deterioration of its relations with the West after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 (Matusevich 2021; Bangura 2022). The Russian government under President Putin adopted a sort of 'flanking strategy' to circumvent diplomatic and economic isolation by the West, and therefore it sought to broaden and strengthen links with the non-Western world (Faleg and Secrieru 2020). Russia's engagement with various African states was an attempt to generate new economic opportunities for its domestic businesses, especially those penalised by sanctions. Indeed, Russia has become a strategic partner for selected African states, specifically those that receive limited attention from the international community or those subject to Western sanctions – and of course it is also worth remembering that Russia plays a crucial role in arms sales and nuclear energy cooperation, whereas it lags behind with regards to development assistance and trade relations (Geröcs 2019; Stronski 2019; Faleg and Secrieru 2020; Siegle 2021; Lanfranchi and de Bruijne 2022). Still, in comparison to the other big players, Russia remains 'a minnow in the African game' and 'Africa is clearly not one of the bigger fish in the Russian foreign policy/strategic pond' (Olivier and Suchkov 2015, 162).

Nonetheless, it is obvious that a 'large part of Russian activity in Africa is noise meant to unnerve Europe and the United States' (Stronski 2019, 21). Russia does so by pointing to the predatory behaviour of neo-colonial European powers, presenting itself as an actor that shares Africa's traditional values and is able to provide viable solutions to its economic and security needs, and insistently repeating that it does not possess any colonial baggage (Faleg and Secrieru 2020; Matusevich 2021). Furthermore, it strives to offer an alternative to the liberal international order championed by the EU and the USA. In this regard, the discourse on sovereignty and non-interference which underpinned the first Africa-Russia summit in Sochi in October 2019 (the second was planned for November 2022, but was moved to mid-2023 due to the conflict in Ukraine) implied that African ruling elites could pursue their political goals in a multipolar world without external scrutiny, and African leaders would not have their hands tied by notions of due process or Western appeals to good governance (Stronski 2019; see also Matusevich 2021; Aydın-Düzgüt and Noutcheva 2022; Gruzd, Ramani, and Clifford 2022). It is therefore unsurprising that Russia has courted African states at the UN, emphasising shared beliefs in principles of sovereign equality and non-interference, which has consequently been reflected in similar voting behaviour (Daniel and Shubin 2018; Stronski 2019; Siegle 2021). Russia is not the Soviet Union, however, lacking the latter's resources and ideological structure, so much so that its actions in Africa have been dismissed as a combination of unrealistic ambitions and opportunism (Stronski 2019). Indeed, a widely shared view

among African scholars is that 'Russia's ambitions in Africa may surpass its muscle. African leaders know this and see Russia from the perspective of what it can offer. However, they play the game because they benefit from rivalries between Russia and the West' (Lopes 2022, 15).

To recapitulate, the first part of this article has established that to better understand the evolution of EU-Africa relations it is necessary to decentre the EU's external action and concurrently recentre Africa's international agency, while also interrogating the rise of new powers, and more specifically for this article, Russia. Decentring Europe and recentring Africa means challenging the assumption that Africa needs Europe more than Europe needs Africa: this may have been historically true – though it has been questioned by many, particularly by those looking at the formation and evolution of the EU itself (Hansen and Jonsson 2014; Langan 2018; Nshimbi 2020) – but it is certainly less valid in a multipolar world. Traditional powers have made major efforts to revamp their relations with Africa, while new actors have appeared on the continent and presented concrete plans of action. This surge of interest may result in 'a new scramble for Africa' but it is also a bid to secure Africa's support for competing worldviews on the international order, whether liberal or post-liberal (*ISS Today*, 30 August 2022). The European Union, in the past few decades, has assumed that African states would align in a defence of multilateralism and the Western-led liberal international order. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine, which is dealt with in the second part of this article, has defied these expectations.

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict, post-colonial scars, and geopolitical divides

Attended by almost 70 heads of state and government, the sixth summit between the AU and the EU held on 17–18 February 2022 was a diplomatic success, but not a game-changer. Aside from their long-standing resentment of the EU's approach to trade and migration cooperation, African leaders were disappointed by the limited solidarity shown by Europeans during the COVID-19 pandemic, and particularly by the decision not to waive intellectual property rights to enable African countries to produce vaccines locally. Another source of discord concerned energy policy: the AU tried to resist EU pressure to give up on fossil fuels, needed to accelerate industrialisation and economic development prospects in Africa; the EU saw gas as a last resort, a tool to avoid worse options such as coal and ageing nuclear infrastructure, and was willing to consider supporting gas investment in Africa only if no other options were available. Some positive signals came from the fact that, as an indirect response to China's growing economic and political clout in Africa, the EU announced an ambitious plan to boost investment in key areas such as infrastructure development, energy transition, growth and jobs, digital transformation, and human and social development – though African leaders did not share the same enthusiasm as their European counterparts as the plan, based around the Global Gateway initiative, was not previously discussed with them and largely repackaged existing funds. Significantly, AU and EU leaders committed to a 'Joint Vision for 2030', which mapped out areas of strategic cooperation for the near future, including in international settings and in support of multilateralism, which was seen as an area in which the partnership had great potential (*DevEx*, 18 February 2022; *ECDPM Commentary*, 21 February 2022; Haastrup 2022). The summit follow-up, however, was overshadowed by events in Ukraine.

The outbreak of the conflict

On 21 February 2022, Russia recognised Donetsk and Luhansk, two separatist regions of Ukraine, as independent states. The reaction by world leaders, particularly from Europe, was to stand by Ukraine's territorial integrity and national sovereignty – and that initially seemed to be Africa's posture as well, considering the pronouncements of the three African members of the UN Security Council (Gabon, Ghana and Kenya). In fact, one of the strongest rebukes against Russia's actions, which received much praise by pundits and diplomats in the North, came from Ambassador Martin Kimani, Kenya's Permanent Representative at the UN. Drawing parallels between Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Africa's experience of European colonisation, he warned against plunging back into 'new forms of domination and oppression' and urged Russia to learn from African states, which accepted artificial borders set by European powers for the sake of peace. Leaving aside the fact that for some observers the speech 'garnered praise from former colonisers who like to pretend they were doing Africans a favour', thus perpetuating a sort of 'valorisation of the colonial order that continues to this day' (*Aljazeera*, 23 February 2022), it is important to note that Ambassador Kimani stated that multilateralism was 'on its deathbed', but it was 'assaulted today as it has been by other powerful states in the recent past' (see *The Daily Nation*, 22 February 2022; *The African*, 3 July 2022). In doing so, he echoed longstanding concerns by African states, and other countries in the South, about the unfairness of the liberal international order – though these observations, unsurprisingly, were glossed over in the North (Obadare 2022).

In the days that followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the response of Africa was somewhat muted, with the prevailing view among African leaders being that this was a European problem which required a European solution (*The East African*, 6 March 2022). The AU did not adopt a common position as it has done on many other issues, and only a minimalist statement, jointly signed by Sall and Faki Mahamat, was released reflecting a lack of accord between the AU Member States: the statement called for a ceasefire and, sticking diligently to AU guiding principles, urged Russia as well as any other actor to 'imperatively respect international law, the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of Ukraine' (see *Africa Confidential*, 28 February 2022). The perception among African diplomats was that the swift move to isolate Russia was an ominous reminder of a hegemonic order that the West has been seeking to impose on them, as pointed out by a Nigerian analyst: 'many in Africa and the rest of the Global South do not regard – and never have regarded – the liberal order as particularly liberal or international. Nor do they consider it to be particularly orderly, considering how much their countries were turned into spheres of influence and arenas for geostrategic competition' (Ògúnmodé 2022).

The AU was far more resolute – though again through a joint statement signed by Sall and Faki Mahamat but this time reflecting a general consensus – in condemning incidents of racial discrimination against Africans, most notably students, trying to flee Ukraine and enter Poland (*Jeune Afrique*, 28 February 2022; *The East African*, 1 March 2022; *Africa Confidential*, 3 March 2022; *The Reporter*, 5 March 2022; *The Citizen*, 7 March 2022). These accusations were rejected by Ukraine, Poland, and representatives of the EU (*The Daily Nation*, 2 March 2022), but they demonstrated how post-colonial scars were still vivid. The same Ambassador Kimani before the UN General Assembly declared that it was 'deeply

disturbing to observe the racialism that has characterised the expression of solidarity in parts of Europe' and in 'wholeheartedly condemning racism against African people and people of African descent', he added: 'we resist any view that expressing this concern is a distraction because the safety and dignity of African people will never be secondary to us' (see *The East African*, 1 March 2022). The warm welcome extended by east European states to Ukrainian refugees, in stark contrast to the narrative of invasion associated with irregular migrants coming from Africa, did not go unnoticed in Africa: many diplomats publicly questioned why the suffering of Ukrainians should be more important than the suffering of any other person in Africa or why certain EU Member States would refer to 'good refugees', as if it were possible to establish a sort of empathy with variable geometry (*Africa Confidential*, 28 February 2022; *Jeune Afrique*, 2 March 2022; 1 April 2022; *The Conversation Africa*, 11 May 2022).

This racialised refugee hierarchy added strain to EU-Africa relations. When Russia's invasion of Ukraine was discussed at the UN General Assembly, the divide between the EU and Africa – and more broadly between the North and the South – stood out unequivocally.⁵ The first resolution, which condemned Russia and demanded the withdrawal of its troops, was supported by all EU Member States but only by 28 of the 54 African members of the UN, whereas 17 abstained, eight did not vote, and one voted against it. This outcome was unexpected, and the number of abstentions would have been higher if the EU had not put strong pressure on several African states (*Business Day*, 2 May 2022; *Politico*, 3 June 2022), as confirmed by various African ambassadors: 'there [was] intense pressure today ... And the fact that western powers had to go into battle to get votes ... sometimes with threats – that says a lot about the state of the world' (see *Africa Confidential*, 28 February 2022). The number of African states refusing to take sides increased with the third resolution (from 26 to 44), when UN members decided to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council, and again with the fifth resolution (38 in total) when it was regarding a mechanism for Russia to pay reparations for destruction in Ukraine – whereas the outcome of the vote for the second resolution blaming Russia for the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine was almost the same as the outcome of the first resolution and in the case of the fourth resolution a higher number of African states (30 against 28 in the first resolution) voted to uphold Ukraine's territorial integrity against Russia's annexation of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia (*Africa Confidential*, 7 October 2022; *Daily Maverick*, 15 November 2022; *The East African*, 23 November 2022).⁶

This voting pattern at the UN, as shown in [Table 1](#), exposed Africa's lack of cohesion and risked undermining the credibility of Pan-Africanism, as AU Member States did not manage to form a unified position (*The Conversation Africa*, 8 April 2022). A slight majority of states did support the first two UN resolutions (and then the fourth one), yet their diplomats said very little on the record, which for some was an indication that 'those governments may be out of step with sentiment on the street' (*Africa Confidential*, 1 April 2022).⁷ Clearly, those states which refused to condemn Russia attracted much attention. The most frequently cited reason for their posture was the desire to preserve the close economic, political and military relations developed with Russia since the 2000s – leaving aside gratitude for support in their post-colonial struggles. Many African leaders also lamented the EU's inconsistency in applying international norms or heeded the anti-Western sentiments of their populations, which are linked to past grievances related to colonialism and are fuelled by various forms of neo-colonialism

Table 1. African states and different UN resolutions on the Russo-Ukrainian war.

	Russia's aggression against Ukraine (2 March 2022)	Humanitarian consequences of Russia's aggression against Ukraine (24 March 2022)	Russia's suspension from the Human Rights Council (7 April 2022)	Russia's annexation of four Ukrainian oblasts (12 October 2022)	Russia's payment of war reparations to Ukraine (14 November 2022)
<i>Approve</i>	28 Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, Chad, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Malawi, Mauritania, Mauritius, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, São Tomé e Príncipe, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Tunisia, Zambia.	27 Benin, Cape Verde, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Malawi, Mauritania, Mauritius, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, São Tomé e Príncipe, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Tunisia, Zambia.	10 Chad, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Libya, Malawi, Mauritius, Seychelles, Sierra Leone.	30 Angola, Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, Chad, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Tunisia, Zambia.	16 Benin, Burundi, Cape Verde, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Niger, Seychelles, Somalia, Togo, Tunisia, Zambia.
<i>Abstain</i>	17 Algeria, Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Senegal, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe.	20 Algeria, Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Central African Republic, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Sudan, Togo, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe.	24 Angola, Botswana, Cape Verde, Cameroon, Egypt, Eswatini, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda.	19 Algeria, Burundi, Central African Republic, Congo, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Guinea, Lesotho, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zimbabwe.	25 Algeria, Angola, Botswana, Chad, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Libya, Madagascar, Mauritania, Mauritius, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda.
<i>Against</i>	1 Eritrea.	1 Eritrea.	9 Algeria, Burundi, Central African Republic, Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Mali, Zimbabwe.	0	7 Central African Republic, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Zimbabwe.
<i>Absent</i>	8 Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Morocco, Togo.	6 Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Comoros, Guinea, Morocco, Somalia.	11 Benin, Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea, Mauritania, Morocco, Rwanda, São Tomé e Príncipe, Somalia, Zambia.	5 Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, São Tomé e Príncipe.	6 Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Morocco, São Tomé e Príncipe, Senegal, Tanzania.

Source: United Nations.

(*Jeune Afrique*, 1 April 2022; *Daily Maverick*, 24 July 2022).⁸ One African diplomat at the UN regretted the attention given to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict compared to other wars in Africa, and suggested that the vote of several African states was to be seen as a message to the world: 'We are not just voting fodder for the resolutions you like and you propose. We are tired of this hypocrisy ... We want this condemnation, this fervour, this mobilisation, also to apply to African situations where some people are doing what they like to serve their interests' (see *Africa Confidential*, 18 March 2022; see also *Daily Maverick*, 23 August 2022). Another set of explanations refers to the fact that many African states did not want to get entangled in what they perceived as a proxy war between the West and Russia, and instead invoked a stance of non-alignment or neutrality (*ISS Today*, 18 March 2022; *The Conversation Africa*, 30 March 2022; 11 May 2022; *Daily Maverick*, 16 May 2022). Some African leaders openly attributed part of the responsibility for the Russo-Ukrainian conflict to NATO, which was very unpopular in Africa following its intervention in Libya and alleged destabilisation of north Africa. In this regard, the words chosen by the South African President Cyril Ramaphosa before Parliament, after some 'contortions' in his own government, became very controversial: 'The war could have been avoided if NATO had heeded the warnings from amongst its own leaders over the years that its eastward expansion would lead to greater, not less, instability in the region' (See *The East African*, 5 July 2022; *Daily Maverick*, 23 August 2022; Monyae 2022; Sidiropoulos and Gruzd 2022).

The consequences of the conflict

Almost immediately after Russia invaded Ukraine, the EU adopted several measures to support Ukraine at an unprecedented speed, including the toughest sanctions in history. Conversely, none of the African states adopted sanctions against Russia, nor was an emergency meeting of the AU ever called (*The Reporter*, 23 April 2022; *The African*, 4 August 2022). A widely shared sentiment in European diplomatic circles was that Africa 'failed to stand in solidarity with Europe in its hour of need' (Kifukwe and Lebovich 2022). Thus, European diplomats in Africa were under pressure to convince their host governments that it was in Africa's best interest to rally against Russia (*Africa Confidential*, 1 April 2022; *The Reporter*, 23 April 2022), either by engaging with ministers of foreign affairs or through various forms of public diplomacy, such as convening public meetings or publishing op-ed pieces in local newspapers (*The Daily Nation*, 28 February 2022; *The Africa Report*, 9 March 2022; *The East African*, 24 March 2022). Despite reassurances, there were fears of possible cuts in foreign aid for African states openly supporting Russia, as well as the risk of reduced contributions to the AU for the promotion of peace and security (*Le Matinal*, 7 March 2022; *ISS Today*, 4 April 2022; *Business Day*, 2 May 2022). Amid these concerns, the EU announced an allocation of €600 million to support the AU's peace and security architecture for three years, though this stood in contrast to the €2 billion allocated for Ukraine. Furthermore, a leaked report from EU headquarters in Brussels indicated that additional funds for Ukraine would most likely be at the cost of African and other developing states: 'it is clear that the longer the war will last, the less resources there will be' (see *Euractiv*, 29 July 2022). Similarly, in a leaked document from the EU delegation at the AU, it was stated that the EU should become 'more transactional' in its approach and possibly make aid to African states even

more conditional on support for EU values: 'higher levels of financial engagement in African countries will depend on working on common values and a joint vision' (see *DevEx*, 22 July 2022).

The war in Ukraine had immediate negative consequences for African households, hit hard by soaring prices and food shortages resulting from overdependence on imports of wheat and fertilizer from both Ukraine and Russia (*The Africa Report*, 21 April 2022; *The Reporter*, 30 April 2022; *The African*, 3 July 2022). The food crisis became a source of friction between the West and Russia, with Africa caught in between and paying a heavy toll. On the one hand, Russia blamed the food shipment blockage on Western sanctions and on Ukraine itself for mining its ports. On the other hand, the West and Ukraine blamed Russia for blocking millions of tons of grain, as well as stealing grain and selling it and preventing crop planting and harvesting in Ukraine (*The East African*, 25 February 2022; *The Conversation Africa*, 13 April 2022; *The Citizen*, 9 June 2022). Russia's behaviour was characterised as 'a war crime' by Josep Borell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (see *Daily Maverick*, 21 June 2022), who decided to directly write to all African ministers of foreign affairs to clarify that food and fertiliser were not part of the sanctions package – yet he did not admit that the EU decision to expel many of the Russian banks from the Swift system for financial transfers had made it difficult or impossible for African countries to make payments for food imports and fertiliser. As the blame game continued for several weeks, Sall and Faki Mahamat, following an invitation by President Putin, took a trip to Russia to 'present the AU collective view' (*The East African*, 1 June 2022) that the food crisis was sparked by the war in Ukraine but also by the sanctions imposed by the West on Russia. If among EU diplomats the visit to Russia by the two highest representatives of the African Union boosted their perceptions 'that the AU and its Member States may be drifting further away from our position' (see *DevEx*, 22 July 2022), in AU circles and by Pan-Africanist observers it was seen as highly symbolic: it was a signal that Africans were very eager to speak out to promote their collective interest, a blatant testimony to the fact that Africa 'is no longer a far flung bystander to the changing global balance of power' (*The Reporter*, 11 June 2022; see also Bangura 2022; Lopes 2022). Thus, when the deal was brokered by the United Nations and Turkey, allowing over 20 million tons of blocked grain to be exported to global markets, the AU claimed that it was (also) a consequence of Sall and Faki Mahamat's mission in Russia (*Jeune Afrique*, 23 July 2022; *ISS Today*, 29 July 2022).

The battle for Africa's support continued throughout the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. The tour by Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov of a handful of African countries in July 2022 (Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Uganda) largely overlapped with the visit of France's President Emmanuel Macron to Benin, Cameroon, and Guinea Bissau. Their rhetoric was surprisingly similar. Lavrov sought to present Russia as a respectful friend to Africa as opposed to the 'overbearing Western powers with a colonial mindset' (*The Reporter*, 30 July 2022). Macron, conversely, accused Russia of waging an imperial war of conquest: 'I'm telling you here in Africa, a continent that has suffered from colonial imperialism: Russia is one of the last colonial, imperial powers. She decides to invade a neighbouring country to defend her interests' (*The Ghanaian Standard*, 30 July 2022). Macron's words resonated with those of Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky on 20 June 2022, when he was finally allowed to address the AU Assembly by video conference and behind closed doors, a meeting which was attended by only four heads of states and government

(*Africa Confidential*, 21 June 2022; *The Africa Report*, 21 June 2022; *The African*, 5 July 2022).⁹ Interestingly, Zelensky did not garner the same type of support he received from the West because, as one Ethiopian analyst put it, many African leaders ‘failed to see the commonalities between their struggles against imperialism and that of the Ukrainians, preferring to instead conflate the Ukrainians with their benefactors in Western Europe’ (*Aljazeera*, 23 March 2022).

The war in Ukraine, whilst presenting opportunities for some African states, exposed contradictions in the EU’s energy policy. The curtailment of Russia’s natural gas deliveries became a source of anxiety for the EU and several of its Member States; and Africa, with its vast gas resources, seemed well positioned to become ‘Europe’s next gas station’ (*The Daily Nation*, 3 March 2022; *The Citizen*, 7 March 2022). Thus, several EU Member States (most notably Italy, but also France, Germany, Portugal, and Spain) signed new agreements with various African states (e.g. Algeria, Angola, Congo, Egypt, Nigeria, and Senegal) or intensified discussions on the development of natural gas projects (*African Business*, 1 June 2022). This aggressive push for gas contracts raised eyebrows among African observers: their main concern was that these export deals could result in a diversion of gas from local consumption, plunging some African populations into energy poverty for the sake of meeting the needs of European markets. There were also questions about the long-term prospects of gas development and risks for African states of devoting significant resources to build infrastructures for boosted exports, considering that the EU was not keen to provide financial support. In fact, the EU had put strong pressure on African states to abandon fossil fuels and shift towards renewable sources, as well as on international financial institutions to stop funding gas projects seen as contributing to global carbon emissions (Aggad et al. 2022; *Aljazeera*, 1 March 2022). This position was somewhat toned down with the war unfolding in Ukraine, and it was not surprising that this hypocritical behaviour was chastised: a commonly-shared view among African policy-makers was that if the EU’s energy security is under threat, its global climate commitments can wait, in an approach that ‘smacks of a patronising green colonialism that treats African governments as mere objects of Western policy, not agents working to advance their countries’ future’ (*Foreign Policy*, 14 July 2022).

Conclusion

The majority of existing academic analyses on EU-Africa relations have documented and theorised how, with some notable exceptions, the European Union has managed to impose its preferences on African states, reflecting longstanding power asymmetries but also revealing the limits of Eurocentrism. This article has used the turmoil that followed Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 as a prism to better understand the evolution of EU-Africa relations, also considering that one of the principal objectives of the sixth AU-EU summit (held in Brussels on 17–18 February 2022) was to make a qualitative leap towards a more equal and strategic partnership, rather than focusing solely on development cooperation and matters of mutual concern. In line with the *decentring agenda in EU external relations*, it has *provincialized* the EU, specifically questioning the expectations of its leaders that Africa should align with the EU, owing to the significant support it receives and the allegedly shared values and interests both sides committed to promoting in international settings. It is therefore not surprising that, when nearly half of the AU membership did not join the West in condemning

Russia, European diplomats were caught off guard: some were angered, others even felt betrayed; and the post-colonial reflex was to persuade, if not coerce, recalcitrant states to change their stance. By *engaging* with African voices, it was possible to ascertain why the EU's posture on the Russo-Ukrainian conflict gained less traction in Africa than Europeans wanted. The key divide between Africa and the EU (and more generally the West) was on their different views of the Western-led liberal international order, and therefore the high number of abstentions or absences on a series of UN resolutions can be interpreted not (necessarily) as a sign of Russia's growing influence in Africa, but more as evidence of growing anti-Westernism within some African governments and among African populations and a contestation of the EU's post-colonial and neo-colonial approaches to Africa. From Africa's perspective, the war in Ukraine has also unveiled some ambiguities in the EU's external policies, particularly in relation to the different treatment given to migrants and refugees from Africa and Ukraine, as well as regarding its energy policy, including the frantic search for alternatives to Russian gas in Africa by several EU Member States despite their ambitious climate change commitments reiterated in various international contexts.

It should at this point be evident that *reconstruction* in EU-Africa relations means that the EU should not take Africa for granted and should make tangible efforts to treat it as a true partner, not an afterthought. Thus, complementary to the decentring agenda in the EU is the *recentring of Africa's international agency*, considering that African actors have increasingly been active at the global level, shaping decisions in different fields. Starting from the fact that African states do not wish to be seen as swing states in the battle for the preservation, or contestation, of the Western-led liberal international order, it is evident how African states (like any other states) legitimately seek diversification in their partnerships with external actors, partnerships based on interests and values that at times overlap with those pursued by the EU, but at other times inevitably collide. Undoubtedly, the increased prominence of many new external actors has strengthened Africa's negotiation position vis-à-vis the EU. Russia's recent incursions into Africa are, in part, motivated by a desire to irk the EU (and the West more generally), and in effect Russia has provided succours to some authoritarian regimes; yet, unlike China, Russia does not constitute a significant threat to the EU's long-awaited comprehensive strategy for, or better with, Africa. Multipolarity has given Africa more options, though the choice is not just between compliance or resistance, but also includes non-alignment and active neutrality. This has consequences for EU-Africa relations, and if a strategic partnership or partnership of equals will ever be achieved, it does not mean that partners must share the same interests and values. Finally, the locus of African agency does not have to exclusively lie with the AU, which failed (in fact, did not even try) to forge a common position on how to respond to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, except to denounce racism against Africans who were fleeing Ukraine and by seeking to address questions of food security. At the same time, it has become urgent for the AU to develop a clear strategy on how to engage with external powers, including the EU: without one, African states risk being trapped in geopolitical disputes and becoming pawns of great powers, which would increase the risk of suffering like the grass when elephants fight.

Notes

1. This article benefits from a thorough review of numerous continental news sources, such as *Africa Confidential*, *African Business*, *Jeune Afrique*, *New African*, *The Africa Report*, *The African*,

The Conversation Africa, *The East African*, and of some major national newspapers, notably *Business Day* (Zambia), *Daily Maverick* (South Africa), *Le Matinal* (Benin), *Premium Times* (Nigeria), *The Citizen* (Tanzania), *The Daily Nation* (Kenya), *The Maravi Post* (Malawi), *The New Times* (Rwanda), and *The Reporter* (Ethiopia). It also draws from analyses produced by the main African think-tanks, notably the *Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa* (CODESRIA) located in Senegal and the *Institute of Security Studies* (ISS) and the *South African Institute of International Affairs* (SAIIA), both headquartered in South Africa.

2. The Cotonou Agreement was set to expire in February 2020 but was extended to June 2023 because of delays in the signature of its successor, despite being initialled in April 2021 (see Carbone 2021).
3. An increasing role in Africa has been played by the controversial Wagner group, a Russian-owned private military contractor, which for some is an indication of the failure of the EU's strategy for the Sahel (Faleg and Secieru 2020; Siegle 2021; Bangura 2022).
4. Clearly not all EU Member States were involved in Africa's colonial history, yet the EU's policies towards Africa have been significantly shaped by former colonial powers.
5. For example, some of the largest UN members such as China, India, Pakistan, Brazil, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Turkey did not align with the West.
6. It should be noted that in the 2014 UN resolution following Russia's annexation of Crimea, 19 states voted in favour, 27 abstained, and six were absent.
7. Interestingly, among states that supported the various UN resolutions condemning Russia, besides pro-West and democratic states, there were also several authoritarian states that have developed close ties with the EU and the USA (e.g. Chad, Egypt, Gabon, Mauritania, Rwanda, and Somalia).
8. Among states that did not condemn Russia, there were those sanctioned by the West or with poor democratic records (e.g. Central African Republic, Eritrea, Mali, and Sudan), those that received support by the Soviet Union in the decolonisation period (the southern Africa region, most notably), those that experienced rising anti-French attitudes extended to the EU more generally (principally in west Africa), and those that opted for neutrality and non-alignment (e.g. Morocco, Namibia, Senegal, South Africa, and Uganda).
9. The AU had twice rejected requests by President Zelensky to address the AU Assembly, as its leaders did not want to jeopardise the AU's declared position of neutrality and the possibility of a negotiated outcome (*The East African*, 1 June 2022; *Africa Confidential*, 21 June 2022).

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