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EBCAM calls for the creation of a Euro-African Free Trade Bloc aligned with the AfCFTA

1. Context and Justification

The current geopolitical environment is characterised by the relative disengagement of the United States from global affairs and growing frustration among African stakeholders with the China-Africa partnership. This evolving landscape creates a strategic opportunity for the European Union, which aspires to redefine its role in a more balanced global order and promote durable, equitable economic relations with Africa. European leaders are now calling for new economic partnerships based on the principles of reciprocity, industrial sovereignty, and mutual interest.

To establish this new economic partnership, the EU must first simplify and harmonize its trade agreements with Africa.

The EU's existing trade policy towards Africa mirrors the fragmentation of the continent, with a series of different unilateral and reciprocal regimes with differing degrees of market access and diverging rules of origin.

Indeed, the EU currently has:

- 4 Association Agreements with countries in Northern Africa
- 5 Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with regions in Sub-Saharan Africa, many only implemented bilaterally in the form of interim EPAs with individual countries
- 1 Clean Trade and Investment Partnership with South Africa
- and a majority of African countries benefit from the EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences arrangements, in particular the Everything but Arms (EBA) scheme for least developed countries (LDCs).

However, in order for these agreements to effectively contribute to the development of intra-African trade, the EU must aim to streamline existing EU trade frameworks with the continent to avoid contributing to its fragmentation and leading to a regulatory divergence that would disincentive regional integration.

In this context, the EU should align its trade policy with the objectives of the AfCFTA, supporting Africa's regional integration efforts and positioning itself as a partner that strengthens, rather than undermines, continental cohesion. This requires moving beyond

fragmented bilateral arrangements towards a more coherent, continent-wide framework that facilitates investment, value-chain development, and inclusive growth.

This is the reason why, in the context of the forthcoming EU-AU Summit, the European private sector is considering the creation of a Euro-African free trade bloc that would overlay and structure the multitude of existing bilateral agreements, while aligning with Africa's ambitions through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The key question today for EU businesses is how to reconcile Africa's ongoing integration, through the AfCFTA, with Europe's ambition to maintain a strong and sustainable economic presence in Africa.

2. Our proposal

The core idea is to multilateralise Euro-African trade relations by progressively extending AfCFTA benefits to European countries, especially for the non-tariff barriers, this in accordance with the founding principles of the AfCFTA. This bloc would serve as a strategic cooperation framework that simultaneously fosters African economic integration and secures Europe's long-term economic presence on the continent. Our proposal is not new. We launched it in 2021 in the post-Covid context (see our position paper on new EU trade strategy).

- The central role of non-tariff barriers (NTBs)

Intra-African customs duties are already relatively low, but NTBs (deficient infrastructure, customs delays, divergent regulations, sanitary standards, administrative burdens...) constitute the real obstacle to trade. The effective and irreversible reduction of these barriers is therefore the key to the AfCFTA's success.

- Towards a "targeted multilateralisation" of AfCFTA benefits

From an economic and strategic perspective, it is reasonable—but conditional—to consider the gradual extension of AfCFTA benefits to the EU:

● Advantages for Africa:

- **Preserving the priority of regional integration** while attracting European investments that require a more integrated continental market.
- **Acceleration of African regional integration:** By consolidating AfCFTA efforts, the Euro-African bloc would encourage harmonisation of African trade and industrial policies around a strategic partner;

- **Development of joint value chains:** This initiative would enable the creation of integrated industrial value chains, boosting African industrialisation while enhancing the competitiveness of European businesses;
- **Incentive to modernise standards and procedures,** financed and supported by Euro-African partnerships.

- **Advantages for the EU:**

- **Rationalisation of existing frameworks:** By replacing or integrating the many existing bilateral agreements, this bloc would create a more coherent and transparent regulatory environment for economic operators that goes beyond the current, often criticised and fragmented Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs);
- **Strengthening of European influence:** Active involvement in the AfCFTA dynamic would position the EU as a genuine equal partner and help counterbalance the growing influence of non-European actors.

3. Feasibility conditions

- Multilateralisation must respect the founding principles of the AfCFTA, meaning it must remain subordinate to intra-African integration.
- It should take the form of an asymmetric partnership, with European financial, technical, and logistical support for NTBs reduction.
- The EU must accept a logic of regional integration cooperation, rather than imposing a market-access-driven agenda.

4. Risks and Challenges

- **Structural asymmetries:** Premature market liberalisation could harm fragile African industries. Safeguard clauses and differentiated transition periods will be essential.
- **Perception in Africa:** The project must be clearly positioned as supportive of the pan-African process, and not as interference or a dilution of economic sovereignty.
- **Legal and technical complexity:** Aligning this new bloc with existing agreements (EPAs, EU-North Africa accords, etc.) will require sophisticated and adaptable legal engineering.

5. Recommendations

- Initiate the creation of a **joint EU-AU task force**, including private sector representatives and pan-African institutions, to study the political and technical modalities for convergence between the AfCFTA and a future Euro-African bloc.
- Provide a **differentiated support mechanism** for African countries, including assistance with infrastructure modernisation, industrial capacity building, and digital transition.
- Launch a **pilot phase** with a limited number of willing countries to test the framework before broader implementation.

Conclusion

- **In the long term, such an arrangement could evolve into a Euro-African Free Trade Area, aligned with the ambitions of the AfCFTA.**
- The EU would then become the primary structural partner of African integration consolidating a shared Euro-African economic space.
- This project would carry strong geopolitical value: it would position Europe as a strategic partner of African development, rather than as a mere commercial competitor of emerging powers.

Key message

The ambition to create a Euro-African free trade bloc should not be viewed as an alternative to the AfCFTA, but rather as a catalyst for its success. If co-designed in a spirit of respect, solidarity, and shared vision, this strategic initiative could provide a powerful response to current geopolitical challenges and reposition Europe as a trusted long-term partner for Africa.

It therefore makes sense to envisage a gradual and selective multilateralisation of AfCFTA benefits to European countries, but under three conditions:

- African integration must remain the absolute priority
- Europe must provide financial and technical support for the reduction of NTBs
- The approach must be framed not as a unilateral African opening, but as the construction of a shared economic space, consistent with the continent's sovereign ambitions.