

# « JE T'AIME, MOI NON PLUS »

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## Cognitive biases in the AU-EU partnership

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by

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The relationship between the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) has hit some rough patches in recent years. Key events like the AU–EU Summit and ministerial meetings have been delayed or concluded without consensus. These strains reflect broader, unresolved tensions rather than isolated disagreements. Divergences over the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the Israeli invasion of Gaza highlight these tensions. Internal crises and the growing availability of alternative partners further complicate cooperation between the two organisations.

Nevertheless, the partnership remains vital for addressing transregional challenges. It involves a wide range of actors and policy fields on both sides. However, disagreements and misunderstandings persist among decision-makers. This Brief argues that ongoing strains in the AU–EU partnership result from cognitive biases, where each side (mis)interprets events, facts and people through the lens of its own beliefs and experiences. After identifying the main biases affecting the partnership, we propose concrete ways to address them.

### Summary

- The AU–EU relationship is experiencing ongoing tensions due to differing political priorities. Cognitive biases are a major factor contributing to persistent misunderstandings.
- Stereotyping, egocentrism, and an over-emphasis on single-issue concerns are deeply ingrained biases that continue to influence and complicate the dynamics of the partnership.
- While the EU has a recognised wealth of experience in regional integration, the AU's capacity to inspire policies and practices elsewhere is often overlooked.
- This Brief examines the biases that affect AU–EU relations and suggests ways to overcome them. Investing in mutual understanding is a prerequisite for strengthening the partnership.

## BREAKING THE MOULD

There have been repeated efforts to relaunch the AU-EU relationship over the past decade, with numerous summits, meetings and academic discussions attempting to redefine the terms of the partnership<sup>(4)</sup>. However, deep-rooted tensions remain, even after the 2022 AU-EU summit's call for yet another reboot<sup>(5)</sup>. Four biases have proven particularly persistent.

**Stereotyping:** Both sides rely on oversimplified generalisations, which obstruct a deeper understanding of internal complexities within the EU and AU. Examples include reducing the African continent to a singular focus on security or migration crises or viewing the EU as solely driven by former colonial powers.

**Egocentrism:** Decision-makers project the characteristics of their own institution onto the other, which can lead to misunderstandings and frustrations when reality deviates from these assumptions. In particular, the AU's financial dependence on the EU often entails an expectation that the AU should naturally be inclined to follow its lead. This causes friction when the AU takes a different stance, as seen in the UNGA vote on Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The scattered voting patterns of African countries created a sense of antagonism within the EU, even though the rationales for abstention were often unrelated to the EU. Egocentrism also leads to the assumption that the AU and EU have comparable administrative capacities, even though the AU Commission's 1 600 staff contrast sharply with the EU Commission's 32 000. This affects each organisation's ability to fully engage in the relationship, and it obscures the fact that the AU has developed a more sophisticated structure than the EU in certain areas, such as peace and security<sup>(6)</sup>.

**Overemphasis on single-issue interests:** Media coverage and domestic attention prioritise specific issues over a more comprehensive approach to the partnership. For example, the focus on combating Covid-19 in Africa overshadowed the threat posed by more deadly diseases like malaria. While this bias may be seen as pragmatic, it disrupts the spirit of joint initiatives.

**Anchoring:** In the past, the EU had a clear ability to set the agenda, steer negotiation processes or establish terms and conditions. Although power imbalances are now less pronounced, the legacy of this dynamic creates an anchoring bias, where ongoing discussions remain influenced by those initial conditions. Conditionalities, even if in principle reciprocal, often retain a unilateral interpretation. This is evident in areas like the democracy norms in the Samoa Agreement and the EU's deforestation regulation, both of which lack genuine reciprocity.

## INNOVATING TOGETHER

Understanding and addressing cognitive biases is crucial for fostering productive EU-AU relations and implementing the principles of equity outlined in the agreements. This requires awareness, and mitigation of their impact. Recognising financial, power, institutional and discursive asymmetries between the AU and the EU can pave the way for mutual learning without perpetuating perceptions of paternalism.

A key step in addressing biases is overcoming the perception that sees the EU as the provider of solutions to the AU's challenges<sup>(4)</sup>. As the HR/VP commented in the lead-up to the last AU-EU summit, 'Africa's problems are our problems'<sup>(5)</sup>, a view echoed by the President of the European Council who underlined that 'Africa's interests are also the European Union's interests'<sup>(6)</sup>. However, the reverse perspective is lacking, and the EU's challenges are rarely framed as issues where the AU could play a role. While each organisation operates within its unique context, the AU's experiences – both its successes and setbacks in regional integration – can provide valuable lessons for the EU's own integration process.

**Conflict resolution:** The AU cooperates with Regional Economic Communities (RECs) under the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) to address transnational conflicts. This experience offers insights for the EU's inter-institutional relations with NATO, the Council of Europe, and the OSCE in enhancing the European security architecture, and vice versa. The AU and RECs have also developed early warning mechanisms and mediation instruments, such as the Panel of the Wise and special envoys, which have been deployed in countries like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, and South Sudan<sup>(7)</sup>. So far, these initiatives have produced mixed results, but they provide valuable lessons in preventing escalation and supporting conflict resolution, particularly through local mediation and reconciliation. These experiences can inform the EU's own peacebuilding and conflict prevention efforts.

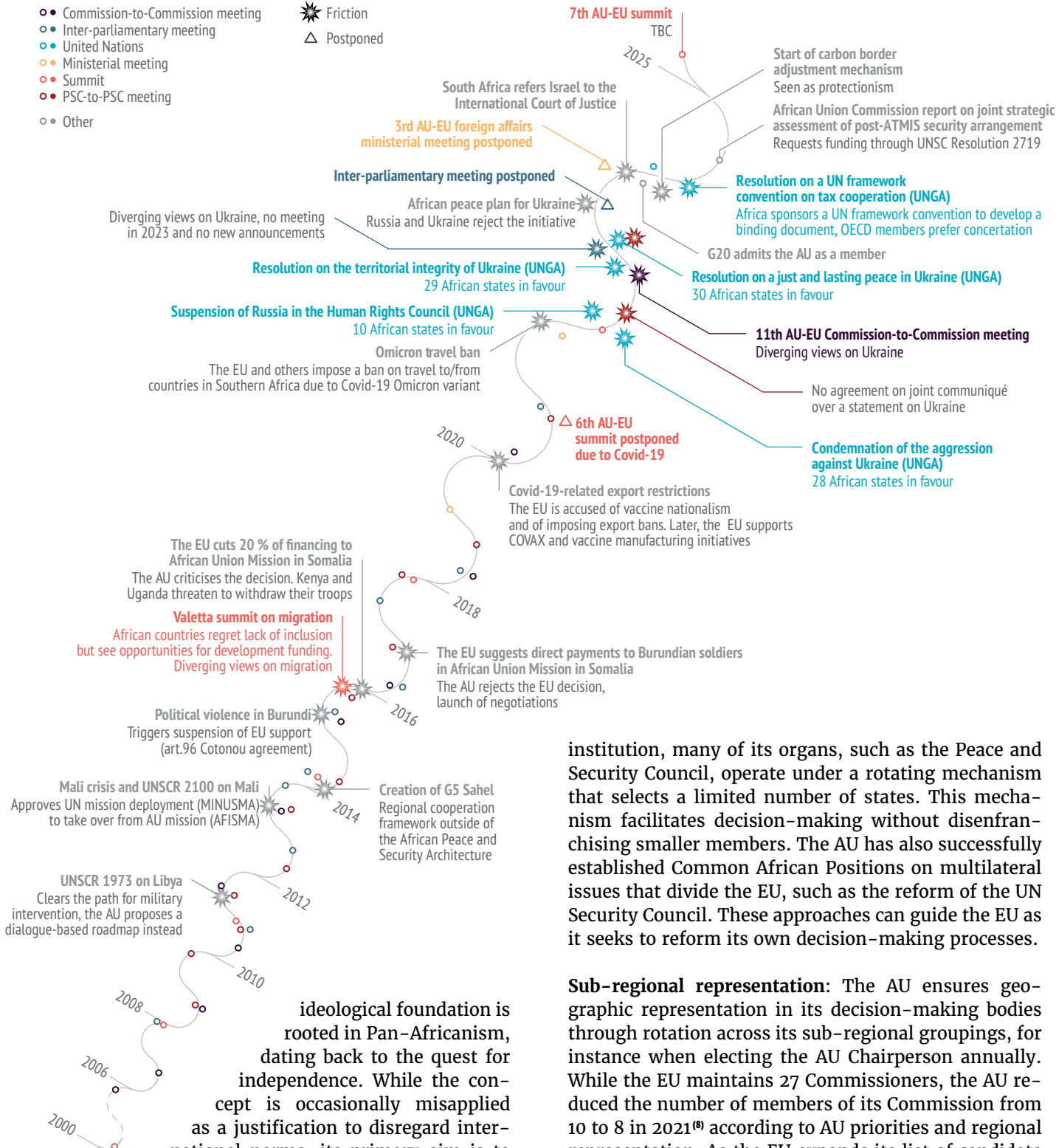
**Democratic backsliding:** Both the AU and the EU face democratic backsliding among member states. The AU's African Peer Review Mechanism allows its members to share practices and consult each other on democratic and economic governance – a process that is perceived as less intrusive than discussions with non-African partners. The AU also has a robust sanctions mechanism for unconstitutional changes of government, which it has applied in recent years, suspending Sudan, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger and Gabon. At the same time the AU is grappling with more insidious threats to democracy, such as extended presidential terms and disinformation campaigns.

**Regional identity:** Building a regional identity is crucial for both the EU and the AU. The latter's cultural and

# Ties and tensions

AU-EU relations through time

- Commission-to-Commission meeting
  - Inter-parliamentary meeting
  - United Nations
  - Ministerial meeting
  - Summit
  - PSC-to-PSC meeting
  - Other
- ★ Friction
  - △ Postponed



ideological foundation is rooted in Pan-Africanism, dating back to the quest for independence. While the concept is occasionally misapplied as a justification to disregard international norms, its primary aim is to promote continental unity. The fact that no AU member has considered leaving the organisation highlights the strength of this identity, offering insights for the EU in dealing with nationalist forces.

**Decision-making:** The EU continues to struggle with reforming its Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) system. The AU and its 55 members have significant experience in how to balance national sensitivities with continental objectives. While the AU remains an intergovernmental

institution, many of its organs, such as the Peace and Security Council, operate under a rotating mechanism that selects a limited number of states. This mechanism facilitates decision-making without disenfranchising smaller members. The AU has also successfully established Common African Positions on multilateral issues that divide the EU, such as the reform of the UN Security Council. These approaches can guide the EU as it seeks to reform its own decision-making processes.

**Sub-regional representation:** The AU ensures geographic representation in its decision-making bodies through rotation across its sub-regional groupings, for instance when electing the AU Chairperson annually. While the EU maintains 27 Commissioners, the AU reduced the number of members of its Commission from 10 to 8 in 2021<sup>(8)</sup> according to AU priorities and regional representation. As the EU expands its list of candidate countries<sup>(9)</sup>, it could look to the AU's mechanisms to move beyond consensus-based decision-making in areas such as foreign policy.

## TURNING VOWS INTO PRACTICE

To revitalise EU-AU relations, the focus should be on changing the partnership rather than trying to

change one another. Even if initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area or the Pan-African Parliament may remind the EU of its own history, they unfold within distinct institutional structures and face unique challenges. Integration pathways and outcomes will therefore also differ, but both sides can still learn from each other's experiences to avoid mistakes and gain valuable insights. Viewing each other's practices as opportunities for learning, rather than problems to be fixed, fosters mutual understanding, reduces cognitive biases and enhances both regional integration processes. With this approach in mind, we put forward four recommendations.

- **Acknowledge and value differences.** While the EU's motto is 'united in diversity', recognising cultural differences when engaging with Africa is key to overcome *stereotyping biases*. Building understanding and respect for each other's differences entails creating spaces for constructive disagreement<sup>(40)</sup>, including on contentious issues such as Ukraine and Gaza. This requires increased interactions at working level. Socialisation among member state officials played a vital role in EU integration<sup>(41)</sup> and could similarly benefit EU-AU relations. A starting point would be for African integration experts to share their knowledge in European teaching programmes, and vice versa.
- **Do not presume.** Due to *egocentric biases* both organisations often assume that their processes and structures are similar. However, the AU operates in ways that differ significantly from the EU. Joint modules on procedures and operations for EU and AU officials should explicitly address each other's institutional practices to ensure that they are able to speak the same language.
- **Take solidarity seriously.** In their notion of partnership, the AU and the EU often evoke principles of solidarity between the two regions. However, both sides overemphasise short-term concerns and selectively choose on which issues they demonstrate solidarity. Yet a genuine partnership requires accepting each other's priorities, whether it is the EU seeking support for Ukraine or the AU looking to address the issue of vaccine inequality.
- **Reconcile political and technical needs.** Decision-making processes in the two organisations are notably different. The AU seeks political agreement first in the Assembly of Heads of State and Government, with implementation left to other bodies. In contrast, the EU relies on preparatory bodies within the Council and Commission to pave the way for discussions for political leaders. In preparing AU-EU meetings, this becomes obvious, with the EU expecting detailed preparations and the AU complaining about the number of meetings.

To bridge these differences and overcome *anchoring biases*, both sides must demonstrate greater flexibility in adapting to each other's needs.

A partnership between two organisations with 27 and 55 members inevitably involves navigating disagreements. However, with a shared commitment to maintaining the partnership, it is time for both sides to put their vows into practice. After signs of alignment in multilateral settings such as the G20 and the Summit for the Future, the two partners will have to demonstrate that they can make their relationship work as they prepare for the upcoming 7th AU-EU Summit in 2025.

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