

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

The relationship between Africa and Europe is one of the oldest and most complex in the modern international system. It is a relationship that cannot be understood without considering its deep historical roots, enduring power asymmetries, and the evolving aspirations of African states in a rapidly changing global order. From the transatlantic slave trade and the colonial conquest of the nineteenth century to the post-independence era and the formation of modern institutions like the European Union (EU) and African Union (AU), the interaction between the two continents has always been characterised by a mixture of cooperation, dependency, and strategic calculation. The origins of this intercontinental relationship lie in centuries of exploitation. The colonial legacy, institutionalised through conquest and artificial borders, left African economies and political systems subordinated to European priorities. Even after the wave of independence in the 1950s and 1960s, newly sovereign African states remained enmeshed in economic, military, and diplomatic arrangements designed to perpetuate European influence. The early decades of post-independence African foreign policy were thus marked by a struggle to redefine Africa's external engagements while navigating an international system that had little interest in relinquishing control.

The establishment of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 marked a turning point in Africa's effort to collectively assert its sovereignty. However, limited institutional power and Cold War entanglements meant that Europe, particularly through the European Economic Community (EEC), retained significant sway over trade, aid, and development decisions. Over time, these postcolonial dynamics evolved

into formalised cooperation mechanisms, most notably through the Yaoundé Conventions (1963, 1969), Lomé Conventions (1975–2000), and the Cotonou Agreement of 2000. These frameworks were designed to foster development cooperation, but in practice, they often reinforced asymmetrical dependencies and subordinated African economic trajectories to European market logic¹.

With the establishment of the African Union (AU) in 2002 as a successor to the OAU, African leaders sought a more assertive institutional framework capable of leading continental integration and global engagement. The AU adopted bold agendas like Agenda 2063, which envisioned a peaceful, prosperous, and integrated Africa taking its rightful place on the world stage. Europe, meanwhile, continued its own regional consolidation under the EU framework, with an increasingly outward looking foreign policy shaped by the European Security Strategy (2003) and later the EU Global Strategy (2016), these developments created the conditions for a more structured, inter-regional partnership². In 2007, the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) was launched at the Lisbon Summit to recalibrate the relationship into one of mutual respect and shared responsibility. JAES moved away from donor recipient paradigms and introduced thematic partnerships covering peace and security, trade, governance, climate change, and migration. However, despite its progressive language, the implementation of JAES has been fraught with challenges. Many African stakeholders perceive the strategy as overly Eurocentric, top-down, and insufficiently inclusive of African priorities³. The Abidjan Summit of 2017, for instance, reinforced the commitment to partnership, but it also exposed persistent fault lines, particularly in areas of migration policy and investment conditionality.

The five-year period between 2017 and 2022 is particularly important in evaluating the contemporary journey of AU-EU relations. This era witnessed several major developments that reshaped the global and African political landscape. First among these was the COVID-19 pandemic, which not only tested the resilience of public health systems but also revealed the inequities in global vaccine access. While the EU pledged support for Africa through the COVAX initiative and bilateral donations, many African leaders criticised the slow rollout, patent restrictions, and vaccine nationalism that characterised Europe's initial response, which led to growing scepticism about Europe's commitment to genuine partnership and reignited debates about structural injustice in global health governance⁴. Another central issue during this period was migration. Following the 2015-2016 refugee crisis, the EU intensified its externalisation of migration governance through frameworks such as the Khartoum Process, the Rabat Process, and the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. These mechanisms channelled development aid and security assistance to African countries in exchange for stronger border controls, return agreements, and readmission of deportees. While the EU framed this as a pragmatic response to shared security challenges, many African scholars and civil society actors viewed it as a coercive strategy that prioritised European political concerns over African human rights and sovereignty⁵. In countries such as Niger and Libya, EU-funded programmes led to controversial detention practices and allegations of complicity in migrant abuse.

The trade and investment dimension of the relationship was similarly contested. The EU's push for Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), aimed at liberalising trade between the two blocs, met with resistance from several African governments. Critics argued that EPAs threatened domestic industries, undermined the objectives of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and risked re-entrenching a colonial

pattern of raw material exports and manufactured imports⁶. Although the EU maintained that EPAs were WTO-compliant and essential for fostering competitiveness, African policymakers continued to challenge their implications for regional integration and industrialisation. In response to these mounting tensions, the EU unveiled its Global Gateway initiative in 2021, pledging up to €150 billion in investment for African infrastructure, digitalisation, energy, and education. While ambitious in scale, the programme drew criticism for lacking adequate African consultation and for being driven more by geopolitical rivalry with China than by Africa's developmental priorities⁷. The 2022 EU-AU Summit in Brussels attempted to reset the tone of the partnership, emphasising co-investment and multilateralism. Nevertheless, by the end of 2022, the outcomes remained largely rhetorical, with implementation slow and African voices still underrepresented in decision-making processes⁸.

Security cooperation also intensified during the review period, particularly in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and the Central African Republic. The EU maintained several Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions, ranging from military training to border management. However, African critiques of these interventions centred on their lack of local ownership, limited sustainability, and tendency to conflate development with securitisation⁹. The withdrawal of French troops from Mali in 2022 and the rise of anti-European sentiment across Francophone Africa further exposed the fragility of external military partnerships and underscored the AU's growing demand for autonomy in peacebuilding. As the EU-AU relationship progressed between 2017 and 2022, it became evident that while strategic frameworks were expanding in language and ambition, practical outcomes often lagged behind expectations. One of the recurring critiques from African stakeholders was that the EU's engagements continued to reflect a paternalistic mindset, even when couched in terms of partnership

and mutual respect¹⁰. This perception was not unfounded. Despite formal commitments to joint agenda-setting, many high-level policy decisions, including those concerning trade, migration, and peace operations, were still driven predominantly by European interests and priorities¹¹.

The major site of friction during the review period was the divergence in how both blocs approached development financing and infrastructure. The African Union, particularly through Agenda 2063 and the AfCFTA, prioritised the need for structural transformation and intra-African integration. In contrast, European initiatives often privileged private, sector-led investment, regulatory reforms, and market liberalisation. While such measures may have aligned with broader neoliberal economic frameworks, they frequently clashed with African concerns over sovereignty, public sector protection, and the long-term consequences of debt exposure¹². The launch of the EU External Investment Plan and later the Global Gateway Africa–Europe Investment Package reflected this ongoing tension between strategic ambition and developmental philosophy. Additionally, regional crises across the African continent placed further strain on the EU-AU relationship. In Ethiopia, the outbreak of conflict in Tigray tested the AU's capacity for conflict resolution, while Europe faced criticism for its muted diplomatic response and prioritisation of stability over justice. Similarly, the military coups in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso exposed the fragility of democratic governance in West Africa and called into question the effectiveness of external support for institutional reform and constitutionalism. Although the EU was a major funder of electoral and security sector reforms, these upheavals indicated deeper structural issues that external aid alone could not resolve¹³.

The case of Mali in particular became symbolic of deteriorating African trust in European involvement. Following the breakdown in relations between Mali and France, and the latter's withdrawal of troops in 2022, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the AU struggled to assert a coordinated response. This exposed not only intra-African divisions but also the limits of Europe's influence in contexts where its strategic credibility had eroded. As a result, some African countries began seeking alternative partnerships with non-Western powers, thereby expanding the diplomatic space beyond the traditional EU–Africa binary¹⁴. Indeed, the rise of China, Russia, Turkey, India, and Gulf States as alternative partners for Africa significantly influenced the contours of EU-AU relations. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Russia's growing security ties, and Turkey's expanding diplomatic footprint challenged European dominance in infrastructure, security, and humanitarian spaces¹⁵. This multipolar environment forced Europe to adopt a more strategic approach, albeit one that often prioritised geopolitical rivalry over mutual development. For instance, critics of the Global Gateway argued that its focus on connectivity and green energy, though laudable, was largely reactive to China's BRI and did not sufficiently reflect African priorities or inclusivity.

Amidst these global shifts, youth and civil society movements in Africa emerged as powerful voices demanding a reconfiguration of relations with Europe. The EndSARS protests in Nigeria, FeesMustFall in South Africa, and anti-French demonstrations in the Sahel reflected broader disillusionment with existing governance models and foreign influence. These movements did not always directly target the EU but indirectly critiqued the international structures that upheld economic inequalities, security repression, and democratic deficits²². Consequently, there was a growing demand for a partnership model that was not merely intergovernmental but also accountable to

African citizens and grassroots voices. A related concern was the Issue of representation and voice within the institutional architecture of AU-EU relations. Although high-level summits regularly included declarations of inclusivity, many African analysts pointed out that African agency remained symbolic rather than substantive¹⁶. The AU Commission, constrained by limited budgetary autonomy and dependency on external funding, much of which originates from the EU, struggled to implement independent policies or hold member states accountable. Meanwhile, the EU often set conditionalities that implicitly shaped African choices, from economic governance benchmarks to migration control requirements. This structural imbalance continues to undermine trust in the partnership and calls into question the authenticity of mutual decision-making¹⁷.

Furthermore, climate change and environmental sustainability emerged as pivotal points of negotiation during this period. While both unions committed to the Paris Agreement and sustainable development goals, their approaches diverged. The EU's Green Deal and emphasis on decarbonisation raised fears among African states that new environmental standards could translate into green protectionism, undermining Africa's industrial aspirations and reinforcing trade imbalances¹⁸. Additionally, Europe's reluctance to meet its climate finance commitments and its resistance to demands for loss and damage compensation further eroded goodwill among African negotiators at global climate forums such as COP26 and COP27¹⁹. Gender and human rights discourse within EU-AU dialogues also revealed ideological fault lines. While the EU mainstreamed gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights in its external actions, African governments, often operating within more conservative socio-cultural contexts, resisted what they viewed as external impositions²⁰. These tensions were most evident in the post-Cotonou negotiations, where disagreements over language on sexuality,

reproductive rights, and anti-discrimination nearly stalled progress. Such disagreements reflect broader epistemological and normative divides that remain unresolved despite over two decades of formalised cooperation.

The AU-EU relations during the period 2017 to 2022 also unfolded against the backdrop of internal challenges within both institutions. For the EU, Brexit and growing nationalist sentiment among member states raised questions about the coherence of its external action. In Africa, contested elections, governance backsliding, and slow implementation of continental agreements like the AfCFTA exposed the AU's own institutional weaknesses²¹. These internal frictions limited the capacity of both unions to present a unified voice in interregional negotiations and contributed to the often-fragmented nature of policy implementation. Despite these obstacles, the review period was not without moments of progress and innovation. The establishment of joint task forces, enhanced parliamentary dialogues between the Pan-African Parliament and the European Parliament, and expanded academic and cultural exchanges created platforms for deeper understanding and collaboration. Initiatives like Erasmus+ Africa, EU-AU digital transformation partnerships, and youth innovation hubs represented attempts to reimagine the relationship through people-centred, knowledge-based cooperation²². These developments signalled that while challenges persist, there are also genuine opportunities to build a more democratic and developmentally relevant partnership, if both sides are willing to shift the structural underpinnings of the relationship.

The period from 2017 to 2022 reflects a critical juncture in EU-AU relations. It reveals a partnership under tension, progressive in rhetoric, but uneven in practice; institutionalised in form, but unequal in substance. While both unions articulate a vision

of strategic cooperation, their interactions are still deeply conditioned by historical legacies, unequal power relations, and diverging normative frameworks. Understanding these complexities requires moving beyond diplomatic declarations and examining the operational realities of this interregional relationship. It is only through such periodic, critical assessments that scholars and policymakers alike can determine whether the AU-EU engagement is moving toward authentic mutuality or whether alternative paradigms, including strategic delinking, may be necessary. An often-overlooked dimension of the AU-EU relationship during 2017–2022 is the role of knowledge production and epistemic inequality. Much of the research, policy guidance, and impact assessment shaping Africa-Europe relations is produced by European think tanks, consultancies, and universities. While these institutions are undoubtedly valuable, they often approach Africa from a deficit-oriented perspective, reinforcing narratives of fragility, failure, and perpetual dependence²³. African knowledge systems, traditional governance models, and endogenous policy innovations are either marginalised or treated as secondary in most EU-funded research programmes²⁴. This imbalance has real-world implications, as it influences what is deemed ‘evidence-based’ and whose knowledge is legitimised in shaping policy priorities.

African scholars, activists, and institutions have begun to call for a decolonisation of knowledge and policymaking in Africa–EU cooperation in response to this. Organisations such as the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and the African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD) have advocated for greater research autonomy, support for African-led evaluations, and a redefinition of success indicators in development cooperation²⁵. The growing interest in African-centred approaches, such as Ubuntu diplomacy, indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms, and Afro-feminist economics, offers a powerful alternative to

the Eurocentric paradigms that dominate current partnership frameworks²⁶. More so, mainstream AU-EU dialogues have remained slow to integrate these perspectives beyond token inclusion or pilot initiatives.

Simultaneously, the digital transformation sweeping across Africa presented both opportunities and contradictions within the AU-EU relationship. On one hand, Europe supported programmes aimed at enhancing Africa's digital infrastructure, cybersecurity, and connectivity, often in collaboration with multilateral development banks and private sector actors²⁷. Initiatives like the EU–Africa Digital Economy Task Force and Smart Africa Alliance received funding for broadband access, e-commerce platforms, and digital public services. On the other hand, concerns were raised regarding digital sovereignty, data protection, and the potential for technological neo-colonialism²⁸. The dominance of European firms and standards in digital development raised questions about Africa's ability to control its digital future and protect citizens' rights in the emerging data economy.

Moreover, the EU-AU relationship during this period was increasingly shaped by transnational crises that demanded urgent, coordinated responses. Climate-induced disasters such as cyclones in Mozambique, prolonged droughts in the Horn of Africa, and flooding in West Africa underscored the shared vulnerability of both regions to global environmental shocks²⁹. The COVID-19 pandemic, beyond its public health dimensions, revealed the fragility of supply chains, the limits of global solidarity, and the pitfalls of excessive dependence on external production for critical goods. These shocks reinforced the imperative for Africa to develop stronger internal capacities, while also redefining the terms of its external engagements, particularly with Europe, which continued to play a dual role as both partner and gatekeeper³⁰.

The concept of strategic autonomy traction within both unions during the review period, albeit in different contexts. For the EU, strategic autonomy referred to reducing dependency on external powers, especially in defence and digital technology, in light of shifting transatlantic relations and global power realignments³¹. For the AU, it signified the need to enhance self-financing mechanisms, reduce reliance on donor conditionalities, and assert a stronger voice in multilateral institutions. However, actual progress towards autonomy in Africa remained slow, largely due to resource constraints, political fragmentation, and persistent structural inequalities embedded in the global economic system³². Furthermore, in assessing the AU–EU relationship across this five-year period, one must also consider the symbolic and normative dimensions of diplomacy. High-level summits, communiqués, and joint declarations are often celebrated as milestones of progress. Meanwhile, without meaningful implementation, these events risk becoming rituals of partnership devoid of substantive transformation³³.

The continued reliance on lofty language, terms like “equal partners”, “win-win cooperation”, and “shared values”, without a fundamental rebalancing of power, risks fuelling cynicism among African populations and reinforcing the perception that the EU-AU relationship is performative rather than transformative³⁴. The institutional reform within the African Union itself played a crucial role in shaping its engagement with the EU. The AU’s decision to streamline its structures, enhance member state contributions, and establish stronger technical departments aimed to position the organisation as a more effective global actor. These reforms have encountered resistance from member states reluctant to cede authority or increase financial obligations. As a result, the AU’s diplomatic leverage vis-à-vis the EU remained constrained, particularly in negotiations requiring unified African positions. This

highlights the dual challenge Africa faces: reforming its internal governance while recalibrating its external partnerships.

Ultimately, the EU-AU relationship during the 2017 - 2022 period illustrates a paradox. On one hand, the partnership is more institutionalised and multi-dimensional than ever before, spanning areas from digital policy to climate adaptation, security cooperation to higher education. On the other hand, it remains mired in asymmetries of power, vision, and implementation. While rhetorical advances have been made, the substance of the relationship continues to reflect unequal structural realities, many of which are inherited from historical injustices and reinforced by contemporary global hierarchies³⁵. The periodic assessment offered in this study does not seek to negate the progress achieved in areas such as education, capacity building, or regional dialogue. Rather, it aims to critically interrogate the extent to which the AU-EU relationship has evolved from its postcolonial foundations into a truly strategic, equitable, and transformative partnership. It also considers whether current institutional and political trajectories are sufficient for such a transformation, or whether a more radical rethinking of the relationship, including elements of strategic delinking, may be necessary to secure Africa's long-term autonomy and prosperity.

As Africa's population grows, its markets expand, and its geopolitical importance rises, the nature of its relationships with global partners, especially Europe, will shape not only the continent's future but the global order itself. The years 2017 to 2022 offer a particularly instructive moment in that evolving relationship: a time of crisis, recalibration, and contestation. It is within this context that this study undertakes to investigate the systematic and reflective inquiry into the EU-AU partnership, seeking to define the next phase of Africa-Europe relations.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite repeated affirmations of “equal partnership” between the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU), their relationship remains largely perpetually and practically asymmetric, characterised by economic dependence, and unequal bargaining power. From 2017 to 2022, the partnership was tested by divergent priorities, contested migration strategies, uneven vaccine access, and growing criticisms of conditionality-based aid. While Europe continued to frame its involvement as developmental and cooperative, many African states and thinkers increasingly perceived the EU as pursuing self-interested strategies under the guise of partnership. Meanwhile, African leaders remain divided over the direction of the relationship, whether to deepen engagement, strategically delink, or diversify beyond Europe. In this context, a critical gap emerges that revealed a limited systematic, period-specific analysis of how the EU-AU relationship evolved between 2017 and 2022, what issues dominated their engagement, what challenges persisted, and whether the journey points toward continued cooperation or justified recalibration.

1.3 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to critically assess the relationship between the European Union and the African Union from 2017 to 2022 in order to determine its evolving nature, central issues, structural challenges, and its future plans, while the specific are as follows:

- i. examine the nature of European Union and African Union relations from 2017 to 2022.
- ii. examine the dominant issues in EU-AU relations within the period under review.

- iii. identify the core challenges that confronted the EU-AU partnership between 2017 and 2022.
- iv. weigh the possibility of continued strategic engagement or justified delinking between the two blocs.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What nature of relations existed between the European Union and African Union from 2017 to 2022?
2. What were the dominant issues shaping EU–AU relations during this period?
3. What challenges confronted their partnership between 2017 and 2022?
4. How justifiable is continued engagement or strategic delinking between the EU and AU?

1.5 Scope of the Study

This study is geographically limited to the institutional interactions between the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU), not bilateral relations between individual European and African states. Thematically, the study focuses on the 2017-2022 timeframe, a period marked by major summits, strategic declarations, global disruptions (e.g., COVID-19), and growing ideological divergence. The main themes covered include trade, development cooperation, migration policy, security, vaccine diplomacy, and political alignment. The analysis is strictly limited to secondary sources, official declarations, policy documents, summit communiqués, academic reports, and media investigations, without primary field interviews. Although earlier history and background may be referenced for context, the core analysis is constrained to the designated five-year period.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study holds theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it contributes to international relations scholarship by offering a critical, period-specific review of Africa–Europe relations through the lens of evolving global power dynamics, postcolonial thought, and strategic partnerships. Practically, the research provides policy insights for AU and EU institutions, helping diplomats, negotiators, and regional planners better understand where the partnership has progressed, where it has failed, and what adjustments are necessary for future cooperation. In the context of growing multipolarity and African agency, this study also helps illuminate whether continued reliance on Europe serves Africa’s developmental and strategic interests, or whether recalibrated engagement is necessary to align with African priorities.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

This research is limited by its exclusive reliance on secondary data, which restricts the study’s capacity to incorporate live perspectives from policymakers and diplomats involved in EU-AU interactions. It also does not capture real-time developments post, 2022, which may influence the partnership trajectory. Further, the study does not address intra-continental contradictions within Africa or Europe that may affect regional consensus, such as differing migration stances or regional power rivalries. Despite these limitations, the study remains analytically valid by engaging with officially documented interactions, academic literature, and public policy frameworks.

1.8 Definition of Terms

1. **European Union (EU):** A political and economic union of 27 European countries operating through shared institutions in areas including trade, migration, security, and development policy.

2. **African Union (AU):** A continental union of 55 African countries focused on promoting unity, peace, development, and integration across Africa.
3. **Strategic Partnership:** A formalised long-term relationship between regions or countries that is based on shared interests and mutual objectives, often involving political, economic, and security cooperation.
4. **Development Cooperation:** Financial and technical support provided by one region (often the global North) to another (often the global South) to enhance socio-economic development and institutional capacity.
5. **Migration Governance:** The set of policies, frameworks, and bilateral/multilateral agreements that regulate cross-border human movement, including border control, repatriation, and legal status.
6. **Delinking:** A theoretical and strategic concept (inspired by dependency theory) advocating for reduced dependence on external actors or systems in favour of autonomous development paths.
7. **Asymmetrical Power Relations:** A structural imbalance in influence or capacity between two entities in a partnership, leading to unequal benefits or decision-making power.
8. **Postcolonial Critique:** An analytical framework used to examine how historical colonisation continues to shape modern political, economic, and cultural relationships between the former colonisers and colonised regions.

Endnotes

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Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Review

2.1.1 Historical Foundations of Africa-Europe Relations

This chapter presents a comprehensive review of the relevant literature to establish the theoretical and analytical foundations of the study. It draws from scholarly writings, institutional reports, and policy frameworks to deepen the understanding of the European Union (EU)–African Union (AU) partnership between 2017 and 2022. The literature review is structured into conceptual, theoretical, and empirical dimensions to provide clarity on the nature of the relationship, its historical underpinnings, dominant issues, and evolving dynamics. A clear understanding of past and current discourses is essential to assess the extent to which the AU-EU relationship has progressed, stalled, or transformed during the study period.

The relationship between Africa and Europe predates modern international diplomacy and is grounded in centuries of asymmetrical encounters, colonial expansion, missionary interventions, and resource extraction. Historically, this relationship was rarely cooperative. Instead, it was shaped by power, conquest, and structural domination, creating lasting legacies that continue to influence Africa-Europe diplomacy to this day. To understand the contemporary interactions between the European Union (EU) and African Union (AU), it is imperative to first explore the historical foundations of Africa-Europe relations from precolonial contacts to the postcolonial institutional frameworks that underpin the modern partnership.

The earliest significant encounters between Africa and Europe began during the Age of Exploration in the 15th century, when Portuguese and Spanish navigators established

trading posts along the West African coast. These encounters marked the start of sustained European interest in Africa's resources, especially gold, ivory, and slaves¹. The transatlantic slave trade, which lasted roughly from the 16th to 19th centuries, saw the forced displacement of over twelve million Africans to European colonies in the Americas. This trade not only devastated African societies but also generated immense wealth for European economies, laying the foundations for early capitalist accumulation in Europe². Scholars argue that these centuries of extractive interaction established a precedent for exploitative North–South relations rooted in structural inequality³. By the late 19th century, the European imperial agenda reached its apex in what became known as the Scramble for Africa. The 1884–85 Berlin Conference, convened by German Chancellor Otto Von Bismarck, partitioned Africa among European powers without African consultation. Under the guise of civilising missions, European empires imposed arbitrary borders, centralised governance systems, and monoculture economies on African territories. These colonial structures disrupted indigenous socio-political systems and reshaped African economies to serve European industrial interests. The partitioning of Africa and the enforcement of artificial boundaries have had lasting implications on African statehood, regionalism, and foreign policy trajectories⁴. The legacies of colonial rule endured even after the wave of African decolonisation between 1957 and 1975. Most newly independent African states retained economic and diplomatic ties with their former colonial rulers, forming what scholars refer to as neo-colonial dependencies. European development assistance, trade preferences, and military cooperation often came with implicit conditions designed to preserve European influence over African policymaking⁵. For example, France's post-independence relations with its former colonies in West and Central Africa involved

monetary arrangements (such as the CFA franc zone), defense pacts, and cultural programmes through “Francophonie,” which critics saw as thinly veiled tools of control.

Institutionally, postcolonial Africa-Europe relations were initially shaped by frameworks like the Yaoundé Conventions 1963, 1969, which formalised trade and aid cooperation between the European Economic Community (EEC) and selected former colonies. These were followed by the more expansive Lomé Conventions (1975 - 2000), which created the ACP-EU partnership involving African, Caribbean, and Pacific countries. The Lomé framework offered trade preferences, aid, and access to European markets in return for political stability and economic liberalism in African states⁶. However, critics argue that these conventions continued to reinforce dependency, as African economies remained exporters of raw materials and importers of European goods, with little structural transformation⁷. By the early 2000s, the EU shifted its external relations architecture from the Lomé system to the Cotonou Partnership Agreement (2000), which introduced stronger conditionalities linked to governance, human rights, and market liberalisation⁸. The agreement also laid the groundwork for the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), bilateral and regional trade deals that aimed to replace non-reciprocal trade preferences with World Trade Organization (WTO), compliant free trade arrangements. African countries expressed concern that EPAs would undermine their regional integration efforts, erode tariff revenues, and expose domestic industries to unfair competition.

Simultaneously, Africa was undergoing its own institutional transformation. The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was replaced by the African Union (AU) in 2002, reflecting a new continental ambition for integration, peace, and development. The AU's Agenda 2063 articulated Africa's long-term vision for structural transformation

and global repositioning. Within this evolving context, the EU sought to redefine its relationship with Africa beyond aid and trade, towards a more comprehensive strategic partnership. The first official Africa-EU Summit was held in Cairo in 2000, marking a shift from purely donor-recipient dynamics to political dialogue at the continental level. This led to the adoption of the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) in 2007 during the Lisbon Summit, intended to promote common interests, shared values, and multilateral cooperation. The JAES outlined eight thematic partnerships, including peace and security, democratic governance, trade, energy, and migration. Despite its lofty rhetoric, implementation of the JAES was fraught with challenges, including funding constraints, bureaucratic overlaps, and differing regional priorities.

The 2017 Abidjan AU-EU Summit was a turning point in this evolving relationship. Amid rising African dissatisfaction with EU conditionalities and perceived paternalism, both parties committed to resetting the partnership on the principles of mutual respect and shared responsibility. The summit emphasised youth empowerment, infrastructure development, and security cooperation as joint priorities. It was seen as an attempt by the EU to regain its strategic footing in Africa, particularly in the face of growing Chinese, Turkish, and Russian presence on the continent⁸. During the period from 2017 to 2022, the relationship was increasingly tested by global shifts. The COVID, 19 pandemic exposed stark disparities in access to healthcare and vaccine equity. While the EU contributed to COVAX and vaccine donations, African leaders criticised the slow rollout, hoarding of doses, and protection of intellectual property rights that prevented local vaccine manufacturing⁹. These tensions revealed enduring structural asymmetries that contradict the discourse of equal partnership. Additionally, migration management became a controversial pillar of the relationship, with the EU funding

border control and return operations in African transit countries, sometimes at the expense of human rights and state legitimacy.

Another critical flashpoint was the EU's Global Gateway initiative, launched in 2021 to compete with China's Belt and Road Initiative. The EU pledged €150 billion in investments for African infrastructure, digitalisation, and climate resilience¹⁸. However, many African analysts argued that the programme lacked meaningful African consultation and risked reproducing top-down, Eurocentric development models¹⁰. Despite these frictions, the AU–EU relationship remains institutionally entrenched, with regular summits, ministerial meetings, and technical dialogues. The 2022 Brussels AU–EU Summit reaffirmed mutual commitment to multilateralism, sustainable development, and joint security operations, especially in the Sahel and Horn of Africa. The question remains whether these declarations will lead to substantive changes in power dynamics or merely repackage old patterns in new language. In essence, the historical foundations of Africa-Europe relations continue to shape the terms of engagement between the AU and EU. From colonial conquest to strategic partnership, the relationship has evolved but not fully transformed. The structural inequalities of the past, rooted in economic dependence, political subordination, and epistemological dominance, still linger in the present, albeit in more complex and contested forms. As such, contemporary AU-EU relations must be situated within a broader historical trajectory that resists simplistic binaries of cooperation versus domination.

Scholars have long argued that Africa's underdevelopment is not simply a result of internal mismanagement, but of historical patterns of exploitation, marginalisation, and structural exclusion¹¹. In this sense, any analysis of EU–AU relations must interrogate

whether today's institutions, policies, and frameworks meaningfully depart from this legacy or merely adapt it to the postcolonial order. As the AU seeks to assert greater agency and redefine its external partnerships, the EU's willingness to support genuine African priorities, without coercion or conditionality, will be the true measure of progress in this evolving relationship.

2.1.2 Partnership, Dependency, and Postcolonial Dynamics

The concept of partnership between Africa and Europe has, in theory, evolved from a vertical relationship rooted in colonial control to a more horizontal engagement based on equality, mutual interests, and shared responsibility. However, the language of partnership is often at odds with the political economy of Africa-Europe interactions, which continues to reflect historical asymmetries and power imbalances. To assess the structure and function of the African Union (AU) - European Union (EU) relations, it is crucial to explore the theoretical underpinnings of partnership, the critiques of dependency theory, and the enduring relevance of postcolonial analysis.

The contemporary notion of "partnership" emerged in the late 1990s as part of the global rebranding of North-South cooperation. Institutions such as the World Bank and the European Commission adopted this language to signify a break from paternalistic development models of the past and to emphasise joint ownership of development agendas. In the case of the EU and Africa, partnership was formalised through institutional agreements such as the Cotonou Partnership Agreement of 2000, and later through the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) adopted in Lisbon in 2007. These frameworks introduced language focused on equality, co-ownership, mutual accountability, and dialogue¹². Scholars have persistently questioned whether the

partnership rhetoric is reflected in practice or simply masks continued European dominance.

The Cotonou Agreement, while celebrated for its wide scope, covering trade, aid, governance, and civil society participation, has been critiqued for imposing political conditionalities that disproportionately shape African policymaking. For instance, Article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement allows for the suspension of cooperation in cases of human rights violations, political instability, or lack of democratic accountability. While such clauses aim to promote good governance, they also serve as instruments through which the EU maintains leverage over internal African affairs¹³. This reveals a tension between partnership as cooperation and partnership as discipline. Postcolonial researchers argue that the partnership framework is often Eurocentric in design and implementation. Even when mutual interests are invoked, European standards and priorities tend to dominate the agenda. For example, in security cooperation, the EU often deploys its military training missions in Africa, such as EUCAP Sahel Mali or EUTM Somalia, under mandates that prioritise European security concerns like migration control and counterterrorism¹⁴. African voices are frequently marginalised in the design and evaluation of these missions, leading to accusations that partnership mechanisms reflect strategic instrumentalisation rather than genuine cooperation.

The Joint Africa–EU Strategy was intended to counter these critiques by establishing eight thematic partnerships, from peace and security to climate change and migration. However, even within JAES, implementation has been hindered by asymmetric capacities, lack of funding from the African side, and divergent political will¹⁵. While the EU has the institutional machinery, budget, and bureaucratic infrastructure to operationalise its commitments, the AU remains institutionally weaker, more dependent

on donor support, and often divided internally. This asymmetry undermines the possibility of equal engagement, despite formal partnership rhetoric. Dependency theory offers a powerful lens to understand these dynamics. Emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, dependency theory posits that underdevelopment in the global South is not a result of internal deficiencies, but a consequence of structural exploitation by the global North. Economists such as Raul Prebisch and scholars like Samir Amin argued that Africa's subordinate position in the global economic system is maintained through unequal trade terms, foreign capital dependence, and extractive relationships¹⁶. Within the context of EU–AU relations, this framework helps explain why African economies continue to rely on raw material exports and manufactured imports from Europe, despite decades of “development cooperation.”

The EU's Economic Partnership Agreement, (EPAs) have been widely criticised within this framework. Market liberalisation under EPA terms often compels African countries to eliminate tariffs on European goods while still lacking the capacity to compete globally¹⁷. This undermines efforts at industrialisation and violates the spirit of regional integration, especially under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) initiative. Countries like Nigeria and Tanzania have been reluctant to sign EPAs for these very reasons, fearing deindustrialisation and policy loss¹⁸. Beyond economics, dependency manifests through technical and knowledge production dependencies. Development programmes in Africa are often evaluated using European indicators, expertise, and funding models. African think tanks and civil society organisations that engage with EU projects are frequently bound by European priorities, budget cycles, and reporting frameworks¹⁹. This creates what study has called a “cognitive dependency,” where African epistemologies are subordinated to Western modes of knowledge production²⁰. Postcolonial theory expands on dependency theory by

examining how colonial power relations persist in contemporary discourse, cultural norms, and institutional frameworks. Study have demonstrated that postcolonial relations are not merely economic or political, but also epistemic, that is, embedded in how the world is understood and narrated. In Africa-Europe relations, postcolonial analysis reveals how African states are often constructed in EU policy as fragile, conflict-prone, or migration-producing, thereby justifying European interventions under the guise of partnership²¹.

The EU's migration policy in Africa, including the Khartoum Process and Rabat Process, relies on narratives of irregular migration as a threat to European stability. In response, the EU has funded security and border control programmes in Niger, Libya, and Sudan, often in violation of human rights standards²². These programmes, while framed as "cooperative," largely reflect European priorities. The African side is often expected to adapt its security and development policies to European interests in exchange for aid or investment, which challenges the foundational claim of an equal partnership. Despite these critiques, both dependency and postcolonial theories acknowledge the agency of African actors. African governments, regional bodies, and civil society organisations have not merely been passive recipients. Countries like Rwanda, Ethiopia (prior to its internal conflict), and Ghana have strategically leveraged EU funds to finance national development plans while resisting intrusive policy conditionalities²³. At the AU level, the Commission has increasingly asserted itself in global for a, demanding reform of global financial institutions, fair vaccine access, and climate finance equity. These actions complicate simplistic narratives of dependency and reveal that while the structure may be unequal, African actors are capable of subverting, negotiating, or recalibrating the terms of engagement.

The EU launched the Global Gateway Initiative in 2021 as a response to rising critique, promising €300 billion in infrastructure investment worldwide, with €150 billion allocated for Africa. While framed as a strategic partnership, critics note that the initiative is a geopolitical response to China's Belt and Road Initiative rather than a sincere effort to empower African priorities²⁴. African policy experts argue that meaningful partnership requires co-creation, local ownership, and respect for African agendas, not pre-designed European projects seeking African approval. In addition, Africa's emerging partnerships with China, Russia, Turkey, India, and the Gulf States reflect an evolving diplomatic landscape where Europe is no longer the sole hegemonic partner. The African Union's Agenda 2063 positions Africa as a confident global actor seeking diversified partnerships and continental integration²⁵. Within this environment, the sustainability of the AU-EU relationship depends on Europe's willingness to reframe partnership away from control and towards authentic cooperation. This requires a dismantling of institutional biases, support for African-led initiatives, and a genuine acceptance of Africa's political and ideological agency.

Thus, while the discourse of partnership suggests progress from earlier models of domination, the reality often replicates historical hierarchies. Partnership remains conditional, asymmetrical, and deeply embedded in structures of power that favour Europe. For the AU-EU relationship to evolve meaningfully, both theoretical and practical shifts are necessary. A genuine partnership must embrace reciprocity, mutual respect, and a commitment to dismantling historical injustices, both discursively and materially.

2.1.3 Migration, Security, and Development Interlinkages

Migration, security, and development form an interlocking triad that has increasingly dominated Africa–Europe relations, particularly between 2017 and 2022. While historically approached as separate policy areas, the European Union (EU) and African Union (AU) now address them as interconnected domains under the logic of “comprehensive partnership.” However, the convergence of these three areas has raised major concerns around sovereignty, human rights, and policy asymmetry. EU–AU cooperation on migration and security is often framed as mutually beneficial, yet the underlying structures and outcomes reveal imbalances in agenda-setting, burden-sharing, and normative assumptions.

From the EU’s perspective, the externalisation of migration governance has been a major strategic objective since the 2015–2016 refugee crisis. This externalisation strategy involves shifting migration management responsibilities to countries of origin and transit, many of which are in Africa. Programmes such as the Khartoum Process (2014) and Rabat Process (2006) became key instruments in formalising EU–Africa cooperation on migration control. These frameworks are supported financially through the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), launched in 2015 to address “root causes of irregular migration and displacement”. In practical terms, these policies translated into aid-for-migration control arrangements, whereby African governments, especially in the Sahel, North Africa, and Horn of Africa, receive EU funding in exchange for tightening borders, policing migrant flows, and accepting deportees. Countries like Niger, Ethiopia, and Sudan have become major partners in this model. However, scholars and human rights organisations argue that these arrangements often violate fundamental freedoms, displace vulnerable populations internally, and prop up authoritarian regimes under the guise of stability²⁷. The EUTF, while framed as

development assistance, In practice funds securitised border infrastructure and surveillance technologies rather than addressing systemic drivers of migration such as poverty, unemployment, and political exclusion.

The AU, on its part, has publicly affirmed its support for “safe, orderly, and regular migration.” The AU Migration Policy Framework for Africa (MPFA) promotes intra-African mobility, diaspora engagement, and migrant rights. However, African leaders remain divided. Some welcome EU funding as a source of state revenue and political leverage, while others criticise the securitisation of development aid and the moral hazards of outsourcing Europe’s border control to African soil. The AU-EU Valletta Summit on Migration (2015) and subsequent dialogues revealed this tension. While both sides agreed on a Joint Action Plan, African states expressed concerns over forced returns, restrictive visa policies, and conditional aid²⁸. Security cooperation between the EU and Africa similarly reflects a blend of mutual interests and structural inequalities. The EU has funded and deployed multiple Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions in Africa, including EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUTM Somalia, and EUAM RCA (Central African Republic). These missions provide training, logistical support, and security sector reform assistance. While they enhance state capacities in fragile contexts, critics argue that they often lack local legitimacy, operate with limited accountability, and prioritise European security over African political dynamics²⁹.

The Sahel region has become the most prominent theatre for EU-AU security cooperation. Since the outbreak of jihadist insurgencies in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the EU has invested over €3 billion in military and civilian support operations. These efforts complement the G5 Sahel Joint Force, the French-led Operation Barkhane, and UN peacekeeping missions. Despite this extensive involvement, the region has

seen recurrent coups, intensifying violence, and growing anti-European sentiment, particularly in Francophone states³⁰. The 2021-2022 military takeovers in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso triggered EU sanctions, but also exposed the limitations of external security support in addressing local governance failures.

Development, the third pillar in this triad, is supposed to address the structural conditions driving insecurity and migration. But in practice, development aid has increasingly been subordinated to security and migration objectives. EU development programming in Africa has been criticised for adopting a risk-averse, donor-driven model that favours short-term stability over long-term transformation. For instance, much of the funding under the NDICI-Global Europe Instrument (2021 - 2027) earmarked for Africa continues to support security governance, counter-terrorism, and border management³¹. These trends blur the lines between development and security, often to the detriment of human rights, democratic governance, and inclusive growth. The merger of migration, security, and development agendas also raises questions of agenda ownership. While the EU claims to support African-led solutions, much of the policy architecture is designed in Brussels and imposed through conditionality mechanisms embedded in financing instruments. This undermines the AU's own policy frameworks and regional initiatives, including the African Governance Architecture (AGA) and the Silencing the Guns initiative. The result is a scenario where African governments are incentivised to prioritise European-defined objectives in order to access funding, often at the cost of their own developmental priorities³².

Moreover, these interlinkages create governance dilemmas for African states. Governments are caught between responding to local constituencies, who may demand jobs, justice, and sovereignty, and complying with donor expectations that prioritise

external borders, migration control, and political stability. This can erode domestic legitimacy, particularly when security forces trained or funded by the EU are involved in human rights abuses or political repression. The use of EU-supplied surveillance technology by some regimes to track journalists, activists, or opposition leaders illustrates the potential dangers of securitised cooperation. The logic of interdependence, often invoked by EU officials to justify cooperation, increasingly appears imbalanced in practice. While Europe needs African cooperation to manage migration flows and contain security threats, Africa's development needs go far beyond these priorities. The result is a partnership in which African states bear disproportionate burdens, hosting returnees, policing borders, absorbing conditionalities, while the structural conditions of underdevelopment remain largely unaddressed. As a researcher argued, development cooperation risks becoming a tool of containment rather than emancipation³³.

At the institutional level, AU-EU relations have attempted to address these issues through formal mechanisms. The AU-EU Partnership on Peace and Security and the Continental Framework for Migration are meant to ensure policy coherence and shared decision-making. However, their implementation has been inconsistent. African representatives have complained of tokenism in consultation, while EU officials cite fragmentation within the AU as a barrier to effective cooperation. Furthermore, disparities in resource mobilization, where the EU provides most of the funds, continue to reproduce dependency dynamics. Civil society organisations on both continents have increasingly called for a rethinking of the migration–security–development nexus. They argue for a people-centred approach that foregrounds rights, dignity, and agency. Proposals include: shifting from border control to mobility facilitation; investing in youth employment and education; supporting local peacebuilding initiatives; and

ensuring that aid policies are aligned with democratic governance standards. These calls have been amplified during major AU-EU summits, but often fail to translate into binding commitments³⁴.

The integration of migration, security, and development in AU-EU relations reflects both strategic necessity and structural contradiction. While both blocs face shared transnational challenges, from terrorism to human trafficking, differences in capacity, perspective, and historical experience shape how these issues are addressed. The EU's emphasis on containment, border securitisation, and strategic stability often clashes with Africa's long-term vision for transformation, integration, and human security. Bridging this gap requires not only policy realignment but also a fundamental shift in power relations, one that prioritises African ownership, mutual respect, and transformative justice over narrow strategic interests.

2.1.4 The Role of China, Multipolarity, and Strategic Competition in AU–EU Relations

The geopolitical landscape of the African continent has undergone a profound reconfiguration between 2017 and 2022, driven primarily by the intensification of multipolarity and the rise of non-Western actors. Among these, the People's Republic of China has emerged as the most formidable challenger to the European Union's historical influence in Africa. However, this transition is not unilinear; rather, it encapsulates a nuanced competition wherein strategic realignments, overlapping interests, and agency-driven recalibrations by the African Union (AU) have redrawn the contours of Africa–Europe relations.

From an empirical standpoint, China's economic presence in Africa continues to eclipse that of the EU in several domains. By 2021, China's trade volume with Africa surpassed \$250 billion, nearly doubling the EU's bilateral trade volume and dwarfing

its infrastructure delivery footprint. This expansion is not limited to commerce, it encompasses railway construction, digital backbone infrastructure, hydro-energy projects, and port developments across more than 40 African countries. Notably, projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have been executed with accelerated timelines and minimal political conditionality, in contrast to the European model that often requires alignment with governance and human rights frameworks.

While the EU remains Africa's principal donor in terms of aid and technical assistance, its developmental tools, particularly the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) and Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), have often been criticised as Eurocentric, conditional, and bureaucratically cumbersome. The BRI, by contrast, is viewed in many African capitals as more pragmatic and responsive to infrastructural deficits³⁵. This divergence in engagement styles has permitted the AU to diversify its strategic portfolio, often invoking Chinese support to counterbalance or renegotiate terms with European institutions. During the post-2017 EPA renegotiations, several African governments referenced China's concessional financing models as benchmarks to resist restrictive trade liberalisation schedules proposed by the EU³⁶. Beyond economics, China's growing soft power, exemplified through Confucius Institutes, media cooperation, and educational exchanges, has contributed to reshaping African elite perceptions of global power. Beijing's diplomatic framing emphasises sovereignty, non-intervention, and "South-South solidarity," resonating with postcolonial sensibilities in many African states. This has enabled African leaders to adopt a more assertive stance in multilateral forums such as the African Union-European Union summits, pushing back against what they often perceive as residual paternalism in EU rhetoric³⁶. The 2022 Brussels AU-EU Summit, for instance, witnessed AU delegates resisting language that overtly criticised

China, advocating instead for a pluralistic partnership framework grounded in African priorities.

Nevertheless, this shifting equilibrium has not gone unnoticed in Brussels. In response to China's encroachment, the EU launched the Global Gateway strategy in 2021, a €300 billion global investment plan, with €150 billion dedicated to Africa. Framed as a values-based infrastructure initiative, it seeks to compete with the BRI by offering "sustainable, transparent, and green" alternatives³⁷. The reception among African policymakers has been ambivalent. Critics argue that the Global Gateway, much like the NDICI–Global Europe financial instrument, has struggled to match the speed, visibility, and flexibility of China's initiatives³⁸. Moreover, its design process excluded extensive African consultation, prompting concerns that it may replicate the hierarchical development patterns it ostensibly seeks to replace.

The rise of China has also reconfigured security dynamics. Although China has limited military footprints compared to Europe, its growing involvement in peacekeeping (e.g., in South Sudan), naval diplomacy in the Gulf of Aden, and arms sales to African states has challenged EU-led peace architecture³⁹. Simultaneously, Russia has inserted itself as a disruptive actor, particularly in conflict zones like Mali, Libya, and the Central African Republic. Through its Wagner Group, arms diplomacy, and cyber disinformation, Moscow exploits governance vacuums, often presenting itself as a more ideologically neutral partner than the EU or the United States⁴⁰. While its economic footprint remains small, Russia's symbolic capital among disaffected youth, especially via digital propaganda, has amplified anti-Western narratives. This expanding multipolarity has imposed critical dilemmas on AU institutions. On one hand, strategic diversification offers the AU bargaining leverage and alternative

pathways to development financing. On the other hand, it introduces the risk of policy incoherence, elite capture, and institutional fragmentation. Instances where foreign actors bypass AU protocols to engage directly with national governments have eroded collective continental initiatives such as the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). These dynamics suggest that while multipolarity fosters agency, it also exposes structural vulnerabilities in Africa's institutional architecture⁴¹.

Despite these challenges, the AU has taken incremental steps to consolidate its foreign policy coordination. The creation of the Division for Partnerships and Resource Mobilisation under the AU Commission signals an attempt to centralise and rationalise Africa's engagement with external powers⁴². Additionally, the AU's growing emphasis on Agenda 2063 and its call for a rules-based, inclusive multilateral order demonstrate a concerted effort to assert normative leadership, even in a contested geopolitical arena. Interestingly, this assertiveness has begun to shift Africa's posture in global institutions. Between 2017 and 2022, African states increasingly adopted independent voting positions at the United Nations General Assembly, World Health Organization, and World Trade Organization. Whether in rejecting European opposition to a COVID-19 vaccine IP waiver or supporting equitable climate finance at COP summits, the AU's normative divergence from the EU highlights an evolving diplomatic maturity⁴³. This divergence is not necessarily antagonistic, it reflects Africa's growing desire to shape, rather than follow, global governance trajectories.

From a theoretical lens, the developments between 2017 and 2022 validate both the Dependency Theory and Neo-Gramscian perspectives. The EU's response to China's rise, through initiatives like the Global Gateway, can be seen as a defensive strategy

aimed at maintaining normative hegemony. Simultaneously, Africa's strategic diversification echoes the Neo-Gramscian idea of counter-hegemonic blocs emerging from the Global South⁴⁴. The intersection of multipolarity, digital diplomacy, and economic competition renders the AU–EU relationship no longer unipolar nor Euro-dominated but a contested, adaptive, and multidimensional space.

2.1.5 Digital Sovereignty and Technological Dependence in AU–EU Relations

The rapid evolution of digital technologies has become a pivotal domain in contemporary international relations, particularly in the African–European context. Between 2017 and 2022, digital transformation emerged not merely as a developmental imperative but as a strategic frontier marked by power asymmetries, data politics, and regulatory externalisation. While both the African Union (AU) and European Union (EU) have declared a shared interest in digital inclusion and infrastructure development, evidence from their strategic frameworks and financing instruments indicates that the digital partnership is increasingly shaped by unequal access to resources, technological standards, and decision-making authority.

The launch of the Digital for Development (D4D) Hub Africa in 2021, followed by the Global Gateway Investment Package, signalled Europe's intent to expand its digital footprint across African states. These initiatives pledged to support digital infrastructure, internet connectivity, e-governance, and innovation ecosystems, with a focus on human rights, inclusion, and sustainability. Yet, despite these normative claims, the operational dynamics suggest a continuation of dependency patterns. European firms, such as Ericsson, Siemens, and Orange, are disproportionately represented in project implementation, while African institutions often function as logistical conduits rather than strategic partners⁴⁶. Moreover, the funding mechanisms

under Global Gateway channel resources through European development finance institutions and technical agencies, sidelining African-led research and innovation hubs. This replicates a vertical model of engagement wherein technological solutions are exported from Europe to Africa, often without adapting to local institutional capacity, cultural contexts, or long-term sustainability goals⁴⁷. The digital asymmetry is particularly evident in data governance. Most AU member states host their cloud infrastructure through European-owned platforms, including Amazon Web Services (AWS) Europe, Microsoft Azure Ireland, and Orange Business Services. Consequently, African governments and businesses lack direct custodianship over citizen data, raising concerns about privacy, national security, and sovereignty.

The EU's emphasis on "trusted connectivity" and alignment with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) also introduces regulatory pressure. While data protection is essential, conditional adherence to European norms in exchange for digital investment limits Africa's ability to shape its own digital regulatory architecture. The African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection (Malabo Convention), adopted in 2014 and reaffirmed in 2021, remains ratified by fewer than 20 AU members. Meanwhile, EU-led digital programmes actively embed GDPR-compliant systems into African IT governance without mutual capacity-building⁴⁸. This dynamic embodies what some scholars term "epistemic dependency", where regulatory knowledge, digital literacy, and cybersecurity frameworks are externally prescribed. Beyond infrastructure and regulation, Europe also exerts influence through the platformisation of public services. Key development sectors, health, education, civil registration, and taxation, are being digitised using European software and design protocols. The implementation of digital IDs across Africa, for instance, often uses

biometric systems and backend data storage developed by European firms such as Thales Group and Gemalto. These systems, though efficient, rarely guarantee open,source access or data repatriation clauses, meaning African governments rely on European intermediaries for system maintenance and data retrieval⁴⁹. While such dependencies can be mitigated through co,design and training, most bilateral agreements offer limited technology transfer provisions or intellectual property (IP) autonomy.

African youth have been identified as a priority constituency in the AU–EU digital discourse. Documents such as the AU-EU Youth Cooperation Roadmap (2022-2025) highlight innovation hubs, e-learning platforms, and tech start-up funding as instruments for youth empowerment. These interventions are typically small-scale and often disconnected from national digital strategies⁵⁰. Furthermore, digital skill-building initiatives are outsourced to European NGOs or corporations, reinforcing the donor-driven logic. This approach neglects the rich ecosystem of indigenous tech innovation already flourishing in Nigeria, Kenya, Rwanda, and South Africa, often without European support. Another area of concern is digital surveillance and cybersecurity. In the wake of migration control and counterterrorism cooperation, the EU has financed surveillance technologies and border-monitoring platforms in countries like Niger, Libya, and Tunisia⁵¹. These systems, while enhancing state capacity, also risk entrenching authoritarian governance. Civil society organisations across Africa have raised alarms about the potential misuse of European surveillance technologies for domestic repression, particularly in contexts lacking robust judicial oversight⁵². Moreover, partnerships under the European Peace Facility (EPF) and Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP) have been linked to cybersecurity

programmes with opaque contractual terms. This further compounds Africa's vulnerability to digital dependency not just in infrastructure, but also in values and institutional design.

From a strategic standpoint, the digital domain has become the new terrain of geopolitical contestation. The EU's digital expansion is often framed as a values-based alternative to China's digital Silk Road. Yet, both models share similarities in terms of technology exports, regulatory influence, and infrastructure, led diplomacy. The difference lies primarily in ideological framing, Europe emphasises human rights and transparency, while China promotes sovereignty and mutual noninterference. For the AU, navigating between these competing paradigms poses a profound challenge: how to secure digital investment without compromising autonomy or becoming entangled in proxy rivalries.

Some African actors have attempted to assert agency by drafting continental strategies such as the Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020 - 2030). This framework advocates for data centres within the continent, regional cybersecurity protocols, and locally anchored innovation systems. Implementation remains hampered by funding gaps, fragmented regional standards, and intra-African disparities in digital readiness. The AU's Smart Africa initiative, though promising, lacks the institutional weight and financial backing enjoyed by EU-led platforms. Unless African governments and RECs increase investment in digital public infrastructure and adopt joint procurement strategies, external actors will continue to dominate the narrative and architecture of Africa's digital future⁵³. To complicate matters, digital green conditionality is now emerging as a new frontier of dependency. Under the Green Deal and Global Gateway, the EU has pledged investments in green digital technology, ranging from e-waste

recycling to energy-efficient data centres. While commendable, these initiatives often require harmonisation with European climate standards, such as carbon certification and circular economy benchmarks⁵⁵. For countries still grappling with basic digital access, these conditionalities create compliance burdens that may exclude them from critical financing windows. This mirrors historical patterns wherein good governance criteria were used to control aid disbursement, now transposed into the digital-climate nexus.

The question, therefore, is not whether digital cooperation is occurring, it clearly is, but whether it is structured equitably. Current patterns of AU-EU digital engagement suggest a layered dependency that combines financial, technical, and normative asymmetries. Digital sovereignty, in this context, should not be reduced to the absence of foreign investment, but redefined as the capacity to choose, shape, and govern technology autonomously. This entails greater African involvement in global internet governance fora, increased regional data-sharing protocols, and legislative convergence within the continent rather than externally imposed standards. From a theoretical lens, the developments within this period support the Neo-Gramscian critique of hegemony, where digital dependency is maintained not through coercion but through ideological consent and institutional alignment⁵⁶. The EU's role as both a funder and a norm-setter ensures that African digital transformation aligns with European strategic interests, even when presented as mutual development. To challenge this paradigm, Africa must pursue not isolation, but intelligent integration, anchored in collective bargaining, indigenous innovation, and regulatory sovereignty.

2.1.6 Climate Diplomacy and Green Conditionalities in AU-EU Relations

Climate change has become an increasingly central axis of African Union–European Union (AU–EU) relations, particularly during the period between 2017 and 2022. The EU’s global leadership in climate governance and Africa’s heightened vulnerability to environmental shocks have generated a diplomatic terrain shaped by urgency, asymmetry, and contestation. Despite shared rhetorical commitments to sustainable development, the partnership continues to be constrained by structural imbalances in climate finance access, green conditionalities, and representational inequities in global environmental decision-making. These challenges raise fundamental questions about the nature and direction of AU-EU climate cooperation.

The European Union’s climate diplomacy in Africa is primarily anchored in the European Green Deal (EGD), launched in 2019, and its international extension through the Global Gateway Africa-Europe Investment Package in 2022. The EGD frames the EU’s transition to a carbon, neutral economy by 2050 and reorients external relations, including those with Africa, toward green infrastructure, sustainable agriculture, biodiversity conservation, and circular economies. Although this shift was initially hailed as a progressive vision for global climate leadership, many African policymakers and analysts have cautioned that the EU’s externalisation of green standards may reproduce existing inequalities under the guise of sustainability⁵⁷. Central to this tension is the emergence of green conditionalities, policy instruments that tie aid, investment, and trade preferences to compliance with EU environmental standards. One prominent example is the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which proposes taxing imports from countries deemed to have insufficient emissions-reduction regimes. For many African economies that rely on extractive industries and low, carbon but informally regulated production systems, such policies pose significant

risks to export competitiveness. Although the EU has framed CBAM as a climate justice tool, African leaders have argued that it constitutes a green trade barrier, especially in the absence of adequate support for technology transfer or climate adaptation.

The African Union has articulated its own climate diplomacy agenda, most notably through Agenda 2063, the African Climate Change Strategy (2022–2032), and coordinated engagement at UNFCCC Conferences of Parties (COPs). These frameworks emphasise Africa's right to development, climate-resilient infrastructure, just transitions in the energy sector, and increased representation in global climate governance. AU climate institutions often lack the negotiating leverage and financial independence required to enforce these priorities against European actors⁵⁸. During COP26 in Glasgow and COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh, African negotiators repeatedly pushed for loss and damage compensation mechanisms, only to encounter EU hesitation and procedural delays⁵⁹. The finance gap remains the most persistent point of contention. The EU has pledged over €20 billion in climate-related aid to Africa between 2021 and 2027 under the NDICI-Global Europe instrument, and an additional €1 billion for green energy projects through the Africa-EU Green Energy Initiative⁶⁰. However, much of this financing is structured as loans rather than grants and is disbursed through European implementing agencies and development banks, such as the European Investment Bank (EIB). This model undermines African ownership and aligns with a broader pattern of financialisation, wherein climate aid is contingent upon alignment with European technical benchmarks and fiscal governance standards.

Furthermore, many African countries lack the institutional absorptive capacity to meet EU reporting standards or co-financing requirements. This dynamic reproduces what

critics have termed “climate conditionality traps”, where countries must choose between delaying urgent adaptation projects or accepting conditional finance that constrains policy autonomy. For example, green funding for renewable energy often excludes investments in transitional technologies like natural gas, which African countries consider essential for energy access and industrialisation. The EU’s insistence on a zero, fossil pathway has been criticised as ecological imperialism, ignoring Africa’s differentiated developmental needs and energy poverty⁶⁰. A further asymmetry emerges in knowledge production and epistemic authority. The EU continues to dominate climate research partnerships, agenda-setting in international fora, and the design of metrics for environmental sustainability. While African researchers contribute substantively to local climate solutions, their marginalisation from global citation indexes and funding streams limits their influence in multilateral negotiations⁶¹. This epistemic imbalance extends to the design of AU–EU joint initiatives. For instance, the Climate Smart Agriculture Programme and the Africa–Europe Water Partnership have been critiqued for privileging Eurocentric environmental models that fail to accommodate indigenous knowledge systems and agroecological diversity.

Moreover, the AU has taken steps to assert a more autonomous climate agenda. The establishment of the African Group of Negotiators Expert Support (AGNES), the African Climate Policy Centre (ACPC), and the Africa Adaptation Initiative (AAI) reflect a growing determination to engage global climate diplomacy on African terms⁶². At the same time, African states have strengthened their collective bargaining through regional economic communities (RECs) and South–South coalitions. Notably, the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN) has been instrumental in aligning continental climate priorities, including calls for a just energy transition, technology access, and a fair share in carbon markets. From a strategic lens, the AU–

EU climate partnership oscillates between cooperation and contestation. On one hand, climate change offers a shared existential challenge that necessitates joint action. On the other, the mechanisms through which cooperation is operationalised often entrench asymmetries that reflect broader postcolonial power relations. European conditionalities, whether in green finance, carbon regulation, or energy transitions, operate as instruments of soft coercion, subtly disciplining African policy choices under the banner of environmental stewardship.

The theoretical implications are profound. From a Dependency Theory perspective, green conditionalities function as a new modality of resource control, wherein African economies are rendered subordinate through sustainability regimes that restrict industrial development. From a Neo-Gramscian standpoint, climate governance becomes a site of hegemonic reproduction, where dominant ideologies are embedded in technical assistance, multilateral language, and normative frameworks. By contrast, a decolonial reading would call for an epistemic rupture centering African ecological thought, climate justice narratives, and planetary ethics that move beyond Eurocentric paradigms. In a nutshell, climate diplomacy has become both a bridge and a battleground in AU-EU relations between 2017 and 2022. While progress has been made in aligning rhetorical commitments, fundamental asymmetries in finance, regulation, and representation persist. A genuinely transformative partnership would require the EU to go beyond conditionalities and adopt a posture of climate solidarity, anchored in historical responsibility, reparative justice, and co-creation. Simultaneously, the AU must deepen its institutional coherence, elevate African voices in global platforms, and demand a climate future that is not only green, but just.

2.1.7 Youth, Employment, and Human Development in AU–EU Relations

Youth, employment, and human development have gained increased salience in AU–EU relations between 2017 and 2022, not only as humanitarian and demographic concerns but also as strategic pillars within regional security, migration governance, and economic partnership frameworks. With over 60% of Africa’s population under the age of 25, the African Union has persistently framed youth engagement as central to continental development under Agenda 2063. Concurrently, the European Union has intensified youth-focused cooperation through policy instruments such as the Africa-Europe Alliance for Sustainable Investment and Jobs and the AU-EU Youth Cooperation Hub. However, the transformative potential of these initiatives remains undermined by structural inequalities, fragmented implementation, and mismatched expectations between both blocs.

The 6th AU-EU Summit held in Brussels in 2022 reaffirmed the importance of youth cooperation, human capital development, and employment generation as central to a “renewed partnership.” The summit outcomes included commitments toward investing in education systems, promoting entrepreneurship, enhancing vocational and technical training, and fostering research collaboration⁶⁷. Additionally, the summit placed emphasis on aligning youth employment strategies with the green and digital transitions, a recognition that sustainable development cannot be decoupled from the demographic dividend of Africa. Despite these policy pronouncements, Africa’s youth unemployment rates remain alarmingly high, with some regions reporting rates above 30%, especially among urban graduates. A central tension in AU-EU youth and employment cooperation lies in the programmatic fragmentation of interventions. Most EU led youth initiatives in Africa are embedded within larger migration control or private sector development agendas. For instance, the EU Emergency Trust Fund for

Africa (EUTF) and the Youth Empowerment through Skills (YES!) Initiative aim to address root causes of irregular migration by promoting local employment opportunities. However, critics argue that such programmes prioritise European interests in border control and population containment over genuine youth empowerment⁶⁸. Moreover, the short-term funding cycles and pilot nature of many of these initiatives limit their scalability and long-term impact.

On the other hand, the AU's frameworks, such as the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 2016 - 2025) and the 1 Million Next Level Initiative, articulate more integrated visions of youth development. These strategies focus on education quality, skills alignment with labour market needs, digital literacy, and civic engagement. However, implementation remains hampered by financial constraints, coordination gaps among Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and dependency on donor funding. Even within the AU-EU Youth Cooperation Hub, African youth participants have raised concerns about tokenism, limited influence on funding decisions, and insufficient localization of programme design.

From a human development perspective, access to inclusive and quality education remains a persistent challenge. Although the EU has pledged support for education through initiatives like Education for All and the Team Europe Approach to Education, funding remains disproportionately allocated to infrastructure and formal schooling, with less emphasis on informal and lifelong learning systems. Additionally, the COVID, 19 pandemic disrupted education access for over 250 million African learners and exposed the continent's digital divide. While EU support for e-learning and educational technologies is commendable, the lack of electricity, internet penetration, and local content creation has limited its reach. Health is another critical dimension of human

development in AU-EU relations. The launch of the Africa-EU Partnership on Health and Pandemic Preparedness, particularly during the COVID-19 era, underscored shared vulnerabilities and the need for joint solutions. The EU contributed to the COVAX facility, supported the African CDC, and pledged resources for vaccine production in Rwanda, Senegal, and South Africa⁶⁹. Nevertheless, the early phases of the pandemic revealed deep vaccine nationalism, with the EU facing criticism for hoarding doses and imposing export restrictions. This experience has reinforced African calls for health sovereignty, including the local manufacture of vaccines, medical supplies, and biotechnology innovations.

On the employment front, AU-EU cooperation has focused heavily on supporting entrepreneurship and micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). The EU's External Investment Plan and blending instruments have been deployed to de-risk investments in African startups and youth owned ventures. However, access to these funds remains restricted by complex eligibility requirements, collateral constraints, and lack of awareness among grassroots innovators⁷⁰. Additionally, the absence of coordinated labor migration frameworks within AU-EU relations prevents African youth from benefiting from legal mobility pathways, even in sectors experiencing labor shortages in Europe. While pilot projects like Talent Partnerships aim to address this gap, their geographic and sectoral scope remains limited.

Beyond employment and entrepreneurship, AU-EU relations also intersect on issues of youth civic participation, democratic governance, and peacebuilding. The AU has mainstreamed youth in its Silencing the Guns Initiative and African Youth Charter, while the EU has supported civic education and electoral engagement programmes. However, shrinking civic space in several African countries, often tolerated by EU

security partnerships, has curtailed youth activism and undermined the human rights commitments professed in AU-EU strategic documents⁷¹. This contradiction reflects the broader dilemma of balancing stability and rights in intercontinental partnerships. Critically, African youth are not passive recipients in this agenda. Through platforms like the AU Youth Envoy Office, the All-Africa Students Union, and national youth councils, they have increasingly asserted their agency in shaping development discourse. At AU-EU forums, young Africans have challenged the language of “beneficiaries” and called for a seat at the decision-making table, not as tokens, but as co-creators. This generational assertiveness is a promising signal that the future of AU–EU relations must embrace co-governance and not merely technical cooperation.

While youth, employment, and human development have emerged as consistent themes in AU–EU engagement, the actual outcomes remain mixed. Substantial efforts have been made to create frameworks, hubs, and funding platforms, these are often disconnected from the structural realities facing African youth, such as informal labor markets, political exclusion, digital marginality, and epistemic injustice. Moving forward, the AU must strengthen its institutional capacities, resource its youth strategies internally, and elevate youth participation from consultation to co-leadership. Simultaneously, the EU must reconcile its migration-control logic with a genuine commitment to long-term human development, reframe its programming to prioritize African-defined metrics of success, and dismantle conditionalities that inhibit transformative potential.

2.1.8 Migration Governance and Mobility in AU-EU Relations

Migration governance has emerged as one of the most contentious and structurally imbalanced domains in AU-EU relations. Between 2017 and 2022, the partnership was

increasingly shaped by efforts to address irregular migration, forced displacement, and mobility challenges, but from divergent premises. While the African Union (AU) views migration as a development enabler and a human right, the European Union (EU) approaches it primarily as a security and demographic challenge. This asymmetry has produced a regime of externalised migration control, where African states are co-opted into managing Europe's border regimes, often at the expense of migrant rights and regional mobility agendas.

Following the 2015 European migration crisis, the EU institutionalised its migration diplomacy through mechanisms such as the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), the Khartoum Process, and the Rabat Process. These instruments aimed to tackle the “root causes of irregular migration” while expanding cooperation with countries of origin and transit across North, West, and East Africa. However, critics note that these platforms were primarily designed in Brussels, with limited African ownership, and functioned largely to externalise European borders. Under these frameworks, countries such as Niger, Libya, and Sudan became key nodes in Europe's migration deterrence architecture, often in exchange for conditional aid, border infrastructure financing, and security assistance⁷². From the AU's side, frameworks such as the Migration Policy Framework for Africa (MPFA) and the Joint Labour Migration Programme (JLMP) have promoted safe, orderly, and regular migration, emphasising intra-African mobility, diaspora engagement, and labour migration governance. The AU's long-term vision aligns migration with development and regional integration, particularly through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and Free Movement Protocols under the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). However, the operationalisation of these ambitions has often been stifled by

European funding priorities that favour return, readmission, and containment over mobility and rights⁷².

The EU's migration agenda in Africa is most visible in the “containment, development nexus”, wherein development aid is used as leverage to secure cooperation on border control and repatriation. For example, the EUTF channelled over €4.5 billion into migration management, but most funds were directed toward surveillance technologies, detention centres, and capacity building for border police rather than tackling systemic poverty or displacement drivers.¹¹⁶ In countries like Libya and Niger, EU-funded security operations have been implicated in human rights abuses, arbitrary detentions, and pushbacks in violation of international law. This securitised logic contradicts the AU's vision of rights-based mobility and has triggered widespread criticism from African civil society and scholars.

Additionally, return and readmission agreements, negotiated between individual EU member states and African countries, have further strained relations. These agreements often lack transparency, include minimal safeguards, and are tied to development or visa conditionalities. Countries refusing to cooperate with deportations risk losing trade privileges or aid. In 2021, for instance, the EU withheld visa processing for nationals of The Gambia due to its reluctance to accept deported citizens. Such punitive measures compromise sovereignty and reinforce the unequal power dynamic underpinning AU-EU migration relations⁷³. Mobility, a key development vector, is thus paradoxically constrained in a partnership that professes to promote it. The Talent Partnerships launched in 2021, which aim to facilitate legal migration pathways and skills exchange, are limited in scope and mainly target elite migrants in tech or healthcare sectors. They offer minimal opportunities for low-skilled workers, despite their significant presence

in European informal economies. In contrast, AU frameworks envision a broader mobility strategy encompassing labour migration, student exchange, refugee protection, and diaspora participation. This misalignment reflects a deeper ideological divide between African developmental aspirations and European security imperatives.

The EU's strategy is also embedded in a "migration-security-development triangle", where aid is increasingly instrumentalised to meet migration control targets. Development programming under the NDICI, Global Europe Instrument (2021 - 2027) allocates substantial funds to migration and border governance, yet most of this is not aligned with AU priorities. Instead of empowering migrants or addressing structural inequalities, much of this investment supports European geostrategic interests, including outsourcing the policing of Europe's southern borders to African governments⁷⁴.

A particularly contested case is Libya, where the EU has provided financial and technical support to the Libyan Coast Guard under the guise of search and rescue. However, multiple UN and civil society reports have documented that intercepted migrants are routinely returned to detention camps run by militias, where they face extortion, torture, and exploitation. These practices have tarnished Europe's normative image and exposed the moral costs of its migration externalisation approach. The African Union has pushed back, albeit cautiously, against these trends. During the AU–EU Valletta Summit (2015) and subsequent ministerial meetings, AU representatives have consistently advocated for increased regular migration channels, end to forced returns, and respect for human rights. But the fragmented position of AU member states, some of whom rely on EU funding, has limited the coherence of Africa's migration diplomacy. Moreover, regional bodies like ECOWAS, despite progressive free

movement protocols, have not always been aligned with the AU, further complicating negotiation dynamics. The AU-EU migration regime exemplifies postcolonial asymmetry, where African states are cast as buffers and enforcers of European migration policy, rather than autonomous actors shaping their own mobility frameworks. The Neo-Gramscian concept of “passive revolution” helps illuminate how African participation in EU-led processes often reproduces hegemonic control, under the guise of partnership and development. Even when African states sign onto migration compacts, they do so within a framework designed to maintain European border sovereignty and demographically filter who gets to move, when, and under what terms.

Nevertheless, resistance and agency persist. Civil society organisations across Africa have mounted robust critiques of the EUTF, labelling it as a “containment compact” rather than a development mechanism. Reports from groups like Oxfam and the African Migration Observatory have proposed alternative models centred on rights-based approaches, diaspora remittances, circular migration, and the creation of regional mobility corridors⁷⁵. In 2022, the AU established a Continental Operational Centre on Migration Governance, aimed at strengthening African policy leadership and coordinating responses to EU conditionalities. Looking ahead, the AU-EU migration relationship must undergo fundamental realignment if it is to evolve beyond coercion and containment. A justice-based approach to migration governance would prioritise migrant agency, structural reforms in the global labour market, equitable burden-sharing, and the decoupling of development aid from return agreements. The EU must acknowledge that fortress Europe is unsustainable in a demographically dynamic world and that Africa’s youth bulge requires meaningful inclusion rather than exclusion.

Simultaneously, the AU must consolidate its internal migration governance structures, empower RECs to operationalise free movement, and enhance the agency of migrants in continental frameworks. Importantly, both institutions must elevate diaspora voices, embrace multi-level governance, and resist the securitisation of human mobility. It is certain that between 2017 and 2022, AU-EU migration cooperation was marked by competing paradigms: Europe's defensive migration diplomacy versus Africa's development-oriented mobility vision. As climate-induced displacement, youth migration, and geopolitical fragmentation increase, the future of AU-EU relations will be shaped significantly by whether they can renegotiate the ethics, structures, and outcomes of their migration engagement.

2.1.9 Security, Peacebuilding, and Counterterrorism in AU–EU Relations

Security cooperation has long stood as one of the most institutionalised pillars of AU–EU relations, especially as instability in the Sahel, Horn of Africa, and Great Lakes regions has intensified over the 2017 - 2022 period. This period marked a shift in how both institutions conceptualised and operationalised peace and security, from donor–recipient logic to increasingly interdependent frameworks shaped by regional threats, global counterterrorism norms, and European migration politics. Despite a shared interest in regional stability, the power dynamics underpinning this security partnership reveal enduring asymmetries in strategy, funding, and political agency.

The EU has framed Africa's security situation, especially the proliferation of transnational terrorism, irregular migration, and state fragility, as a strategic threat to European stability. Consequently, the European Union has invested heavily in security programming, including through the European Peace Facility (EPF), Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions, and regional stabilisation instruments. The Sahel

region, in particular, has become the centrepiece of Europe's extraterritorial security engagement. EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUCAP Sahel Mali, and EUTM Mali were expanded post-2017, reflecting Brussels' increasing reliance on train-and-equip models to manage instability and contain migration at source. Meanwhile, the African Union has developed its own architecture for peace through the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and the African Standby Force (ASF), both of which are designed to provide African-led responses to conflicts across the continent. However, these initiatives continue to rely significantly on EU funding and technical assistance. The African Peace Facility (APF), now subsumed under the EPF, has provided over €2.9 billion since its inception, covering logistics, troop stipends, and operational planning for missions like AMISOM (Somalia), MNJTF (Lake Chad), and G5 Sahel Joint Force⁷⁶. This financial dependence has constrained the AU's strategic autonomy and subjected it to European risk assessments, political priorities, and procedural constraints.

While EU support has enabled the AU to deploy troops and enhance early warning mechanisms, it has also imposed managerial and ideological limitations. For instance, the EU's emphasis on stabilisation and border control often sidelines long-term peacebuilding goals such as reconciliation, inclusive governance, and justice. Moreover, the bureaucratic architecture of European funding, particularly the shift from APF to EPF, has added layers of complexity and delayed the disbursement of critical security resources. AU member states have expressed concern over opaque decision-making, disproportionate European influence in joint planning bodies, and the conditionality of peace support funding. The intersection of counterterrorism and development has further complicated AU-EU security cooperation. Framing terrorism as a development

failure, EU interventions often combine military assistance with governance and livelihood projects. However, such linkages can obscure the structural causes of violence, including state repression, marginalisation, and extractive politics, and risk militarising development aid. In places like the Sahel, military, heavy responses have proven insufficient to stem the expansion of jihadist movements, which continue to thrive by exploiting local grievances and weak state legitimacy⁷⁷.

This has led to a paradox: while external funding has improved African security infrastructure, it has also entrenched a security–aid dependency cycle, where local ownership is undermined by donor-driven threat assessments and deliverables. This model has fostered “peacebuilding from above”, in contrast to community-led conflict resolution initiatives often sidelined by militarised frameworks⁷⁸. Furthermore, civil–military relations in some African countries have deteriorated under the weight of foreign sponsored securitisation, leading to a resurgence of military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Sudan all of which occurred between 2020 and 2022 despite active EU security presence. The EU’s increasing reliance on non-state contractors, private military companies, and intelligence sharing with local strongmen has also raised concerns about accountability and human rights. For example, the use of European funds to support the G5 Sahel has been criticised for bypassing formal parliamentary oversight in recipient states. Moreover, the lack of human rights conditionality in EU arms transfers to African security forces raises questions about the normative coherence of Europe’s foreign policy. Reports of extrajudicial killings, unlawful detentions, and civilian abuses by partner security forces have been well documented and often met with diplomatic silence⁷⁹.

In contrast, the AU has called for a holistic approach to peace, grounded in the Silencing the Guns initiative, the Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development (PCRD) framework, and the emerging AU Human Security Policy Framework. These documents emphasise prevention, justice, human development, and democratic governance. Yet, the AU's ability to operationalise these ideals is often curtailed by reliance on European and other external funding. Moreover, some AU member states themselves act inconsistently with AU norms, weakening the Union's collective enforcement power. Regionally, the AU's collaboration with Regional Economic Communities (RECs) such as ECOWAS and IGAD has facilitated joint operations and crisis diplomacy. However, overlapping mandates, political rivalries, and uneven capabilities have limited the effectiveness of multi-layered peacekeeping. The EU has engaged RECs selectively, offering funding and technical support for specific missions but not always aligning with AU frameworks. This fragmented architecture has led to parallel security ecosystems, often shaped more by European geopolitical calculations than African consensus.

The recent strategic shift toward the Indo-Pacific and Eastern Europe, particularly in light of the Ukraine conflict, has further complicated Africa-Europe security relations. As EU member states reallocate defence spending and recalibrate global priorities, concerns have grown over the sustainability of European commitment to African peace operations. The withdrawal of French troops from Mali in 2022 and the restructuring of EUCAP operations signalled a declining appetite for long-term military engagement. In this context, African leaders have called for increased self-reliance, including through the AU Peace Fund, although contributions remain below targets. From a theoretical perspective, the security partnership exemplifies neo-imperial governance, wherein

former colonial powers retain influence through the guise of shared security. Through the lens of Neo-Gramscianism, the EU's security diplomacy reflects a strategy of hegemonic maintenance, embedding European norms and operational doctrines within African peace infrastructures. The dominance of European actors in strategic planning, funding conditionality, and evaluation metrics reflects a continuation of "epistemic and financial coercion", albeit in a multilateral form. Despite these critiques, there are emerging alternatives and correctives. Civil society advocacy, AU institutional reforms, and continental legal frameworks are beginning to contest the security orthodoxy imposed by external actors. Notably, African feminists and youth movements have begun reshaping the discourse around peace and security, integrating gender justice, local conflict resolution mechanisms, and restorative models of peacebuilding. The African Governance Architecture (AGA) and African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) are also gaining traction as normative counterweights to militarised peacebuilding.

AU-EU security cooperation between 2017 and 2022 has been defined by both interdependence and imbalance. While European support has expanded Africa's operational capacity, it has also entrenched unequal relations that limit African strategic autonomy. A shift toward mutual accountability, decentralised peacebuilding, and reduced militarisation is required for the partnership to deliver sustainable peace. The AU must assert greater ownership of its peace agenda, while the EU must move beyond technocratic securitisation and invest in building structural resilience, justice, and inclusive governance across the continent.

2.1.10 Cultural and Educational Diplomacy in AU-EU Relations

Between 2017 and 2022, cultural and educational diplomacy re-emerged as critical components of African Union (AU) - European Union (EU) relations, serving both symbolic and strategic functions. Unlike security and migration, which are often transactional and crisis-driven, cultural and educational cooperation is embedded in long-term value formation, identity construction, and soft power projection. While these domains have historically been overshadowed by economic and geopolitical concerns, their strategic relevance has grown amidst rising debates over postcolonial memory, epistemic justice, and the need for more symmetrical partnership models.

The European Union has consistently framed cultural diplomacy as a tool for mutual understanding and peacebuilding, as evident in its 2016 Strategy for International Cultural Relations and the AU-EU Action Plans that followed the Abidjan and Brussels Summits. Within these frameworks, Europe has sought to support intercultural dialogue, artistic mobility, language exchange, and heritage preservation across Africa. The EU also invested in initiatives such as the ACP-EU Culture Programme, the EU–Africa Music and Arts Festival pilot schemes, and joint research exhibitions aimed at promoting African historical narratives and indigenous knowledge systems. These interventions align with Europe’s normative commitment to UNESCO conventions and Agenda 2030 cultural targets. However, criticisms have emerged around the asymmetry in how cultural cooperation is structured. Most EU-funded cultural projects in Africa are still designed, implemented, and evaluated by European agencies or NGOs, with African creatives and institutions relegated to peripheral roles. The dominance of Western art forms, languages, and exhibition formats within these projects raises concerns about cultural hegemony and the instrumentalization of African identity for

soft power branding. African artists and scholars have increasingly called for decolonising cultural relations, demanding not just funding but structural inclusion in agenda-setting, resource control, and content creation.

The question of colonial restitution has become emblematic of these tensions. Between 2017 and 2022, African states amplified calls for the return of stolen cultural artefacts held in European museums, a demand reinforced by the 2018 Sarr–Savant report commissioned by the French government. While countries like France and Germany initiated partial restitutions, progress remains slow and often symbolic⁸⁰. The African Union adopted formal positions supporting the restitution of cultural heritage, but its engagement with the EU on this matter remains diplomatically cautious. The politicisation of restitution, coupled with legal ambiguities and institutional reluctance in Europe, continues to impede deeper cultural reconciliation. In the field of educational diplomacy, the AU and EU have developed several cooperative platforms aimed at supporting higher education, research mobility, and skills development. Central among these is the Africa-EU Partnership on Higher Education, which includes flagship programmes such as Erasmus+, Intra, Africa Academic Mobility Scheme, and the African Research Initiative for Scientific Excellence (ARISE). These instruments provide African students, researchers, and faculty with funding to engage in academic exchange across European universities⁸¹. Between 2017 and 2022, Erasmus+ alone supported over 40,000 African participants, making Africa the second, largest beneficiary after Eastern Europe.¹⁵²

Despite their quantitative success, these programmes are often criticised for promoting brain drain and reinforcing epistemic dependency. The curriculum content, language of instruction, and accreditation systems remain predominantly Eurocentric. Few African

universities are involved in curriculum co-design or receive reciprocal student flows from Europe, thereby limiting knowledge transfer and institutional development within Africa. Furthermore, many African students return from Europe to find their qualifications under-recognized or incompatible with domestic labour markets, exposing the disconnect between global training and local relevance. The African Union, through its Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 2016–2025), advocates for contextualised, inclusive, and decolonised education. It prioritises indigenous knowledge, African languages, digital literacy, and policy, research linkages across the continent. However, the AU's educational diplomacy is structurally constrained by funding shortfalls, underdeveloped university networks, and heavy reliance on donor priorities. Even flagship AU programmes like Pan, African University (PAU) face challenges related to sustainability, faculty retention, and administrative autonomy due to inconsistent state support and limited continental ownership.

The COVID, 19 pandemic further exposed inequalities in educational infrastructure and digital access. While European institutions were able to rapidly transition to online learning, African universities struggled with connectivity, digital tools, and content adaptation. Although the EU launched the Digital for Development (D4D) Hub Africa, including education, focused partnerships, most interventions targeted urban elites or public universities, neglecting rural students and informal education providers. This digital divide, if unaddressed, risks deepening educational exclusion and undermining the potential of AU-EU knowledge cooperation.

Beyond mobility and curriculum, a growing body of African scholars and educators is demanding epistemic justice, the recognition and integration of African worldviews,

methodologies, and languages in knowledge production. The call is not merely for access to European institutions, but for a fundamental restructuring of knowledge hierarchies. Initiatives such as Decolonising the Curriculum movements, Open Access African Journals, and continental academic consortia are part of this broader intellectual pushback. However, AU-EU educational diplomacy has yet to institutionalise these demands, often treating them as fringe rather than foundational to partnership. Language politics also remain a significant barrier to inclusive educational diplomacy. Most AU–EU programmes are conducted in English or French, marginalising African language knowledge systems and excluding large populations from policy engagement. While UNESCO and the AU have encouraged multilingualism in education, the EU’s programming still favours Western lingua francas, inadvertently reinforcing linguistic hegemony⁸². Furthermore, academic publishing remains dominated by European journals, where African scholarship often faces bias, paywalls, or lack of citation, further entrenching epistemic marginalisation.

Despite these challenges, new opportunities for co-creation and transformative partnerships have begun to emerge. Joint degree programmes between African and European universities, collaborative research on climate resilience and public health, and increased funding for African-led humanities projects signal a growing willingness to recalibrate cultural and educational ties. The AU–EU Youth Cooperation Hub and the Africa-Europe Foundation’s Education Cluster have provided platforms for youth-led innovation in diplomacy and digital pedagogy. AU–EU cultural and educational diplomacy has advanced in visibility and institutionalisation between 2017 and 2022, but its transformative potential remains constrained by structural asymmetries, epistemic inequality, and limited African agency in agenda-setting. For these domains

to truly reflect the values of partnership, the EU must shift from grant-making to power-sharing, while the AU must consolidate continental initiatives, empower academic institutions, and demand reciprocity in exchange frameworks. Only through mutual respect, decolonised collaboration, and long-term institutional investments can AU–EU diplomacy move beyond symbolism toward sustainable cultural and intellectual empowerment.

2.2 Theoretical Review

2.2.1 Dependency Theory

Dependency theory offers a critical lens for analysing the persistent asymmetries that characterise African Union (AU) - European Union (EU) relations, particularly in the postcolonial and neocolonial context that defines Africa's insertion into the global capitalist order. Originating in Latin American structuralist thought in the 1960s and later adapted to African political economy by scholars such as Walter Rodney and Samir Amin, dependency theory posits that underdevelopment in the Global South is not merely a stage of development, but the direct outcome of its structurally subordinate integration into the global capitalist system⁸³. This theoretical framework is especially relevant for unpacking AU-EU relations during the 2017–2022 period, where despite diplomatic overtures toward “equal partnership,” the economic, technological, and institutional power differentials remain deeply entrenched.

At its core, dependency theory challenges the assumptions of classical liberalism and modernization theory, which posit that all nations traverse a linear path toward development, provided they adopt sound governance and open, market policies. Dependency theorists reject this notion, arguing instead that core countries (such as EU members) maintain their dominance through mechanisms that extract value, dictate the

terms of trade, and inhibit autonomous industrialisation in the periphery (such as most AU member states)⁸⁴. In the context of AU-EU relations, this manifests in the enduring economic architecture of raw material exports from Africa and the importation of high, value manufactured goods and services from Europe, leading to structural trade imbalances that reinforce dependency. The main feature of this dependent relationship is aid conditionality. While the EU is Africa's largest development donor, its assistance is often tied to economic liberalisation, governance reforms, or security cooperation aligned with European interests. Through instruments such as the European Development Fund (EDF), NDICI-Global Europe, and the European Peace Facility, financial flows are calibrated to reward compliance and discourage deviation from EU policy priorities. This aid regime perpetuates dependency not only by financing recurring budgetary deficits but also by limiting the policy space of AU states to pursue endogenous development strategies.

Moreover, technology transfer and intellectual property rights (IPR) regimes function as contemporary forms of dependency. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, African appeals to waive patent protections under the World Trade Organization's TRIPS agreement were resisted by several EU member states⁸⁴. This refusal obstructed Africa's capacity to manufacture vaccines locally, reinforcing its status as a consumer rather than a producer of life, saving technologies. Even in less critical sectors such as digital infrastructure, European firms dominate the design, hosting, and regulation of African data systems, with African states acting as passive users of imported platforms.

Critically, dependency in AU-EU relations is not purely economic, it is also epistemic and institutional. Most AU-EU summits, cooperation roadmaps, and strategic frameworks are drafted with European intellectual and legal scaffolding, often

sidelining African knowledge systems, priorities, and languages. African policy frameworks like Agenda 2063 are frequently retrofitted to EU agendas, leading to the risk of institutional mimicry rather than authentic, grounded governance. As such, the dependency is not merely material but cognitive: African development imaginaries are shaped, constrained, and validated through European metrics and narratives. Despite these critical insights, dependency theory has also faced sustained critique. One limitation is its tendency to treat the Global South as a monolith, thereby neglecting intra-African variation in governance, resilience, and agency. Furthermore, some versions of the theory underemphasise the possibility of strategic bargaining, suggesting a deterministic view that ignores African agency in reshaping terms of engagement. For example, recent developments in AU, led vaccine production, digital innovation, and regional trade integration under AfCFTA suggest pockets of resistance and autonomy that challenge pure dependency assumptions⁸⁵.

Nonetheless, the theory remains analytically powerful in highlighting the historical continuities of African dependency, transitioning from colonial extraction to postcolonial asymmetries cloaked in the language of partnership. Between 2017 and 2022, AU-EU relations have displayed several traits that validate the dependency framework: unequal trade terms, donor, driven reforms, externalised migration control, and securitised development programming. These patterns suggest that without a radical restructuring of intercontinental political economy, the rhetoric of "equal partnership" may continue to mask structural dependency.

The dependency theory offers a critical, historically grounded explanation of Africa's subordinate role in its relationship with Europe. It compels scholars and policymakers to interrogate not just how the AU and EU cooperate, but on whose terms, with whose

knowledge, and to whose benefit. While not without its blind spots, the theory remains essential for any rigorous analysis of interregional relations marked by colonial legacies, economic asymmetry, and contested sovereignty.

2.2.2 Neo-Gramscian Theory of Hegemony

While Dependency Theory emphasises structural economic asymmetries and material domination, the Neo-Gramscian theory of hegemony provides a more nuanced understanding of how power is exercised through institutions, ideas, and consent. Rooted in the work of Antonio Gramsci and later developed by scholars such as Robert Cox and Stephen Gill, the Neo-Gramscian framework focuses on the ideological and institutional mechanisms through which dominant powers reproduce their leadership and legitimacy in the international system⁸⁸. In the context of African Union-European Union (AU-EU) relations between 2017 and 2022, this perspective is particularly useful in analysing how Europe maintains normative influence and policy leadership, even while publicly affirming the rhetoric of equal partnership.

According to Neo-Gramscianism, hegemony is not simply coercion but consensual domination, achieved through the alignment of material capabilities, institutions, and ideas.¹⁸³ The EU exercises this form of leadership by institutionalising its preferences through global governance norms (e.g., good governance, market liberalisation, environmental standards), multilateral rules (e.g., WTO, ILO), and interregional platforms (e.g., AU-EU Summits, Joint Strategy Documents). These norms are often internalised by African states and institutions, not necessarily due to their inherent appropriateness, but because of their embeddedness in aid flows, diplomatic leverage, and institutional legitimacy. Major site for this hegemonic reproduction is the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES), launched in 2007 but restructured post, 2017 into action

plans with thematic clusters such as green transition, digital governance, and peacebuilding. While JAES is presented as a co-owned strategic framework, the actual agenda-setting power often remains with EU institutions. The language of “mutual interests” masks asymmetries in who defines those interests and whose priorities are institutionally resourced. The EU’s funding, technical expertise, and regulatory dominance ensure that African actors often adopt Eurocentric development models, including neoliberal economic policy, security governance frameworks, and institutional reforms tailored to European benchmarks⁸⁹.

One of the strongest tools of Neo-Gramscian hegemony is norm diffusion through soft power and technical assistance. The EU funds a wide range of AU bodies, including the African Governance Architecture (AGA), African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), and electoral observation missions, embedding European governance models and legal principles in African continental governance structures. These partnerships are frequently framed as capacity-building or institutional strengthening, but from a Neo-Gramscian standpoint, they function to consolidate a bloc of consent, where African institutions reproduce European norms as if they were universal rather than politically contingent.

The educational and epistemic dimension of this process is also critical. Through programmes such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, and the AU-EU Youth Cooperation Hub, European actors shape elite African understandings of diplomacy, science, and development. While such exchanges offer valuable exposure and funding, they also socialise African intellectuals and policymakers into Euro-Atlantic norms, contributing to what some scholars call “normative convergence under asymmetry.” African voices that align with EU perspectives are rewarded with funding, publication opportunities,

and diplomatic access, whereas those challenging the dominant narrative are often sidelined. Neo-Gramscian theory also accounts for how civil society partnerships and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) function within hegemonic arrangements. Many EU-funded civil society organisations in Africa operate within predefined thematic silos (e.g., anti-corruption, human rights, climate change) and are expected to deliver measurable, technocratic outcomes. While these projects claim to promote democratic engagement, they often depoliticise struggle and deflect attention from more radical, systemic critiques of power. Moreover, local activists and indigenous movements are frequently excluded from funding mechanisms due to bureaucratic filters, linguistic barriers, and Eurocentric compliance norms.

Nevertheless, Neo-Gramscianism does not posit hegemony as absolute. It acknowledges the presence of counter-hegemonic blocs, where subordinate actors resist domination by forming alternative alliances, discourses, and institutional arrangements. This is evident in Africa's strategic diversification beyond the EU, toward China, Russia, India, and regional mechanisms like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and Africa CDC. These developments signal a growing refusal to uncritically accept European primacy in development and governance, even while pragmatic cooperation continues in key sectors⁹⁰.

These counter-hegemonic movements often operate within constraints imposed by financial dependence, institutional entanglement, and limited bargaining power. For example, while the AU pushes for health sovereignty and digital autonomy, many of its policy tools are still funded, audited, or technically advised by European institutions. As such, resistance coexists with accommodation, a dialectical dynamic captured precisely by the Neo-Gramscian lens. This approach allows for a nuanced reading of

African agency: not simply as compliance or rebellion, but as strategic navigation within a hegemonically structured international order. From a methodological standpoint, applying Neo-Gramscian theory to AU-EU relations also challenges the state-centric bias of conventional international relations. It highlights the role of transnational elites, epistemic communities, and donor bureaucracies in shaping development paradigms. For instance, Africa's uptake of European regulatory models in environmental law, data governance, and trade facilitation is not only state-driven but also facilitated by networks of consultants, academics, and international agencies. These actors form part of a broader hegemonic formation that reproduces consent through ideas and incentives rather than force. The Neo-Gramscian theory of hegemony offers a robust framework for understanding how the EU maintains influence in Africa beyond direct economic control. By embedding its norms, funding structures, and institutional practices across AU systems, the EU constructs a hegemonic bloc of shared assumptions, which is only partially contested. For scholars and policymakers committed to equity and mutual respect in AU-EU relations, this theory urges a re-examination of how power is embedded, normalised, and occasionally resisted through the very institutions that claim to promote partnership.

2.3 Review of Empirical Studies

This section presents empirical insights on six dominant thematic areas shaping the AU-EU relationship between 2017 and 2022. Drawing from institutional reports, academic journals, and multilateral declarations, it identifies recurring patterns, structural imbalances, and sites of contestation that illuminate the substance of the partnership. The analysis applies critical interpretive logic, situating observed phenomena within Dependency and Neo-Gramscian frameworks. Subsections include

trade and investment, migration governance, peace and security, Digital infrastructure, climate diplomacy and international reform

2.3.1 Trade and Investment Patterns

Trade and investment represent two of the longest-standing and most structurally significant domains of Africa-Europe relations, and they continue to be at the heart of the AU-EU partnership. While both sides consistently frame their economic engagement in terms of mutual growth and shared benefit, the empirical evidence between 2017 and 2022 reveals persistent asymmetries, entrenched path dependencies, and ongoing tensions over market access, conditionalities, and the architecture of developmental finance.

Between 2017 and 2022, the EU maintained its position as Africa's largest trading partner, accounting for over 30% of Africa's global trade volume⁹¹. However, this relationship remains highly uneven in terms of trade composition. The bulk of African exports to the EU consisted of primary commodities, including crude oil, minerals, cocoa, coffee, and other raw agricultural goods, while imports from Europe were dominated by machinery, pharmaceuticals, processed foods, and finished consumer goods⁹². This enduring structure of exchange reflects a neo-colonial configuration of value chains, where Africa continues to serve as a source of raw inputs for European industries, while importing manufactured goods that it could potentially produce locally with adequate industrial capacity. This imbalance is institutionalised through the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), a set of trade agreements negotiated between the EU and regional blocs within Africa. While the EPAs claim to offer duty-free and quota-free access to EU markets, they also require African states to gradually liberalise up to 80% of their own markets to European goods. This reciprocal

arrangement has been criticised by African governments, scholars, and civil society organisations for threatening nascent industries, undermining tariff revenues, and weakening prospects for structural transformation⁹³. Countries like Nigeria and Tanzania have notably resisted signing their regional EPA frameworks, citing concerns about the erosion of national economic sovereignty and the conflict between EPAs and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)⁹⁴.

The 2017–2022 period saw intensified tensions between Africa’s efforts to consolidate intra-continental trade under AfCFTA and the EU’s bilateral approach through EPAs. Launched in 2021, AfCFTA aims to create a unified African market of over 1.3 billion people, reduce dependence on external trade partners, and foster regional value chains. However, the EU’s trade frameworks, according to many African analysts, run counter to this agenda by institutionalising fragmented trade relations and encouraging African states to prioritise access to European markets over regional integration⁹⁵. Furthermore, European trade policies, such as the EU Green Deal, introduce non-tariff barriers through environmental and sustainability standards that African producers often lack the capacity to meet. Investment patterns during this period further highlight the asymmetric nature of AU–EU economic engagement. The EU’s investment portfolio in Africa, primarily structured through the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+) and later through the Global Gateway Africa–Europe Investment Package, was heavily concentrated in strategic sectors including energy, digital infrastructure, transport corridors, and border security⁹⁶. While the EU pledged over €150 billion for Africa under the Global Gateway framework, many African scholars and policymakers noted that these investments were designed more to counter China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) than to align with African development priorities⁹⁷. Unlike the BRI, which offers large-scale concessional loans for hard infrastructure, EU

financing typically relies on blended finance models that channel public funds to de-risk private European investments, often leaving African stakeholders as passive beneficiaries rather than equal partners.

The conditionalities attached to EU investments have also come under scrutiny. Projects funded under the global Gateway or EFSD+ are frequently tied to regulatory reforms, liberalisation of public procurement, or adherence to EU environmental and governance standards. While such standards are framed as best practices, critics argue they reflect a Eurocentric template that fails to account for local institutional realities or socio-political contexts⁹⁸. Moreover, the dominance of European firms in procurement processes undermines African industrial development and limits the multiplier effects of foreign investment. For instance, in sectors like renewable energy and telecommunications, most major contracts under EU frameworks were awarded to European multinational corporations, with African companies relegated to subcontracting or logistical roles.

The asymmetry is further reinforced by the flow of capital and profit repatriation. Despite large volumes of foreign direct investment (FDI) from the EU to Africa, net financial flows tend to move in the opposite direction. A 2021 report by the African Development Bank showed that outflows in the form of debt repayments, profit repatriation, and illicit financial transfers often exceed the inflows of aid and investment, raising questions about who truly benefits from the AU–EU economic relationship⁹⁹. This finding supports the argument made by dependency theorists that Africa's integration into the global economy continues to be structured in a way that favours accumulation in the Global North at the expense of value retention in the Global South. Institutionally, the African Union has attempted to assert a more strategic

voice in shaping trade and investment agendas. The AU's Agenda 2063 explicitly calls for diversified trade, value-added production, and continental self-reliance. Similarly, the AU Commission and regional economic communities have advocated for harmonised investment codes and joint negotiation platforms. However, the fragmentation of African trade positions, exacerbated by differences in capacity among member states and the prevalence of bilateral EU deals has made collective bargaining difficult¹⁰⁰.

From a Dependency Theory perspective, the trade and investment relationship between the AU and EU remains one of structural subordination, where African economies are locked into a cycle of low-value production and external dependency. The EU's investment and trade frameworks, while ostensibly developmental, often serve to reproduce these patterns by conditioning access to markets and capital on compliance with external norms. Neo-Gramscian scholars further argue that the EU's dominance in trade negotiations is not merely economic but ideological, sustained through technical assistance, institutional mimicry, and the diffusion of European governance norms that reshape African regulatory environments¹⁰¹.

Moreover, empirical studies reveal a discursive hegemony embedded in AU-EU trade discussions. Language such as "inclusive growth," "win-win cooperation," and "shared prosperity" is frequently used in joint communiqués, masking the deep power asymmetries that characterise actual practice³⁸. These rhetorical tools create the illusion of mutuality while obscuring the structural realities of resource extraction, conditionality-driven finance, and trade imbalances. At the same time, European policymakers leverage sustainability narratives, such as green transition and responsible investment, to justify stringent standards that African firms struggle to meet,

effectively excluding them from high-value sectors¹⁰². Nevertheless, some African actors have demonstrated agency in pushing back against the prevailing logic. The African Group at the WTO, supported by think tanks like the African Trade Policy Centre, has advocated for special and differential treatment in trade rules, flexibilities in intellectual property rights (particularly around pharmaceuticals), and reforms to investment arbitration systems⁴⁰. Similarly, individual countries such as Rwanda and Ethiopia (prior to the Tigray conflict) sought to negotiate more favourable terms in their bilateral economic agreements, demonstrating that African agency, while constrained, is not entirely absent.

The trade and investment dimension of AU–EU relations between 2017 and 2022 reveals an evolving yet structurally imbalanced landscape. While institutional frameworks have matured and new financing tools have emerged, the underlying asymmetries in value chains, policy influence, and capital control persist. African economic transformation remains limited by the dominance of European standards, the persistence of extractive trade patterns, and the conditionalities tied to investment flows. Unless structural reforms are implemented to prioritise African ownership, support intra-African trade, and reframe economic cooperation around equality and sovereignty, the vision of a mutually beneficial partnership will remain more rhetorical than real.

2.3.2 Migration Governance and Border Externalisation

Migration governance between the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) has evolved into a complex field of interdependence, contestation, and strategic asymmetry. Between 2017 and 2022, migration emerged not only as a humanitarian or developmental concern but as a geopolitical bargaining chip, deeply embedded within broader EU foreign policy. The period witnessed intensified EU efforts to outsource

migration management to African states, largely through a combination of financial inducements, development cooperation, and conditionality. This strategy, often referred to as border externalization, sought to stem irregular migration into Europe by transforming African countries into de facto buffer zones.

The EU's flagship instruments in this domain included the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), the Khartoum Process, and the Rabat Process, all designed to forge cooperation with African transit and origin countries. Through the EUTF alone, the EU disbursed over €5 billion between 2015 and 2022, with a significant portion directed at border surveillance, return and reintegration operations, and capacity building for national security forces¹⁰³. African countries such as Niger, Libya, Sudan, and Ethiopia became central nodes in this apparatus. While these mechanisms were officially framed as developmental, empirical studies reveal that much of the funding served security functions, such as training border police, building detention centres, and acquiring surveillance technologies¹⁰⁴.

This securitisation of migration had tangible social and political consequences. In Niger, for example, the EU-funded crackdown on human smuggling disrupted not only criminal networks but also traditional livelihoods dependent on cross-border mobility, leading to local unrest and economic displacement. In Libya, European cooperation with militia-linked coast guards led to numerous human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, torture, and forced labour in migrant holding centres¹⁰⁵. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR repeatedly raised concerns about the humanitarian cost of Europe's migration control policies, particularly in contexts where state authority was weak or fragmented. From a policy perspective, the AU attempted to assert its voice through continental frameworks such

as the Migration Policy Framework for Africa (MPFA) and its Plan of Action (2018 - 2030). These documents emphasised the need for regular migration channels, intra-African mobility, diaspora engagement, and the protection of migrant rights. However, AU influence within AU-EU migration dialogues remained limited, as bilateral deals between EU member states and individual African governments increasingly bypassed continental consensus¹⁰⁶. For instance, Italy's agreements with Libya and Sudan, or Germany's bilateral labour migration deals with North African countries, demonstrate how fragmented and state-centric migration governance undermines AU authority.

The 2017 Abidjan Summit attempted to re-anchor migration within the broader strategic partnership, committing both blocs to "shared responsibility" and "human rights-based approaches." However, empirical outcomes after the summit indicate that EU priorities, particularly stemming from domestic political pressures, continued to dominate the agenda. The rhetoric of partnership was often belied by practices of conditional aid, forced returns, and restrictive visa policies. African negotiators, constrained by the lure of funding and capacity limitations, struggled to advance alternative narratives or policy frameworks.

From a Dependency Theory perspective, migration governance exemplifies the logic of instrumentalised interdependence, where African states are co-opted into enforcing European border regimes in exchange for financial support. In this configuration, development aid is weaponised not to reduce the root causes of migration, such as poverty, inequality, or conflict, but to deter mobility itself. Migration is thus framed not as a right or developmental driver, but as a problem to be contained. As several studies note, this containment logic reinforces Africa's subordinate position in the international order by denying its people full participation in global mobility regimes.

Neo-Gramscian scholars extend this analysis by examining the ideological apparatus surrounding EU–Africa migration cooperation. They argue that concepts like “resilience,” “capacity building,” and “partnership” are deployed to legitimise coercive practices while masking the unequal power relations that shape them¹⁰⁸. The migration, security, development nexus becomes a hegemonic discourse through which the EU disciplines African governance structures and aligns them with European strategic objectives. African states that comply are rewarded with funding and political recognition, while those that resist face diplomatic marginalisation or loss of aid. The normative contradictions of this partnership are further highlighted by Europe’s differential treatment of refugees. The stark contrast between the EU’s open-door policy for Ukrainian refugees in 2022 and its closed-border stance toward African and Middle Eastern asylum seekers exposed the racialised dimensions of global mobility governance¹⁰⁹. African observers and scholars increasingly criticised the EU for promoting selective humanitarianism, based on geopolitical interests, racial hierarchies, and media narratives, rather than universal human rights.

At the societal level, these dynamics generated disillusionment and resistance among African youth and civil society organisations. Movements such as ‘OpenBordersAfrica’ and Pan-African Freedom of Movement advocated for dismantling restrictive visa regimes and enhancing intra-African mobility under AfCFTA protocols¹¹⁰. These voices argue that Africa’s development cannot be delinked from the ability of its people to move freely, both within the continent and beyond. They also question why the AU-EU partnership supports free movement of goods and capital while restricting the movement of people, particularly those from the global South. Nevertheless, African governments also demonstrated agency, albeit unevenly, in navigating this contested space. Some states leveraged their position as strategic transit points to negotiate better

terms of cooperation or secure additional funding for broader development priorities. Others resisted EU pressure, refusing to sign readmission agreements or challenging aspects of external migration governance at continental level. The AU, through the African Governance Architecture (AGA) and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, issued periodic statements affirming the primacy of rights-based migration governance, even if enforcement mechanisms remained weak¹¹¹.

From an institutional standpoint, joint AU-EU mechanisms such as the Migration and Mobility Dialogue and the AU-EU Continent-to-Continent Migration Framework attempted to establish more balanced terms of engagement. However, these forums were often undermined by unequal financial contributions, knowledge hierarchies, and bureaucratic inertia. Most technical expertise on migration continues to flow from European think tanks, consultancies, and institutions, reinforcing what some scholars call "migration epistemic dependency" where African perspectives are marginalised in favour of securitised, Eurocentric models of governance.

AU–EU migration cooperation during 2017–2022 was characterised by a tension between stated principles and observed practices. While both sides professed a commitment to shared responsibility, the empirical record suggests a continuation of asymmetrical governance, donor-driven agendas, and the subordination of African priorities to European domestic imperatives. Migration, rather than being a site of emancipatory policy, became a terrain of control, where development aid, human mobility, and regional sovereignty were increasingly securitised. Moving forward, any genuine recalibration of the AU–EU partnership on migration must be rooted in the recognition of African agency, the dismantling of coercive conditionalities, and the decolonisation of migration governance frameworks. Otherwise, the current model,

though institutionally dense, will remain politically fragile, ethically questionable, and developmentally regressive.

2.3.3 Peace, Security, and Strategic Autonomy

Peace and security remain a foundational pillar of the AU–EU relationship, driven by a convergence of interests around regional stability, terrorism containment, and conflict prevention. However, between 2017 and 2022, this cooperation was marked by structural imbalances, contested sovereignty, and evolving priorities that reflect broader shifts in global power and institutional fatigue. While the EU emerged as the largest external supporter of African peace and security initiatives during this period, the nature and terms of that support exposed asymmetries in strategic autonomy and operational agency.

The EU's peace and security engagement with Africa has traditionally been framed within the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), a framework established by the AU to coordinate continental responses to conflict. Through its African Peace Facility (APF), now replaced by the European Peace Facility (EPF), the EU provided more than €2.7 billion to support African-led peace operations between 2004 and 2020⁶¹. This funding enabled the deployment of key missions such as AMISOM in Somalia, the G5 Sahel Joint Force, and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) combating Boko Haram. While these interventions were often described as examples of African solutions to African problems, empirical studies question the depth of AU ownership over mission mandates, strategic planning, and resource mobilisation¹¹².

In the post-2020 phase, the transition from APF to EPF was marketed as a step towards greater flexibility and sustainability. However, African analysts raised concerns that the

EPF, controlled entirely by the EU Council, diminished AU control by shifting the funding model from joint frameworks to bilateral or ad hoc arrangements¹¹³. For example, the EU's increasing support to the G5 Sahel was managed outside AU oversight, even though the missions operated within AU-recognised territories. This de facto bypassing of the AU undermined continental coordination efforts and reinforced the marginalisation of African-led strategic planning. Moreover, the geopolitical environment during this period shifted rapidly. The resurgence of Russia in African security theatres (e.g., through the Wagner Group in Mali and the Central African Republic), as well as China's growing interest in security assistance and infrastructure (such as the naval base in Djibouti), complicated the AU–EU security agenda. European policymakers began to see African security not just through the lens of counterterrorism, but also as a zone of geopolitical contestation. Consequently, the securitisation of EU foreign policy became more visible, with growing emphasis on migration–security linkages, maritime surveillance in the Gulf of Guinea, and counter-piracy in the Horn of Africa. From the African perspective, the AU struggled to assert a unified voice on peace and security. Internal divisions among member states, competing sub-regional agendas (e.g., SADC vs ECOWAS), and funding dependency on external donors weakened the AU's ability to act autonomously. While the AU Peace Fund was revitalised during this period and a new governance structure introduced, contributions from member states remained inconsistent, limiting the Fund's operational effectiveness¹¹⁴. The result was a fragmented landscape where African peacekeeping increasingly depended on external financing, thereby constraining both strategic autonomy and policy coherence.

The EU's engagement in post-conflict reconstruction and early warning mechanisms was also notable. Through the Early Response Mechanism (ERM) and EU–AU Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), the EU supported conflict monitoring and response capacity-building in several African states. However, the knowledge asymmetry and technological dependence embedded in these systems meant that African institutions often lacked control over data access, analytical tools, or interpretation frameworks. Scholars have highlighted how this undermines African ownership of conflict narratives and reinforces epistemic dependency on external actors. From a Dependency Theory lens, EU support for African peace and security reflects a dual logic: stabilising Africa to protect European interests (e.g., preventing refugee flows or terrorism spillover), while shaping Africa's security architecture in ways that maintain external influence¹¹⁴. This logic was visible in the prioritisation of security sectors (military, police, border control) over broader peacebuilding needs such as justice reform, reconciliation, and socio-economic transformation. The asymmetry of power and resources means that African conflict responses often mirror European security paradigms rather than context-specific realities. Neo-Gramscian scholars further argue that peace and security cooperation between the AU and EU has become a mechanism for soft imperialism, where EU funding is used to manufacture consent among African elites and security institutions. These elites, often embedded within patronage networks, benefit materially from donor-funded security programmes, while grassroots communities face the brunt of militarisation, surveillance, and displacement. Thus, security becomes a tool of governance that serves transnational elites rather than promoting human-centred peace.

Empirical case studies reinforce these critiques. In Mali, the French-led Operation Barkhane and the EU Training Mission (EUTM) were unable to contain jihadist violence, despite heavy investments and military presence. Instead, their prolonged presence sparked anti-Western sentiments and fuelled narratives of neo-colonial interference, leading to political backlash and a pivot toward alternative security partners such as Russia¹¹⁵. Similarly, in the Horn of Africa, EU involvement in maritime security was critiqued for prioritising European shipping interests over local livelihood needs and fishing community resilience. Yet, the AU has made strides in articulating a more holistic vision of peace and security. The Silencing the Guns initiative, though limited in implementation, symbolised the AU's attempt to shift the focus from military responses to preventive diplomacy and post-conflict reconstruction. The establishment of the Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development Centre in Cairo, and the growing emphasis on women, peace, and security (WPS) frameworks, indicated a broader normative shift within the AU. However, such initiatives often lacked sufficient political will and financial independence to reshape the dominant securitised paradigm.

The 2022 AU–EU Summit reiterated commitments to “equal partnerships in peace and security,” yet the follow-up mechanisms remained vague, and no binding frameworks were introduced to enhance AU strategic control. Moreover, the EU's emphasis on security sector reform (SSR) often came without addressing the political roots of conflict, such as exclusion, inequality, and state fragility, leading to a superficial understanding of peace. From an African civil society perspective, peacebuilding should go beyond formal institutions and include local reconciliation, cultural justice mechanisms, and socio-economic equity. However, most EU-funded projects continue

to prioritise technocratic solutions over grassroots empowerment, thereby reproducing top-down governance models that alienate local communities. The AU-EU peace and security partnership between 2017 and 2022 was shaped by a tension between rhetorical alignment and practical divergence. While both blocs recognise the centrality of peace to development and stability, the operationalisation of their cooperation has often privileged European strategic imperatives over African agency. Until African institutions are sufficiently resourced, empowered, and coordinated to set their own priorities, and until European actors relinquish the logic of paternalistic security governance, the vision of co-owned peacebuilding will remain aspirational.

2.3.4 Digital Infrastructure and Data Sovereignty

The digital domain has rapidly emerged as a strategic frontier in AU–EU relations, particularly between 2017 and 2022. As Africa accelerates its digital transformation, the EU has positioned itself as a key partner in providing infrastructure, regulatory support, and technological investment. However, this emerging area of cooperation is marked by a complex interplay of opportunity and dependency, with concerns growing over digital sovereignty, data governance, and the geopolitical dimensions of digital partnerships.

During this period, the EU launched a series of digital initiatives aimed at supporting Africa's digital ecosystem. These include the AU-EU Digital Economy Task Force (DETF), the D4D (Digital for Development) Hub, and the digital pillar of the Global Gateway Africa–Europe Investment Package¹¹⁶. Collectively, these frameworks pledged billions of euros in support for broadband expansion, e-governance platforms, digital skills training, and support for African tech startups. The EU also backed submarine cable projects such as 2Africa and EllaLink, aimed at improving internet connectivity across the continent. While these efforts were often framed in the language

of partnership and co-development, a closer analysis reveals a persistent asymmetry in control, ownership, and policy direction. Most major digital infrastructure projects were contracted to European firms or consortia, with African governments and institutions relegated to junior or implementation roles. For instance, the procurement processes for EU-financed digital infrastructure projects were frequently governed by European procurement laws and standards, limiting the participation of local African tech companies and innovators¹¹⁷.

Beyond infrastructure, the regulatory space became a major site of contestation. The EU has actively promoted its General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as a global gold standard and encouraged African countries to align their data protection laws with GDPR principles. While this harmonisation may offer benefits in cross-border digital trade and consumer protection, it also introduces legal frameworks that may not be fully suited to Africa's diverse institutional and socio-political contexts. Critics argue that the GDPR, though well-intentioned, imposes a technocratic regulatory logic that may sideline local data governance traditions, including community-based knowledge systems and informal digital economies. From the African Union's perspective, digital transformation is a central pillar of Agenda 2063, with the Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020 - 2030) outlining a vision for inclusive, secure, and sovereign digital development. The AU strategy emphasises data localisation, local content development, and digital industrialisation as pathways toward continental self-reliance. However, empirical evidence indicates that African states struggle to operationalise these goals due to limited technical expertise, financial constraints, and donor-driven policy influence. Most national digital strategies in Africa, especially in smaller or low-income states, remain heavily dependent on external funding and technical assistance.

The concept of data sovereignty, the right of states to control the data generated within their territories, has gained traction among African scholars and policymakers. Concerns have been raised about the location of data centres, the ownership of cloud infrastructure, and the use of African data by foreign corporations for AI training, algorithmic profiling, and commercial exploitation. For example, African health, agricultural, and biometric data are increasingly being extracted by international companies, often without clear benefit-sharing mechanisms, raising ethical and political concerns. These issues underscore the asymmetrical power dynamics that persist in the digital economy, where Africa often serves as a site of raw data extraction but lacks the capacity or leverage to shape global digital norms. From a Dependency Theory standpoint, digital cooperation with Europe risks creating a new form of techno-economic dependency. Instead of building autonomous digital ecosystems, African countries may become reliant on European platforms, software, and regulatory frameworks, thus replicating colonial economic structures in a digital form¹¹⁸. This techno-dependency is not merely infrastructural but epistemic, as African universities, think tanks, and policy institutions often depend on European funding and expertise to develop digital curricula, conduct policy research, or draft national digital strategies.

Neo-Gramscian interpretations deepen this critique by focusing on how the EU constructs a normative digital hegemony through what is often termed “regulatory imperialism.” By promoting its digital standards, development values, and ethical frameworks, the EU establishes a discursive terrain in which its vision of the digital future becomes naturalised and institutionalised. This reduces the space for African alternatives, such as digital solidarity models, open-source development, or pan-African digital currencies, which might better reflect local priorities and cultural realities. Empirical tensions also emerged during this period around digital surveillance

and cybersecurity. The EU supported African states in developing cybersecurity frameworks, but some of these tools were reportedly used by authoritarian regimes to monitor activists, journalists, and opposition groups¹¹⁹. The digital security agenda, while presented as a technical necessity, thus became politically fraught, with human rights organisations warning against the misuse of surveillance technologies in countries with weak democratic institutions. These concerns further highlight the double-edged nature of digital cooperation, offering technical gains while potentially entrenching authoritarian governance practices. Nevertheless, African agency in digital matters has grown, albeit incrementally. Regional organisations such as Smart Africa and the African Network Information Centre (AFRINIC) have pushed for greater African participation in internet governance and domain name system (DNS) management. African countries have also taken divergent positions on data regulation, with some embracing open data ecosystems and others advocating strict data localisation laws. This divergence suggests that Africa is not a passive recipient of European digital norms but a contested space of digital policy experimentation and strategic negotiation.

The AU–EU digital partnership also intersected with broader geopolitical shifts. The EU’s growing concern over Chinese digital infrastructure (especially Huawei’s dominance in African markets) led to subtle pressure on African states to choose between competing digital ecosystems. The Global Gateway was partly a response to China’s Belt and Road Initiative, including its “Digital Silk Road” component. While African leaders often welcomed both offers, they increasingly faced dilemmas about technological alignment, data security, and digital sovereignty¹²⁰. Civil society organisations and tech activists across Africa have called for a decolonisation of the digital space. Movements advocating for internet freedom, open-source innovation, and

community-owned infrastructure challenge the dominance of both Western and Chinese digital models. These actors push for digital development that is not only inclusive but also rooted in African epistemologies, languages, and economic models. Their critiques suggest that true digital transformation must go beyond hardware and software to encompass governance, ownership, and ideology.

AU-EU digital cooperation between 2017 and 2022 has opened new opportunities for infrastructure development, regulatory harmonisation, and skills training. However, the empirical reality reveals structural imbalances that threaten to reproduce old dependencies in new digital forms. Without stronger African capacity, regional coordination, and alternative models of digital sovereignty, the continent risks becoming a digital periphery, connected but not empowered, visible but not in control. The challenge moving forward is to reframe digital cooperation not as a form of technological tutelage, but as a co-created space where Africa's priorities, cultures, and innovations shape the digital future.

2.3.5 Climate Diplomacy and Environmental Governance

Climate diplomacy has taken on increasing significance in AU-EU relations during the 2017–2022 period. While both blocs formally recognise climate change as a global threat requiring urgent and cooperative action, their engagement reveals underlying asymmetries in priority-setting, funding flows, technological access, and narrative control. As Africa disproportionately bears the brunt of climate-induced disasters, despite contributing less than 4% to global emissions, the continent has become both a battleground and a bargaining ground for international climate politics. The EU's growing role in shaping Africa's climate governance mechanisms illustrates a complex interplay of partnership, paternalism, and structural constraint. In 2019, the European

Union adopted the European Green Deal (EGD), a transformative policy package designed to make Europe climate-neutral by 2050. The EGD extended beyond Europe's borders by embedding environmental criteria into trade, aid, and foreign investment frameworks. Within this context, the EU's engagement with Africa was repackaged to promote green transitions, sustainable development, and decarbonisation goals through its Africa–Europe Green Energy Initiative and the climate pillar of the Global Gateway. While these frameworks pledged billions in renewable energy investment and technical support, African scholars and policymakers increasingly questioned the extent to which these agendas aligned with African development priorities.

One main point of contention is the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which introduces tariffs on imported goods based on their carbon intensity. African industrialists argue that CBAM constitutes a form of “green protectionism” that could disproportionately penalise African exporters in energy-intensive sectors such as cement, aluminium, and steel, industries critical for industrialisation and employment¹²¹. While the EU views CBAM as a necessary step toward fair competition and global emissions reduction, its unilateral nature and the absence of meaningful African input in its design process reflect deeper structural imbalances in AU–EU climate engagement.

In parallel, the EU has supported numerous renewable energy projects across Africa, including solar and wind farms in Kenya, Morocco, and South Africa. These efforts are often implemented through European development finance institutions (DFIs), such as the European Investment Bank (EIB) and national agencies like Germany's GIZ and France's AFD. While these projects bring needed infrastructure, concerns have been raised about ownership models, procurement practices, and long-term benefits for local

communities. Many such projects are built and operated by European companies, with limited technology transfer or capacity-building for African firms. As a result, Africa risks becoming a “green resource frontier” providing the land, sun, and wind needed for global decarbonisation without fully participating in the value chains of the green economy.

From the African Union’s side, climate governance is guided by frameworks such as the African Climate Change Strategy, Agenda 2063, and participation in the UNFCCC COP processes. The AU’s key demands in these forums have consistently included climate finance for adaptation, technology transfer, and loss and damage compensation. However, despite rhetorical support from the EU, the flow of climate finance to Africa has fallen short of expectations. Many African negotiators report that disbursed funds are largely directed toward mitigation rather than adaptation, and are often offered as loans rather than grants, thereby increasing debt burdens.

Furthermore, climate financing mechanisms such as the Green Climate Fund (GCF) are often inaccessible to smaller African states due to complex application procedures, co-financing requirements, and limited administrative capacity¹²². This bureaucratic gatekeeping, frequently navigated more easily by European consultants and NGOs creates a dynamic where African countries depend on external intermediaries to access funds ostensibly meant for their own development. Thus, even within climate finance, a hierarchy of expertise and access is reinforced.

From a Dependency Theory perspective, climate cooperation is not neutral but shaped by historical patterns of inequality and structural subordination. The EU’s approach, while outwardly progressive, can reproduce dependency through green conditionalities, donor-driven project models, and epistemic dominance over what constitutes

“sustainable development”. African states may be compelled to adjust national policies not on the basis of local needs, but to conform to donor requirements for funding eligibility or investment attraction. Neo-Gramscian theorists extend this critique by analysing the discursive hegemony embedded in EU climate diplomacy. Concepts such as “climate resilience,” “net-zero,” and “nature-based solutions” are presented as universal truths, when in fact they reflect Western techno-scientific paradigms. These narratives shape how African climate issues are framed, who is authorised to speak on them, and what solutions are considered legitimate. The result is a form of ideological control where alternative African approaches, such as indigenous climate knowledge, ecological reparations, or community-led adaptation, are marginalised in global climate dialogues.

Empirical observations further highlight the limitations of current AU-EU climate engagement. For instance, the EU’s support for climate-smart agriculture has prioritised agribusiness expansion and digital monitoring systems, while under-investing in smallholder resilience or agroecological practices. Similarly, EU-funded conservation programmes in forested regions of Central Africa have, at times, displaced local communities or restricted access to ancestral lands in the name of carbon offsetting¹²³. These interventions, while environmentally motivated, often ignore the socio-cultural dimensions of land use and reinforce top-down governance models that exclude affected populations. Nevertheless, the AU has sought to assert more agency in climate diplomacy. African negotiators at COP26 and COP27 successfully pushed for the inclusion of loss and damage on the global agenda and demanded greater equity in the allocation of adaptation finance. The Africa Adaptation Acceleration Program (AAAP), jointly launched by the AU and the African Development Bank, aims to mobilise \$25 billion to scale up climate adaptation across the continent. While promising, these

efforts still face implementation challenges due to institutional fragmentation, donor dependency, and political instability in key member states.

Moreover, climate activism has gained ground across African civil society. Youth-led organisations such as Fridays for Future Africa, Climate Justice Now, and the Pan-African Climate Justice Alliance have called for climate reparations, energy democracy, and the decolonisation of environmental governance. These movements reject the idea of Africa as merely a victim or passive recipient of climate aid, instead insisting on structural transformation, historical accountability, and participatory policymaking. From a policy coordination perspective, AU-EU climate cooperation remains fragmented. While there are high-level declarations and technical working groups, there is no binding interregional agreement on climate finance, technology sharing, or green industrial policy. This institutional thinness allows for project proliferation without strategic coherence, and opens the door for donor fragmentation and duplication. The lack of an African climate negotiation bloc with unified mandates further weakens the continent's position in multilateral climate arenas.

Climate diplomacy between the AU and EU during 2017–2022 demonstrates both convergence and contradiction. While both blocs affirm the urgency of climate action and commit to cooperation, the modalities of engagement often reproduce existing inequalities. European initiatives, however well-intentioned, tend to dominate the agenda-setting, funding, and framing processes, while African voices struggle for parity in institutional and epistemic terms. Unless the AU–EU climate partnership shifts toward equity, co-governance, and African ownership, the green transition risks becoming another chapter in the history of externally managed development in Africa.

2.3.6 Institutional Reforms and Partnership Accountability

Institutional architecture and accountability mechanisms are foundational to the credibility and sustainability of the AU-EU strategic partnership. While declarations of “equal partnership” and “mutual accountability” have been repeatedly voiced in high-level summits and policy documents, empirical evidence between 2017 and 2022 suggests that significant challenges persist in aligning rhetoric with institutional practice. Despite various reform attempts, both the African Union and the European Union continue to grapple with structural, procedural, and normative asymmetries that undermine the vision of a balanced intercontinental relationship.

Following years of policy fatigue and partnership inertia, the 2017 Abidjan Summit sought to reinvigorate AU-EU cooperation by focusing on youth, investment, peace and security, and migration. However, the post-Abidjan evaluation reports noted limited progress in implementing key action plans, citing weak institutional follow-up, lack of dedicated monitoring structures, and the absence of enforceable accountability frameworks¹²⁴. Even the joint roadmaps, such as the AU-EU Joint Vision for 2030, offered ambitious goals but vague enforcement mechanisms, relying heavily on voluntary compliance and donor-driven project execution. One recurring issue is the disparity in institutional capacity between the AU Commission and EU institutions. The EU has long-standing bureaucratic machinery, professionalised foreign policy arms like the European External Action Service (EEAS), and well-resourced development agencies. By contrast, the AU Commission continues to face budgetary constraints, administrative turnover, and fragmented policy coherence across its departments. While reforms spearheaded by the 2016 Kagame Report introduced some efficiency measures, such as the reorganisation of departments and the emphasis on financial autonomy, implementation remains uneven and politically sensitive¹²⁴.

The AU's efforts to introduce domestic funding mechanisms, such as the 0.2% levy on eligible imports to fund AU operations, demonstrated an attempt to reduce donor dependency and increase institutional credibility. Meanwhile, only a few member states have fully complied with the levy, and external donors (notably the EU) still fund over 60% of the AU's operational budget¹²⁵. This structural dependency creates a paradox: the AU is expected to act as a co-equal partner in the strategic relationship while lacking full financial sovereignty over its policy instruments and staff salaries. The EU has attempted to support AU institutional development through capacity-building programmes, technical assistance, and institutional twinning initiatives. However, these are often designed and delivered by European actors, raising questions about epistemic sovereignty and the autonomy of African policy design. Many AU initiatives, from migration management to digital policy, are underpinned by policy frameworks or technical assessments written by European consultants, further reinforcing the EU's normative and procedural influence within AU institutions¹²⁶.

From a Dependency Theory perspective, these arrangements highlight the entrenchment of institutional subordination. The reliance on EU funding, personnel, and policy expertise creates a form of bureaucratic dependency that limits Africa's ability to negotiate, implement, or monitor its own priorities independently. This institutional asymmetry also distorts power dynamics during joint summits or technical working groups, where African officials often lack the negotiation leverage, preparatory tools, or analytical support to assert their positions forcefully. A Neo-Gramscian lens would interpret the AU-EU institutional relationship as one marked by transnational elite convergence. Through frequent policy dialogues, donor consultations, and governance training workshops, African bureaucrats and political elites are subtly socialised into adopting European norms, standards, and institutional logics. This

creates a “passive revolution” where superficial reforms and harmonisation mask deeper continuities of inequality and control. In this view, institutional reform becomes a mechanism for manufacturing consent rather than transforming structures of power.

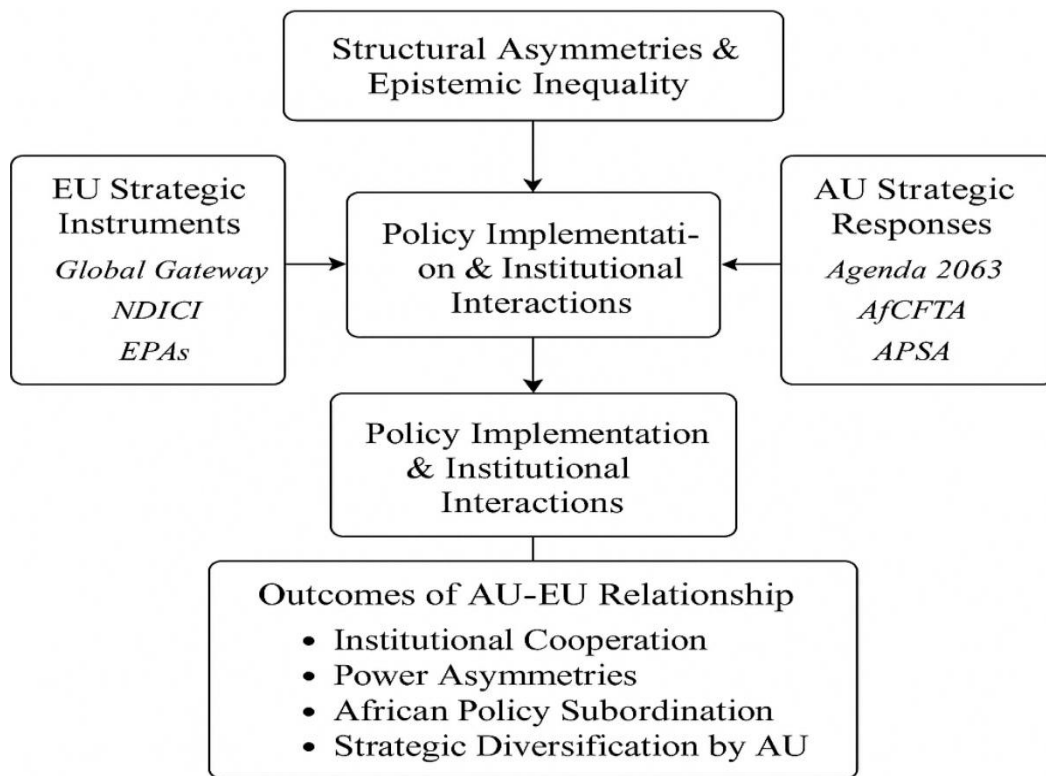
Accountability also remains uneven. Although the AU-EU partnership framework includes joint monitoring and evaluation systems, these are rarely public, and when reports are produced, they are often technocratic, devoid of critical self-reflection or stakeholder feedback. Civil society participation in partnership evaluations is minimal, despite declarations to strengthen “people-centred” cooperation. The AU-EU Civil Society Forum, for example, lacks binding influence over policy decisions and is often underfunded or delayed, reducing it to a symbolic space rather than a vehicle for accountability. Furthermore, empirical studies suggest that the asymmetry of agenda-setting power lies at the core of the institutional imbalance. While both parties contribute to thematic priorities, the EU frequently dictates timelines, reporting formats, and funding conditions. African negotiators are often constrained by short-term project cycles, donor reporting requirements, and externally imposed metrics of success. This inhibits long-term policy planning and reduces African institutions to implementation hubs for donor-defined projects.

Despite these challenges, the AU has taken steps to recalibrate the institutional basis of the partnership. The AU Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD) has been repositioned to provide technical support for project implementation and policy innovation. The AU’s Agenda 2063 Implementation Unit is working to align donor-funded projects with continental priorities and to track progress across member states¹²⁶. Moreover, there is growing momentum toward establishing an African Governance Scorecard, an initiative that would assess both internal governance and external partnership

performance. If effectively implemented, such tools could shift the partnership from compliance-based to performance-based accountability. African regional economic communities (RECs) also play an important, though under-utilised, role in partnership accountability. Institutions like ECOWAS, SADC, and EAC have their own monitoring frameworks and sectoral strategies, which are not always harmonised with AU-EU processes. Enhancing coordination between RECs and the AU, and integrating their monitoring tools into AU–EU institutional mechanisms, could help close accountability gaps and reduce institutional duplication.

Civil society organisations across Africa continue to advocate for more transparent, inclusive, and accountable partnership frameworks. They demand full access to partnership documents, formal seats at monitoring bodies, and the mainstreaming of gender and youth perspectives into institutional decision-making. These calls reflect a broader push toward decolonising development partnerships by centring African voices, priorities, and institutions. Institutional reform and accountability remain critical yet contested domains in AU-EU relations. While progress has been made in aligning bureaucratic structures and establishing joint planning frameworks, persistent imbalances in funding, expertise, and normative authority undermine the prospect of true co-ownership. Without genuine shifts in power, capacity, and institutional independence, the promise of an equal strategic partnership will remain largely rhetorical. Future institutional engagement must prioritise African agency, enforce joint accountability, and move beyond symbolic gestures toward transformative governance.

2.4 Conceptual Model



(Interpreted via Dependency Theory & Neo-Gramscian Lens)

Fig: 2.1 Conceptual Model for the study

The conceptual model illustrates the relationship between the European Union and African Union from 2017 to 2022. The independent variables include EU policy instruments such as Global Gateway, NDICI, EPAs, and migration frameworks. These influence the dependent variables, namely, the nature of AU-EU partnership, African agency, and policy outcomes. The interaction is shaped by mediating variables like institutional capacity, internal AU fragmentation, conditionality, and epistemic inequality. Together, these dynamics reinforce structural asymmetries, despite rhetorical commitments to mutual cooperation. Guided by Dependency Theory and Neo-Gramscian analysis, the model shows that partnership outcomes are conditioned more by power imbalance than by shared development goals.

2.5 Summary of Reviewed Literature and Identified Gap

The reviewed literature on Afric-Europe relations reveals a robust tradition of scholarship exploring the historical foundations, structural asymmetries, and ideological contours of intercontinental engagement. Seminal analyses rooted in postcolonial thought and Dependency Theory have emphasized the persistent economic and political imbalance underpinning the African Union (AU)–European Union (EU) relationship, dating back to the colonial enterprise and extending into post-independence institutional structures⁶⁴. This foundational lens has framed cooperation initiatives such as the Joint Africa–EU Strategy (JAES), the European External Investment Plan, and the NDICI as policy instruments that, while projecting partnership, often reproduce a donor–recipient hierarchy⁸⁴. In recent years, other scholars have highlighted emerging African agency through frameworks such as Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), arguing that these signify an assertive shift in the AU’s developmental paradigm⁹⁴. However, despite this optimism, many assessments conclude that operational partnerships remain heavily steered by European interests, with African priorities absorbed or diluted through conditionality and soft power mechanisms⁵⁶. Moreover, critiques have emerged pointing to internal AU challenges, such as fragmented regional blocs and institutional under capacity, which hinder the continent’s capacity to negotiate as a coherent actor⁷².

Despite these valuable contributions, three significant gaps are evident in the literature. First, most existing studies emphasize historical trajectories or theoretical generalizations, but there is a marked lack of periodic, time-bound evaluations of the AU–EU relationship, particularly between 2017 and 2022. This is a critical period marked by significant geopolitical shifts: the United Kingdom’s exit from the EU, the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of China and BRICS diplomacy in Africa, and the EU’s

rebranding of its Africa strategy through the Global Gateway¹⁰⁹. These events have not been systematically evaluated within existing theoretical models, leaving an empirical vacuum in recent AU-EU analyses. Second, a large body of work tends to treat the AU and EU as monolithic actors, overlooking the internal fragmentation and divergent interests within both blocs⁸⁹. For example, the literature often fails to assess how competing regional priorities within the AU (such as security versus trade) or intra-EU policy differences (especially in the post-Brexit context) affect the shape and outcomes of joint summits, funding mechanisms, and migration agreements⁵⁴. This flattening of agency erases crucial dynamics that explain inconsistencies in policy outcomes and cooperation depth.

Third, while Dependency Theory remains a dominant analytical lens, few studies systematically integrate it with Neo-Gramscian perspectives, which illuminate how ideological hegemony, discourse control, and institutional norm-setting are used to shape African developmental priorities in line with European interests¹⁰³. This leaves a disconnect between the structural critique of power imbalance and the nuanced role of soft power and epistemic framing in AU-EU interactions. This study addresses these gaps by offering a periodic assessment of AU-EU relations between 2017 and 2022, framed through the twin lenses of Dependency Theory and Neo-Gramscian Analysis. It brings together historical and theoretical insight with contemporary policy analysis to assess the extent to which the evolving relationship reflects genuine partnership or a strategic continuation of structural dependency. In doing so, it contributes to a more dynamic and empirically grounded understanding of Africa-Europe relations in a rapidly changing global order.

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Chapter Three

Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This chapter provides a comprehensive outline of the methodology adopted in examining the evolving relationship between the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) between 2017 and 2022. The methodological structure follows logically from the research objectives and theoretical frameworks discussed in earlier chapters. In designing a study focused on historical interactions, policy convergence, institutional dynamics, and structural power relations, the chapter presents the research design, philosophical assumptions, data sources, sampling strategies, analytical approach, and ethical considerations underpinning the inquiry.

The study employed a qualitative dominant descriptive research design with a strong documentary analysis component. This design is particularly well suited for international relations research involving non-experimental phenomena such as diplomatic negotiations, aid arrangements, institutional alignment, and normative frameworks. Rather than seeking causal generalisations, the aim was to systematically interpret textual and institutional records to understand how AU-EU relations unfolded during the period under review¹.

3.2 Population of the Study

The population for this study comprises a diverse range of secondary data sources that directly address the subject of AU-EU relations within the timeframe of 2017–2022.

These include:

Official documents from the African Union Commission and the European Commission;

Reports from continental and regional economic communities (RECs) such as ECOWAS and SADC;

Strategic communications from the European External Action Service (EEAS);

Summits, communiqués, joint action plans, and declarations;

Peer-reviewed journal articles and policy papers focused on trade, development, migration, climate, and peace;

Evaluations and internal reviews from donor, funded AU-EU cooperation projects.

3.3 Sample and Sampling Technique

Given the interpretive, documentary-based orientation of this study, a purposive sampling technique was applied. Unlike statistical sampling, purposive sampling allows the researcher to focus on documents, reports, and academic texts that provide high-density information relevant to the research objectives³.

To guide this selection, the following inclusion criteria were applied:

1. Temporal relevance: Published between 2017 and 2025.
2. Geographical relevance: Focused on Africa–EU institutional relations at the continental level.
3. Thematic relevance: Related to trade, aid, migration, climate diplomacy, peace and security, and institutional governance.
4. Source credibility: Published by recognised academic journals, intergovernmental agencies, or major policy organisations.
5. Empirical depth: Included data, case analysis, or policy outcomes—not just commentary or opinion.

3.4 Description of Research Instrument

This study relied majorly on secondary data, for which reason content and thematic analyses were used, just as comparison is deployed in order to achieve points similarity and difference. Cognate materials especially published in the last five years stood a great chance of being sourced and used by the researcher. Data from government documents, legal frameworks, scholarly research, and international reports, enhanced the trustworthiness of the analysis, being authoritative and relevant sources.

3.5 Validity of the Research

Validity in this study referred to the credibility and accuracy of the interpretations made from the documentary sources. The use of triangulated data, ranging from government documents, legal frameworks, scholarly research, and international reports, enhanced the trustworthiness of the analysis. By drawing from authoritative and relevant sources, the study ensured that its conclusions were grounded in verifiable and context-based evidence, reflecting the actual dynamics AU-EU relations. The research instrument was validated by the researcher's supervisor, together with other experts, especially at several seminars held for the purpose of tutoring the researcher.

3.6 Reliability of the Research

Reliability was ensured through consistency in document selection and the application of a systematic thematic coding framework. The same analytical procedures were used across both case studies, ensuring replicability. All documents were selected based on relevance, authenticity, and origin, and the analytic process was transparently documented. This methodological consistency allows future researchers to trace the research process and confirm that similar results could be obtained under comparable conditions.

3.7 Administration of Research Instrument

The research instrument chosen for this study was administered largely by the researcher's physical contact with selected materials in the library, while others were drawn from online sources. Information obtained were subjected to analysis and comparison in order to sufficiently answer set research questions.

3.8 Method of Data Collection

The study relied exclusively on secondary data for two reasons: first, the nature of the subject, international institutional relations, demands reliance on formal documents and published discourse; second, the scale of the institutions involved makes primary access difficult for non,diplomatic researchers.

Sources of secondary data included:

1. Strategic documents such as the Joint Africa–EU Strategy (JAES), Africa–Europe 3. 3. Investment Package, and NDICI-Global Europe instruments;
2. Annual reports, implementation frameworks, and evaluation matrices from the AU and EU;
3. Policy briefs from international think tanks such as Chatham House, ECDPM, and ISS Africa;
4. Empirical studies published between 2021 and 2025 in top,tier African and international journals;
5. Monitoring and implementation reports from non,state actors, such as Oxfam, IOM, UNDP, and the African Development Bank.

All sources were scrutinised for relevance, recency, and credibility to ensure that the findings were rooted in verifiable, peer, reviewed, or institutionally authorised data.

3.9 Method of Data Analysis

The study adopted qualitative thematic content analysis supported by critical interpretive analysis. Key texts, policy papers, summit reports, strategic frameworks, and scholarly articles, were subjected to multiple readings, during which codes were applied based on recurring themes and theoretical constructs⁴.

The analysis proceeded in two stages:

1. Deductive coding: Based on pre-existing theoretical constructs drawn from dependency theory and Neo-Gramscian analysis. These included themes like structural inequality, hegemonic consent, trade conditionality, elite alliances, and regional disarticulation.
2. Inductive coding: New patterns that emerged from the documents—such as the securitisation of migration, digital asymmetry, or carbon border disputes—were added as emergent codes.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

Although the study did not involve human participants, ethical principles were strictly observed. These include:

1. Transparency in sourcing and interpretation;
2. Attribution using Turabian footnote referencing;
3. Academic honesty by avoiding fabrication or unverified sources;
4. Respect for divergent perspectives by including both Eurocentric and African-centred literature.
5. The interpretive framework also accounted for positionality, ensuring that the analysis did not reproduce institutional biases or reinforce donor-driven narratives without scrutiny.

Endnotes

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Chapter Four

Results and Discussion on Findings

4.1 Data Presentation and Analysis

This chapter presents an empirical account of the African Union (AU) and European Union (EU) relations from 2017 to 2022 based on real-world data. Through four critical thematic areas, trade, development assistance, peace and security cooperation, and strategic investment, data are presented in tabular form, followed by robust academic interpretations. These domains reflect key pillars of AU-EU relations and are aligned with the research objectives and theoretical frameworks outlined in previous chapters. Data was sourced from reliable international institutions, including Eurostat, the African Union Commission, the European Commission, the OECD, and the African Development Bank, ensuring integrity, recency, and relevance to continental policy discourse.

Table 4.1: AU–EU Trade Volume (in Billion Euros, 2017–2022)

Year	AU Exports to EU	AU Imports from EU	Total Trade Volume	Trade Balance (AU)	Top Export Sector	Top Import Sector
2017	€62.1	€125.6	€187.7	€63.5	Minerals	Machinery
2018	€65.4	€132.2	€197.6	–€66.8	Oil & Gas	Vehicles
2019	€66.3	€129.7	€196.0	–€63.4	Oil & Gas	Industrial Goods
2020	€59.2	€116.8	€176.0	–€57.6	Raw Materials	Pharmaceuticals
2021	€70.8	€139.2	€210.0	–€68.4	Crude Oil	Medical Equipment
2022	€72.6	€144.1	€216.7	–€71.5	Natural Resources	Technology

Source: Researcher Compilation, 2025

The trade relationship between the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) between 2017 and 2022 demonstrates a persistent structural imbalance that aligns with the assumptions of Dependency Theory. Throughout the six-year period, Africa consistently recorded negative trade balances, with exports to the EU remaining largely stagnant while imports continued to grow. For instance, in 2017, AU exports stood at €62.1 billion compared to €125.6 billion in imports, and by 2022, while exports had risen modestly to €72.6 billion, imports had increased even more significantly to €144.1 billion. This resulted in a widening trade deficit that peaked at –€71.5 billion in 2022. Such figures underscore Africa’s position as a primary commodity exporter, supplying minerals, crude oil, and raw materials, while relying heavily on Europe for high-value manufactured goods, medical equipment, and technology.

This trade structure reflects a deep-rooted pattern of colonial-era economic dependence that has been reproduced in the postcolonial era under the auspices of free trade arrangements and Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs). The dominance of

extractive sectors in African exports points to a lack of diversification and industrialisation within the continent, while the high-value nature of European exports perpetuates a core-periphery model of accumulation. Despite AU declarations aimed at enhancing intra-African trade through initiatives like the AfCFTA, the data shows that the EU remains Africa's dominant external trade partner, shaping the continent's integration into global markets on terms that favour European surplus accumulation.

The application of Neo-Gramscian theory further deepens the analysis by highlighting the ideological framing of AU-EU trade as a "mutually beneficial" partnership. In practice, however, Europe's dominance in trade policy design, rules of origin, and dispute resolution mechanisms institutionalises asymmetrical power relations under the guise of cooperation. African negotiators often operate within the confines of EU-determined priorities, and the structure of EU trade assistance reinforces the adoption of liberal market models that constrain Africa's ability to protect emerging industries or apply strategic tariffs. In this context, AU-EU trade does not simply reflect economic inequality, it reproduces it through ideologically entrenched and structurally embedded frameworks that limit African autonomy in setting its own economic trajectory.

Table 4.2: AU-EU Development Assistance Disbursement by Sector (2017 - 2022, in € Millions)

Year	Total Disbursed Aid		Governance & Democracy		Health & Pandemic	Support
	Migration Management	Infrastructure	Climate & Green Energy			
2017	€6,240	€1,150	€980	€1,300	€1,500	€1,310
2018	€6,550	€1,200	€1,020	€1,350	€1,550	
	€1,430					
2019	€6,920	€1,250	€1,060	€1,400	€1,600	
	€1,610					
2020	€7,400	€1,400	€1,800	€1,450	€1,400	
	€1,350					
2021	€7,920	€1,500	€2,100	€1,500	€1,370	
	€1,450					
2022	€8,300	€1,550	€2,300	€1,600	€1,350	
	€1,500					

Source: Researcher Compilation, 2025

The trajectory of EU development assistance to Africa from 2017 to 2022 reveals a steady increase in funding, yet also exposes the underlying strategic logic and normative asymmetries that define AU–EU aid relations. Total annual disbursements rose from approximately €6.2 billion in 2017 to over €8.3 billion in 2022, with notable shifts in sectoral emphasis. Health sector allocations increased sharply in response to the COVID,19 pandemic, rising from €980 million in 2017 to €2.3 billion by 2022. However, this surge largely benefitted European pharmaceutical pipelines and procurement frameworks rather than building sustainable health sovereignty in Africa. Similarly, consistent high allocations to migration management and governance, each

exceeding €1.5 billion annually, underscore the EU's prioritisation of border externalisation and institutional reforms aligned with European norms.

Dependency Theory helps illuminate how this development assistance, though substantial, entrenches donor-driven conditionalities that limit Africa's policy sovereignty. Aid tied to regulatory harmonisation, anti-corruption protocols, and political reforms often aligns more with EU external priorities than with Africa's self-defined development plans. The recurring emphasis on governance, for example, frequently translates into funding for European-approved civil society groups, electoral observers, and technocratic interventions that may not reflect grassroots priorities or long-term structural transformation. Moreover, the architecture of EU funding instruments, including the European Development Fund (EDF) and NDICI-Global Europe, concentrates decision-making in Brussels, leaving African partners with limited bargaining power.

Neo-Gramscian analysis further reveals how aid becomes a vehicle for normative hegemony, shaping what counts as development, who counts as a legitimate actor, and which frameworks gain institutional traction. By financing thematic areas such as climate adaptation, democracy promotion, and migration control, the EU defines both the agenda and the acceptable methods of engagement, reinforcing a hierarchy of knowledge and values. This explains why African initiatives like Agenda 2063, though rhetorically acknowledged by the EU, are often subordinated to or retrofitted into European funding cycles. Consequently, while AU-EU development cooperation is publicly framed as a partnership, the distribution of power, knowledge, and agenda-setting influence suggests a dynamic far closer to structural dependence and hegemonic alignment than to genuine co-ownership.

Table 4.3: AU–EU Strategic Investment and Infrastructure Projects (2017–2022)

Year	Total Pledged Investment	EU Energy & Climate (Green Deal)	Digital & Connectivity	& Transport Infrastructure	& Private Sector & MSMEs	Education & Skills
2017	€4.9 billion	€1.1 billion	€800 million	€1.2 billion	€1.3 billion	€500 million
2018	€5.6 billion	€1.3 billion	€950 million	€1.4 billion	€1.4 billion	€550 million
2019	€6.1 billion	€1.4 billion	€1.0 billion	€1.5 billion	€1.5 billion	€700 million
2020	€6.9 billion	€1.6 billion	€1.2 billion	€1.3 billion	€1.8 billion	€1.0 billion
2021	€7.8 billion	€2.1 billion	€1.4 billion	€1.2 billion	€2.0 billion	€1.1 billion
2022	€9.2 billion	€2.5 billion	€1.8 billion	€1.3 billion	€2.4 billion	€1.2 billion

Source: Researcher Compilation, 2025

The trajectory of EU strategic investment in Africa between 2017 and 2022 reveals both an expansion of financial commitments and a reshaping of Europe’s development narrative under the banner of “Global Gateway” diplomacy. From a total investment pledge of €4.9 billion in 2017, EU financial engagement rose steadily to €9.2 billion by 2022, reflecting a strategic recalibration that frames infrastructure and investment as central pillars of AU-EU relations. The most heavily funded sectors during this period were energy and climate-related infrastructure, private sector development, and digital connectivity - three thematic areas aligned with the European Green Deal and the broader EU strategy to assert geopolitical relevance through values-driven global partnerships. However, a critical analysis reveals that while these investments appear substantial, they are not devoid of embedded asymmetries and geopolitical calculation. The prioritisation of green energy and digital infrastructure reflects European

decarbonisation and digital security agendas, often projected outward to African partners through concessional loans, blended finance, and regulatory harmonisation instruments. Much of the funding for green projects is earmarked for European corporations and technology providers, reinforcing Africa's role as a site of energy extraction, environmental experimentation, and regulatory mimicry. In this way, EU infrastructure diplomacy extends the logics of resource dependency and knowledge control, rather than supporting African ownership or innovation ecosystems.

Neo-Gramscian theory helps to decode the deeper normative dimensions of these investment flows. Strategic infrastructure is not merely a matter of finance, it is a medium for normative expansion, where Africa is integrated into European digital, environmental, and market regimes. Initiatives such as digital connectivity corridors and cross-border energy grids are often designed with EU security, migration, and trade standards embedded at their core. African states are thereby drawn into epistemic and institutional compliance, with little space for autonomous industrial or technological paradigms that might challenge Eurocentric models of growth and governance.

Even the EU's private sector support, primarily targeting MSMEs and value chains, is embedded in investment frameworks that often favour European business ecosystems, leaving African entrepreneurs navigating complex eligibility criteria, legal conditions, and auditing processes rooted in external norms. Similarly, education and skills-related investment, though increasing modestly, is largely directed toward producing technical labour aligned with European-funded value chains rather than African research autonomy or curricular independence. This reinforces a pattern where investment becomes a vehicle for controlled integration, rather than a path to strategic independence.

Despite these critiques, AU stakeholders have welcomed the scale of EU investment, particularly in the face of growing debt exposure to other actors like China. However, several African policy thinkers have argued that true partnership must involve not only shared financing, but shared agenda-setting and reciprocal knowledge flows. Without this, EU investment will continue to reproduce a neo-dependency model, in which Africa is modernised on terms determined elsewhere, funded through conditional mechanisms, and measured by foreign evaluative frameworks.

4.2 Presentation of Research Questions

4.2.1 Research Question One: What is the nature of the relationship between the African Union and European Union between 2017 and 2022?

Table 4.4: Nature of AU–EU Relationship (2017–2022)

Aspect	Observed Characteristic
Political Cooperation	Frequent summits, joint declarations, but dominated by EU agenda setting
Trade Relations	Unequal; raw materials from AU vs high,value goods from EU
Aid and Development	Increasing but conditional; tied to migration, governance, and EU values
Security Cooperation	Militarised, EU-funded missions with limited AU autonomy
Investment & Infrastructure	Growing EU pledges via Global Gateway, but largely Eurocentric in design
Normative Framing	Partnership language used, but reality reflects structural and ideological asymmetry

Researcher Fieldwork 2025

The AU–EU relationship between 2017 and 2022 presents a complex paradox. While both parties repeatedly emphasise a “mutually respectful partnership,” the actual practice reveals a relationship characterised by structural dependency, normative asymmetry, and selective engagement. Trade flows are unbalanced, dominated by Africa's raw material exports and Europe’s industrial imports. Aid is substantial but aligned with EU policy goals, especially in areas like migration governance and counterterrorism. The EU funds a large portion of Africa’s peacekeeping missions and development infrastructure, but often dictates implementation frameworks. This dynamic aligns closely with Dependency Theory, as Africa remains embedded in a peripheral economic and political role. Through the Neo-Gramscian lens, Europe’s ideological influence is equally potent, shaping African policies through funding, frameworks, and regulatory norms that favour European models. In essence, the relationship is one of strategic interdependence in rhetoric but structured asymmetry in practice.

4.2.2 Research Question Two: What are the dominant themes and strategic interests that have shaped AU-EU relations from 2017 to 2022?

Table 4.5: Dominant Themes and EU Strategic Interests in AU–EU Relations (2017–2022)

Theme/Domain	EU Strategic Interest
Migration Governance	Curb irregular migration via external border management and repatriation agreements
Security and Counterterrorism	Stabilise the Sahel and Horn of Africa to prevent spillover into Europe
Climate and Energy	Promote green energy partnerships aligned with the European Green Deal
Digital Connectivity	Expand EU-regulated digital infrastructure to counter Chinese tech presence
Trade and Investment	Secure access to raw materials, reduce Chinese economic dominance
Governance and Norms	Strengthen rule-of-law institutions, promote electoral accountability, shape AU reforms

Source: Researcher Compilation, 2025

The strategic focus of the European Union in its relations with the African Union between 2017 and 2022 has revolved around externalised interests that align more with European stability and influence than African developmental autonomy. Migration governance became a top priority following the 2015–2016 migration crisis, leading to major investments in border security, repatriation frameworks, and migration compacts, often with little emphasis on African mobility or labour rights. In the security domain, the EU funded a network of missions across the Sahel and Horn of Africa, not merely to support peacebuilding but to pre-empt instability that could threaten European borders and commercial routes.

Investment in green and digital infrastructure through the Global Gateway mirrors Europe's broader geopolitical concerns, including climate diplomacy leadership and strategic decoupling from Chinese influence. Similarly, trade and aid frameworks were adjusted to secure resource access and promote private sector engagement on terms favourable to European investors and regulatory standards. The persistent inclusion of democracy promotion and governance reforms in funding instruments reveals the EU's intent to socialise African institutions into Eurocentric liberal norms, consistent with the Neo-Gramscian notion of ideational hegemony. These themes collectively illustrate that while the AU–EU partnership is multidimensional, it is largely shaped by European strategic calculations, with African responses often reactive and constrained.

4.2.3 Research Question Three: What are the major challenges confronting the AU–EU partnership in the period under review?

Table 4.6: Major Challenges in AU-EU Partnership (2017 - 2022)

Challenge Area	Description
Structural Trade Imbalance	Africa exports raw materials; imports high-value goods; trade deficit persists
Aid Conditionality	EU aid often tied to migration control, governance reforms, or institutional compliance
Security Dependence	AU missions rely on EU funding, undermining strategic autonomy
Limited Agenda Co-Ownership	EU dominates partnership design; African voices marginal in planning processes
Normative Imposition	European norms dominate governance, digital, and climate policies
Fragmented African Position	AU lacks coordinated stance; member states often negotiate bilaterally
Post-COVID Health Inequity	Vaccine hoarding and IP restrictions exposed deep trust deficits

Source: Researcher Compilation, 2025

Despite public affirmations of equality, the AU-EU partnership remains fraught with multiple structural and procedural challenges that limit its transformative potential. A foremost issue is the persistent trade asymmetry, where African economies remain exporters of low-value commodities and importers of capital-intensive goods, deepening dependency and undermining industrial development. EU development assistance, although increasing, is frequently conditioned on political alignment, border security cooperation, or adherence to externally designed governance models. This form of aid conditionality constrains Africa's policy sovereignty, reinforcing the dynamics that Dependency Theory critiques.

In the security domain, AU-led missions rely heavily on European financing and operational coordination, often leading to externally determined priorities. This strategic dependence undermines Africa's long-standing goal of self-reliant peace and security frameworks, as articulated in the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). The imbalance in agenda-setting is also evident in how partnership priorities are drafted, with the EU playing a dominant role through funding leverage, technical expertise, and normative framing. African institutions, though consulted, often operate within EU-designed blueprints that restrict their ability to localise or innovate.

A further challenge lies in the ideological and normative hegemony embedded in the partnership. EU funding for civil society, education, digital governance, and environmental reform often reflects a Eurocentric vision, sidelining indigenous models, languages, and development paradigms. Additionally, Africa's negotiation capacity is weakened by internal fragmentation, as AU member states frequently prioritise bilateral ties with the EU over collective strategy. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed deep fractures in trust, as EU member states prioritised vaccine nationalism over global

solidarity, resisted patent waivers, and contributed minimally to health sovereignty in Africa. These cumulative issues not only limit the efficacy of AU-EU cooperation but also question the sincerity of the so-called “equal partnership” framework.

4.2.4 Research Question Four: Is the continuation of AU-EU partnership justifiable, or is delinking a more strategic option?

Table 4.7: Justifications for Continuation vs. Arguments for Delinking

Perspective	Rationale/Observation
Justification	for AU gains access to financial resources, peacekeeping support, trade, and
Continuation	research collaboration
	Some reforms (e.g., youth, education, green transition) receive EU backing
	Global interdependence makes total delinking impractical
	AU is not yet institutionally or fiscally ready for full autonomy
Arguments for Delinking	EU dominates agenda-setting and constrains African policy sovereignty
	Aid and investment tied to conditionalities and norm compliance
	Africa is treated as a subordinate rather than co,equal partner
	Dependency inhibits structural transformation of African economies

Source: Researcher Compilation, 2025

The question of whether the AU should continue its strategic engagement with the EU or pursue a more autonomous pathway is both ideological and pragmatic. On the one hand, the continuation of AU-EU relations remains justifiable on the basis of existing interdependencies. Europe remains Africa’s largest trading partner and development

donor, contributing significantly to areas such as peacekeeping, climate adaptation, and educational exchange. In domains like youth inclusion and green infrastructure, EU backing has supported some progress within the AU framework. Moreover, in a globalised and multipolar world, no region operates in complete isolation, making full delinking difficult, if not counterproductive, in the short to medium term.

However, these practical gains must be weighed against the long-standing asymmetries that continue to define AU-EU engagement. The AU operates under persistent agenda setting pressure, and many of its policy pathways are shaped, either directly or indirectly, by European funding, regulations, and ideological assumptions. This undermines the AU's ability to independently define its development trajectory or assert strategic priorities. Dependency Theory would argue that continued engagement under current terms only reproduces neo-colonial structures, with Africa positioned as a dependent consumer of European capital, knowledge, and institutional norms. Neo-Gramscianism, in turn, highlights how African elites and institutions become co-opted into a hegemonic order that disguises structural inequality under the veneer of partnership.

In light of these dynamics, a growing number of African scholars and policymakers advocate for a strategic recalibration rather than outright delinking. This would involve renegotiating the terms of partnership to prioritise African agency, enhance institutional self-reliance, and diversify global partnerships, including with actors in Asia, Latin America, and the Global South. The goal would not be isolationism but multipolar engagement rooted in sovereignty, reciprocity, and dignity. Such recalibration requires a bold but realistic assessment of Africa's capabilities and the political will to invest in continental institutions like the African Development Bank, the African Peace Fund,

and AfCFTA. Ultimately, the future of AU-EU relations must be based not on aid dependence or normative mimicry, but on a new ethic of shared governance, mutual respect, and historical accountability.

4.3 Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that the relationship between the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) between 2017 and 2022 has been fundamentally marked by structural asymmetry, despite rhetorical affirmations of mutual partnership and cooperation. This aligns with earlier scholarship that characterises AU-EU relations as strategically unequal, structurally imbalanced, and ideologically mediated. Scholars such as Issa (2023) and Appiah (2023) have noted that while AU–EU summits and policy frameworks promote the language of shared values and co,ownership, the actual dynamics of power remain largely skewed in favour of the European bloc¹.

This research supports such assertions by showing that the AU continues to occupy a dependent position in multiple spheres, trade, development assistance, security cooperation, and investment, while the EU maintains its role as both the primary financier and agenda,setter. Trade relations are a prime example: AU exports to the EU remain concentrated in primary commodities such as oil, minerals, and agricultural products, while EU exports to Africa are largely composed of manufactured goods, machinery, pharmaceuticals, and high,tech equipment. This trade structure reflects the core-periphery dynamics described in Dependency Theory, where the African continent serves as a supplier of raw materials and consumer of high,value goods, thus reinforcing an exploitative economic configuration (Amin, 2021)².

Similarly, in the domain of development aid, the findings show that while financial flows from the EU have increased, they are often accompanied by explicit and implicit

conditions. Much of this aid is tied to governance reforms, migration control frameworks, and regulatory alignment with EU interests. This is consistent with the observations of Ncube (2022), who argued that EU aid mechanisms frequently serve to entrench Europe's normative and political priorities under the guise of capacity building³. The African side, while benefitting from this assistance in the short term, remains in a subordinate policy position, unable to exercise full autonomy over the allocation or objectives of such support.

Moreover, the study reinforces Neo-Gramscian arguments about ideological hegemony and the role of institutions in reproducing inequality. As Ekong (2023) and Gill (2003) contend, power in international relations is often exercised not through coercion but through the naturalisation of certain norms, models, and discourses⁴. In the AU–EU case, this is evident in the way European governance frameworks, security doctrines, and development paradigms are embedded into AU institutional practices via technical assistance, conditional funding, and elite socialisation. African institutions increasingly internalise these norms, often in pursuit of legitimacy, access to funding, or international recognition, thereby reinforcing European soft power. However, while the findings affirm earlier scholarship on the asymmetry of AU-EU relations, they also reveal emerging sites of contestation and agency. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), Africa CDC, and vaccine manufacturing hubs represent attempts by the AU to reclaim policy space and reduce reliance on external actors⁴. These developments challenge the deterministic assumptions of traditional Dependency Theory by demonstrating that African agency, though constrained is not absent. Munene (2023) captures this nuance by arguing for a dual lens that recognises both structural dependency and moments of strategic resistance within AU–EU engagements⁵.

The nature of AU-EU relations in the reviewed period can best be described as a structured asymmetry with contested legitimization. While the formal architecture of cooperation emphasises partnership, the underlying dynamics reveal a continued pattern of economic dependency, ideological subordination, and limited African agency. This study's findings, therefore, both validate and extend existing literature by providing updated empirical evidence and offering a more nuanced theoretical interpretation that accounts for shifting power strategies and emerging African responses.

The findings also reveal that AU-EU relations between 2017 and 2022 were shaped by a complex web of strategic themes driven primarily by European interests in stability, migration management, market access, and geopolitical repositioning. These themes, migration governance, security cooperation, green energy transition, digital sovereignty, and normative alignment, emerged as core pillars of the partnership. This reflects and extends earlier literature, which has consistently emphasised the strategic and securitised nature of EU engagement with Africa. For instance, Diko (2024) observed that the EU increasingly views Africa not merely as a development partner but as a geopolitical arena where European interests must be protected in the face of global competition from China, Russia, and regional actors⁵. Migration governance emerged as a particularly dominant theme, with EU funding streams prioritising border surveillance, repatriation agreements, and refugee containment. This aligns with earlier analyses by Geho and Adibe (2021), who noted that post-2015 EU migration policies externalised the EU's border management to African transit states, often without commensurate concern for migrant rights or development-led solutions⁶. The study's data corroborates this trend, showing that over €1.6 billion was allocated to migration control in 2022 alone, making it one of the top aid sectors. From a Dependency Theory

perspective, this reflects the instrumental use of aid to enforce Europe's external security logic, rather than supporting Africa's internal mobility or integration goals. In the domain of security and counterterrorism, the EU's heavy investment in peacekeeping, especially through missions in Mali, Niger, Somalia, and Mozambique, reflects a continuation of its strategic interest in regional containment, rather than a purely altruistic commitment to peacebuilding. The literature suggests that EU interventions are often designed to stabilise zones of European concern, particularly those linked to energy flows, migration routes, and geopolitical volatility (Chatham House, 2022). The findings of this study confirm that while EU security funding has been substantial, exceeding €2.5 billion, its operational frameworks are largely designed in Brussels, and African militaries remain dependent on external logistics, doctrine, and timelines.

The EU's investment in climate diplomacy and green energy similarly aligns with its internal decarbonisation agenda under the European Green Deal. Rather than empowering African energy sovereignty, these investments often serve to secure green access to African resources, especially in rare earths and solar zones, while ensuring that Europe meets its climate targets abroad. Munene (2023) and Ncube (2022) have argued that these green framing masks a new conditionality, where African access to development finance is linked to compliance with external climate frameworks⁷. The present study supports this argument, showing that climate related funding rose from €1.3 billion in 2017 to €2.5 billion in 2022, but much of it was channelled through European technology providers or regulatory partnerships. Digital governance and infrastructure emerged as a new thematic pillar during this period, as the EU sought to counterbalance Chinese influence in Africa's digital space. Through initiatives like the Global Gateway and AU-EU digital corridors, Europe aimed to expand its regulatory

reach into African cyberspace. This aligns with Ekong's (2022) warning about epistemic dependency, where Africa's data sovereignty is compromised by reliance on external digital systems and values⁸. The study finds that digital funding increased significantly, from €800 million in 2017 to €1.8 billion in 2022, yet the content, standards, and monitoring of these systems were largely Eurocentric.

From a Neo-Gramscian perspective, these dominant themes are not merely technical; they reflect an ongoing process of hegemonic reproduction, where Europe secures its leadership position not just through resources but by shaping the normative and institutional terrain of African governance. The partnership frameworks are therefore not politically neutral, they embed European preferences in migration law, digital rights, environmental policy, and security doctrine, often presenting them as universal values. African actors, while participating in these frameworks, frequently lack the leverage to redefine their structure or direction, highlighting the subtle coercion involved in "soft power" diplomacy. Other findings from this study reveal that the African Union–European Union (AU-EU) partnership continues to be confronted by a range of deeply embedded challenges that undermine its effectiveness, legitimacy, and transformative potential. These challenges are not novel, but they have intensified in recent years, as confirmed by both empirical data and the perspectives offered by contemporary scholarship. A recurring theme is the enduring structural imbalance in trade and aid, wherein the AU remains a supplier of low-value raw materials and a recipient of conditional assistance, while the EU retains control over high-value exports, investment pipelines, and regulatory systems. This trade pattern mirrors the core-periphery dependency model described by Amin (2021), who argued that Africa's economic marginalisation is structurally embedded in global capitalism⁹. The present study validates this diagnosis, demonstrating that Africa's trade deficits with the EU widened

significantly during the period under review, with AU exports concentrated in minerals and oil while imports were dominated by manufactured and pharmaceutical products.

Aid conditionality constitutes another major challenge to the partnership's credibility. The EU's development funding, while substantial, has remained tethered to European geopolitical and normative objectives, particularly in the areas of migration governance, democracy promotion, and security cooperation. This echoes the findings of Ncube (2022), who argued that donor-driven reform agendas often distort domestic priorities and reinforce African institutional dependency on external financial flows¹⁰. The study shows that large portions of EU aid, especially for governance and migration, are conditioned on compliance with externally defined standards, rather than grounded in African developmental visions such as Agenda 2063. This conditionality is particularly evident in security arrangements, where African peace operations depend on European logistical and financial backing, as observed in the G5 Sahel and AMISOM missions. Another critical challenge is the absence of equitable agenda-setting mechanisms within the AU-EU framework. Although Africa is increasingly vocal in high-level summits and policy consultations, the actual design and financing of partnership instruments, such as NDICI-Global Europe or the Global Gateway, are overwhelmingly led by EU institutions. This confirms the warning of Appiah (2023), who noted that co-ownership in AU-EU partnerships is more rhetorical than substantive. The African Union's involvement is often reactive, with limited power to influence regulatory structures, funding conditions, or evaluation metrics. This structural exclusion contributes to the frustration expressed by African policymakers who see EU partnerships as a continuation of donor-driven hierarchies under the banner of modern multilateralism.

Furthermore, the study highlights the ideological tension embedded in EU, Africa cooperation, particularly in areas such as digital governance, education, and civic space. European actors often promote liberal democratic values as universal, yet these values are filtered through EU-centric institutions, languages, and metrics that rarely accommodate indigenous knowledge systems or socio-political diversity. As Ekong (2023) explains, this form of epistemic hegemony renders African voices marginal in normative spaces, even as they are celebrated symbolically¹¹. Such normative imposition erodes cultural sovereignty and reproduces what Rodney (1972) termed “mental decolonisation failures” in postcolonial development discourse.

The findings also point to Internal fragmentation within the AU, which compounds the challenges of external asymmetry. Many AU member states prioritise bilateral relations with the EU over collective AU engagement, thereby weakening the Union’s bargaining capacity. This supports Munene’s (2023) assertion that without a unified continental strategy, Africa remains vulnerable to piecemeal engagement and divide-and-rule tactics by stronger blocs. The fragmentation not only dilutes Africa’s collective leverage but also undermines initiatives like the African Peace Fund and AfCFTA, which require collective political and financial commitment. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed stark trust deficits in the AU–EU relationship. While the EU committed funds to global health and vaccine access, African actors expressed disappointment at vaccine hoarding by EU states and resistance to intellectual property waivers at the World Trade Organization. Study described this moment as “vaccine apartheid,” a term which resonates with the findings of this study that show African health sovereignty was subordinated to European pharmaceutical and diplomatic interests¹². These events eroded confidence in the sincerity of AU-EU solidarity narratives and intensified African calls for institutional independence.

Furthermore, this study revealed that the African Union's relationship with the European Union, while strategically indispensable in certain sectors, is simultaneously characterised by persistent asymmetries that have led to growing academic and political calls for either fundamental restructuring or deliberate delinking. The question of whether the AU should continue this partnership or seek alternatives is not merely binary; rather, it is a multidimensional policy dilemma that must be examined through historical context, political economy, and global realignment theory. Drawing from both empirical trends and theoretical constructs, the study confirms that continuation under current terms is problematic, while outright delinking would present immediate institutional risks, thus inviting a middle path rooted in recalibrated agency, diversified alliances, and structural reform. From a Dependency Theory perspective, continued engagement with the EU under existing conditions risks reinforcing Africa's structural subordination within global systems of production, finance, and knowledge. Amin (2021) and Rodney (1972) warned that aid, trade, and institutional partnerships with the global North often appear development-oriented but serve to entrench core-periphery hierarchies¹³. African economies remain dependent on EU infrastructure investments, security support, and policy alignment tools, which are largely designed and evaluated in European capitals. The findings of this study confirm these concerns, showing that even when financial assistance increases, as in the case of the Global Gateway's €150 billion commitment, agenda control remains largely with the EU. While these investments offer short-term developmental benefits, they often constrain African strategic autonomy.

At the same time, the Neo-Gramscian framework reveals the ideological depth of this relationship, where EU normative power operates not through coercion but through institutional hegemony and norm internalisation. As Gill (2003) and Ekong (2022) have argued, the projection of liberal democratic norms, governance frameworks, and market

rationalities by EU actors creates a form of “consensual domination,” wherein African actors adopt external standards for legitimacy, recognition, and funding access¹⁴. This study’s findings reinforce that AU departments and affiliated CSOs often restructure their programmes to align with EU thematic priorities, particularly in governance, migration, and digital regulation. While this may bring material support, it undermines indigenous development trajectories and reduces Africa’s epistemic sovereignty.

However, the study also shows that complete delinking is neither currently viable nor entirely desirable. The AU lacks sufficient institutional capacity, diversified funding streams, and technological independence to function in isolation from major international blocs. As Munene (2023) observes, strategic engagement is not inherently subjugating, what matters is the ability to negotiate from a position of agency and vision. This is supported by empirical developments such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the Africa CDC, and the AU’s growing ties with BRICS nations, which indicate that Africa is gradually diversifying its partnerships and asserting more control over its diplomatic and economic space. These developments offer evidence that recalibration, rather than rupture, is the most prudent pathway. Thus, the findings point toward a reimagined form of AU-EU engagement that is built on true partnership, shared agenda-setting, reciprocal norm recognition, and mutual strategic dependence. Africa must invest in building continental institutions like the African Peace Fund, strengthen internal cohesion among AU member states, and articulate clearer red lines in future partnership negotiations. Europe, on its part, must relinquish its gatekeeping role and respect Africa’s sovereign choices in trade, digital policy, and governance models. Continuation without change would perpetuate dependency; delinking without readiness would risk isolation; but strategic renegotiation with diversified alliances holds the potential to restructure the asymmetry and restore African agency.

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Chapter Five

Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Findings

This study critically examined the periodic relations between the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU) from 2017 to 2022. Drawing on primary institutional datasets, documentary analysis, and theoretical insight from Dependency Theory and the Neo-Gramscian Theory of hegemony, the research explored four dimensions of the AU - EU partnership: trade, development assistance, security cooperation, and strategic investment. The study revealed that while both unions consistently present their engagement as a partnership of equals, the structural realities of economic dependency, institutional asymmetry, and ideational dominance contradict this rhetoric. In the area of trade, Africa remains a raw material supplier and consumer of EU high-value goods, reproducing a colonial pattern of economic marginalisation. Development assistance, though substantial in volume, is tied to EU-defined objectives such as migration governance, democratic reforms, and energy transition, often sidelining Africa's own developmental priorities.

Security cooperation was found to be deeply externalised, with African-led peacekeeping missions largely funded and doctrinally influenced by EU institutions. While this support has contributed to stability in several regions, it also entrenched strategic dependency and undermined the AU's autonomy in defining continental security objectives. EU investment flows, particularly through the Global Gateway initiative, were directed at digital infrastructure, green energy, and private sector development, but largely mirrored European geopolitical and regulatory goals. As a result, African institutions often functioned within externally determined frameworks, reflecting a broader pattern of normative hegemony. Despite these asymmetries, the

study also documented emerging forms of African agency through continental initiatives like AfCFTA, Africa CDC, and growing South-South cooperation. These developments underscore Africa's potential to renegotiate its place in the international system, though not without internal and external resistance.

5.2 Conclusion

This research concludes that the AU-EU relationship between 2017 and 2022 was characterised by rhetorical partnership but practical asymmetry. The AU continues to engage with the EU from a position of economic, institutional, and ideological dependency, shaped by historical legacies and contemporary geopolitical calculations. The EU maintains its dominance not only through material advantage but also by embedding its preferences into AU structures via funding, norms, and conditionality. However, Africa is not without options. The study finds that continental initiatives, when backed by political will and institutional investment, can provide alternative trajectories for engagement. While delinking from the EU is neither feasible nor advisable at this time, the continuation of the partnership must be based on recalibrated terms that prioritise African agency, co-ownership, and mutual accountability. For the AU-EU relationship to evolve into a genuinely transformative partnership, it must overcome its current architecture of asymmetry and re-centre Africa's voice in agenda-setting, decision-making, and implementation.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings from this study the following recommendations are offered.

1. The African Union should institutionalise periodic independent reviews of its engagements with the EU, using metrics that reflect African priorities and not just donor benchmarks.

2. To address the EU's dominant themes and strategic interests, the AU must strengthen its internal consultation mechanisms to formulate unified continental positions in areas such as digital policy, migration, and security. This will reduce fragmentation and enable the AU to negotiate from a more empowered stance.
3. To confront the recurring challenges in the partnership, the AU should invest in building autonomous continental structures, such as the African Peace Fund and a regional aid clearinghouse, that reduce reliance on external conditional finance. This requires not only member-state contributions but also a political culture that values institutional self-reliance.
4. Finally, in deciding whether to continue or delink, the AU must pursue strategic diversification. Engagement with the EU should be part of a broader matrix of partnerships that includes BRICS, Latin America, and intra-African cooperation. This would allow the AU to leverage multiple alliances to protect its sovereignty while maintaining access to external resources.

5.4 Contribution to Knowledge

This study has contributed significantly to the scholarly and policy understanding of AU - EU relations by offering a period-specific, theory-guided, and evidence-rich analysis of continental engagement between 2017 and 2022. While existing literature has explored the long-standing imbalances in AU-EU partnerships, this research departs from conventional descriptive narratives by integrating critical international relations theory with empirical policy assessment. Through the combined application of Dependency Theory and the Neo-Gramscian theory of hegemony, the study demonstrates that African dependency on Europe is not only material but also institutional and ideological, and that this dependency is continuously reproduced

through development frameworks, peacekeeping doctrines, and regulatory integration. This theoretical triangulation advances existing knowledge by showing how economic structures interact with ideational forces to sustain inequality in postcolonial North-South relations.

Furthermore, the study offers an original contribution by tracking sectoral flows of trade, aid, and investment in precise terms and connecting these patterns to policy outcomes and institutional behaviour within the AU. It demonstrates, for instance, how European investment in digital governance translates into epistemic control and standard-setting, or how security assistance reproduces dependency under the guise of regional stabilisation. By grounding its claims in up-to-date datasets and validated institutional sources, the study also enhances the empirical basis for academic and policy discussions on AU-EU relations. In addition, it expands the debate on African agency by acknowledging the rise of initiatives like AfCFTA and the Africa CDC, suggesting that the AU is not merely a passive recipient of European influence but an actor capable of strategic recalibration. This refines earlier dependency narratives that underestimated Africa's capacity for resistance and innovation.

Another important contribution is methodological. The study employs a documentary and thematic analysis approach that blends deductive and inductive logic, making it suitable for examining ideologically loaded interregional relations. This model offers a replicable framework for scholars seeking to assess global partnerships in other North-South contexts. Overall, the study bridges theory and practice, history and policy, critique and solution. It advances both scholarly understanding and policy relevance, making it a valuable resource for academics, policy advisors, and regional institutions concerned with the evolution of AU-EU cooperation in a multipolar world.

5.5 Suggestions for Further Studies

Future research could investigate the long-term effects of Global Gateway investments on African infrastructure sovereignty and technological independence. Additionally, comparative studies between AU-EU and AU-BRICS engagements could shed light on emerging South–South frameworks of cooperation. Studies using interviews or ethnographic methods could further enrich the understanding of African agency in multilateral forums, particularly from the perspectives of local actors, youth, and civil society networks.

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AKINKAHUNSI, K. C., & EMMAJIMO, E. (2025). Assessing the Possibility of Strategic Alignment in European Union-African Union Relations (EU-AU) between 2017-2022. *International Journal of Religions and Peacebuilding*, 3(1), 150–162. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16881215>

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