

The French EU Council Presidency

Four proposals to strengthen Franco-German cooperation on Africa

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The French EU Council Presidency started on 1 January 2022. Under the motto of *relance, puissance, appartenance* (recovery, strength, sense of belonging), the French government argues for a new model of economic growth, and for a more sovereign and more humane, citizen-centred Europe. France is known for its overarching visions of the European project and for offering important stimuli for further integration, sometimes at the cost of causing frictions with other EU Member States.

In the field of external action, the French Presidency plans to renew the Africa-EU partnership. The first potential occasion to advance this goal is the upcoming EU-AU summit on 17-18 February. Moreover, the co-occurrence of the French EU Council and the German G7 presidencies provides an opportune moment to strengthen Franco-German cooperation on Africa. Cooperation between the EU's two largest member states is particularly warranted, as the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in France in April and June 2022 may make it difficult for the French government to fully realise its ambitious plans.

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France and Germany have often pursued different strategies in their external policies, particularly with regard to Africa. This time, however, the French priorities offer several entry points for Germany to fulfil the foreign policy agenda of the new government coalition and for advancing Franco-German cooperation on EU development policy. The recent Team Europe Initiatives give more room to EU member states in promoting joint European policies. The two partners can advance key dossiers including peace and development in the Sahel, EU-Africa cooperation on trade, the external dimension of the Green Deal and the ‘digital for development’ agenda.

First, France and Germany are invested in the Sahel through military deployments such as Operation Barkhane or their contributions to UN and EU missions. They are also engaged in the region through bi- and multilateral development cooperation. While France advocates for stronger counter-terrorism operations, Germany endorses a “civilian surge”. The deterioration of the security situation in the region, the

announcement by the Malian military junta to delay elections until 2025, the fallout with France and other international partners, and the arrival of Russian mercenaries in Mali have raised doubts in many European capitals about whether and how to continue their engagement in the Sahel. France and Germany should launch a joint initiative for a coordinated EU response, defining a way forward for its engagement in the region.

Second, supporting the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is a shared priority of both governments. The AfCFTA is an ambitious regional integration project facilitating trade on the African continent and contributing to fundamental reforms of African economies. Franco-German cooperation can play a key role in coordinating EU support to the AfCFTA, promoting coherence at all levels and across thematic priorities. Moreover, to realise a “forward-looking alliance with Africa” the two partners should push for a reflection process on consolidating the EU's complex bilateral and regional patchwork of trade agreements.

Third, France and Germany back the European Green deal with its goal to transform Europe into a carbon-neutral continent by 2050. However, they also hold diverging views on the means to achieve this goal, as the recent quarrel about the European Commission's proposal to label nuclear and gas as green investments demonstrates. Many African states view the European Green Deal's external dimension and the proposed Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism as a means to create new dependencies. Therefore, the EU must engage in a wide-ranging dialogue process with its African partners. As climate policy leaders, France and Germany can bundle their expertise and technological and finance innovations in support of a global green agenda. At the same time, they need to become more attentive to African strategic interests and their own climate transition agendas.

Fourth, both partners are invested in strengthening the EU's digital sovereignty. Improving regulation and fostering innovation ecosystems at home is only part of the story. New global digital partnerships are needed; a fact that is acknowledged by Germany's commitment to an “active digital foreign policy”. Strengthening digital partnerships with Africa can help promote a European vision of a digital future whilst supporting an alliance of equals.

Advancing Franco-German cooperation on these four dossiers may not only contribute to a successful French Council presidency, but also to forging a closer Africa-Europe partnership. “Allez les deux.”