

# Italy-Africa Summit 2024: A Facade of Partnership?

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**While Rome is attempting to position itself to serve as a gateway into European markets for natural gas from Africa, the “Mattei Plan” is opaque about what Africa would gain from this plan.**

The optimism on display at the Italy-Africa Summit hosted in Rome on January 28-29 by the Italian government, gathering representatives from over 25 countries along with EU leadership, struggled to mask underlying contradictions of the event. Italy, under the leadership of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, proclaimed its ambition to "work for the development of Africa in a new partnership of equals." However, this statement appears to oscillate between naive hopes and political cunning, suggesting to some observers that this promise of a “partnership of equals” is deception rather than sincere.

While Rome has ambitions to serve as a gateway into European markets for natural gas from Africa, the “Mattei Plan” is opaque about what Africa’s gains would be in this in terms of development. In such an atmosphere of high-flying promises and the reality of short-term European political and electoral interests, the Italy-Africa Summit could well turn out to be a new chapter in the long story a Europe-Africa relationship where speeches promising equality and partnership often mask imbalanced power dynamics and divergent interests.

On the one side, Italy as led by Meloni and her populist far-right coalition is asserting its desire to contribute to Africa's progress under the guise of renewed and balanced cooperation. The Italian government's flagship initiative aims to mobilize 5.5 billion euros for their proposed plan for African development over the next five to seven years by combining Italian cooperation envelopes and the country’s climate change fund—something vehemently contested by Italy’s opposition parties.

Yet these promises are met with skepticism, and a number of African countries are voicing their discontent with

what they perceive as European interference or imposition, even as they seek essential financial and economic support. In the eyes of many African leaders, Meloni's promises ring hollow. For one, Italy developed its plan for Africa without input from African leadership. Furthermore, the funds pledged are not sufficient for providing sustainable, long-term solutions for the many issues facing the continent. Although the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have shown their support through significant financial commitments, the added value of this summit and the fulfillment of its promises remain uncertain.

The expressed intention to find synergies (and additional funding) with other programs, such as the EU's Global Gateway, raises questions about the viability and sincerity of the commitments made in a context where intentions and tangible results appear more than uncertain. Also, energy needs are ostentatiously at the center of the initiative as the prominent role of Italy's energy giant ENI in the plan clearly demonstrates.

### **Combating the root causes of migration remains central**

Another European actor—Germany—had previously explored a similar approach and ultimately rejected it due to its failure to achieve the expected results. Berlin sought to develop a [new policy](https://www.france24.com/fr/20190210-france-edgard-kpatinde-afrique-allemande-influence-parts-marche-image-investissements) (<https://www.france24.com/fr/20190210-france-edgard-kpatinde-afrique-allemande-influence-parts-marche-image-investissements>) towards Africa independent of the EU or France—given France's poor reputation as a former colonial power. In this bid to renew ties with Africa, Germany assured African partners that it had observed the mistakes made by the French, and that Berlin would apply a rational, methodological approach to its policy while avoiding paternalistic interference.

Germany's ambition at the time was just as "commendable" in form as that carried by Meloni today in that it advocated the end of the era of conventional development aid and favored the orientation of private investments towards the support of renewable energies and environmental preservation. Nevertheless, the migration crisis constitutes the persistent backdrop of these approaches, and Germany aspired to establish a new type of cooperation capable of retaining young potential emigrants in their home countries. Thus, to a large extent, to stem the migration flow, the German government articulated its new African strategy, primarily encouraging German companies to invest in Africa. But as is the case with Italy, stemming the flow of migrants to Europe was the ultimate driver behind Germany's cooperation with Africa. And like the proposed Mattei Plan, this single-minded focus of the migration crisis prevented a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach that could address the underlying issues driving emigration from Africa.

It appears that Meloni's government has failed to understand this lesson, continuing to prioritize migration over other issues. A controversial migration agreement between Italy and Libya has been automatically renewed for three years amid warnings by humanitarian organizations that this might make Rome and the European Union complicit in crimes against humanity.

The Memorandum of Understanding on Migration – signed on February 2, 2017, to provide Libyan authorities with financial and technical support to “combat illegal immigration” – was automatically renewed for a second time in 2022.

### **Geopolitical context conducive to renewal**

Times are changing, and the international context is no longer conducive to unproductive quarrels and symbolic gestures. The current German government seems to have now understood that a paradigm shift is needed in Europe-African relations. In a recent statement, German Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, Svenja Schulze (SPD), presented a revised German strategy for the African continent, saying that "Africa is growing and changing enormously. Its evolution will shape the 21st century – and thus also the future of Germany and Europe." This new strategic direction signals Germany's intent to ingratiate itself into broader EU initiatives vis-à-vis

Africa rather than pursue an independent path. This shift also marks a willingness to radically transform the relations between Europe and Africa by transcending the colonial legacy and addressing the historical imbalance of power between the continents.

In fact, if EU leaders who attended Meloni's summit in Rome are sincere in their interest in Africa—and not just seeking visibility and publicity ahead of the European election—they should emulate Germany's strategic readjustment and focus on adjusting power imbalances between the two continents.

Europeans must recognize that over-reliance on historical and geographical ties, supposed to confer an advantage against competitors such as China, India, or Turkey, represents a strategic misinterpretation of the current state of Europe-Africa relations. Indeed, several African countries have established significant ties not only with China and Turkey but also, surprisingly after the war in Ukraine, in the field of military cooperation with Russia. The hesitation of many African countries to clearly position themselves in a conflict with such evident moral stakes has shocked the common sense of many in the West, but it should be a wakeup call that African countries do not feel like they must automatically support Europe.

And if Europe's objective is to really favor Africa's sustainable and long-term development, it needs to move beyond the rhetoric of hydrocarbons, which even the "Mattei Plan" name—in honor of the founder of Italy's major oil company Eni—embodies. To become a real strategic partner to the African continent, as expert Lorella Stella Martini of Ecco think tank **indicated (<https://formiche.net/2024/01/piano-mattei-africa-martini-ecco/>)**, Europe needs to focus on the opportunities presented by the green development and the energy transition, which in addition would be more in line with its own European Green Deal.

### **Africa needs to find its own alliances**

Today, many African countries seek to break free from their traditional role in the global politics and adopt a proactive stance. States now wish to choose their partners autonomously without being drawn into alliances dictated by others. The criticisms from the Tunisian Foreign Ministry, which accuses the European Community of suffering "from a feeling of superiority and thinks that it is a model to follow while in reality, it is a minority" should be understood in this context. Although this sentiment might be shared by many in the region, it is time to move beyond such unproductive statements and see Europe for what it is, a chance and an opportunity for the development of the continent and to face global challenges together. As the Malian writer Amadou Hampâté Bâ so aptly said, "Partnerships between nations should not be mirrors reflecting the asymmetries of the past but windows open to the possibilities of a shared future."

And there is much room for envisioning this shared future—the destinies of Europe and Africa are inextricably intertwined. Currently, the European Union positions itself as Africa's main commercial partner, concentrating more than 30 percent of the continent's external trade exchanges. Meanwhile Europe, in its quest for energy diversification, needs Africa for its natural gas supply. With the announcement of the imminent exploitation of vast gas fields off the west coast of Africa, including reserves estimated at 2.83 trillion cubic meters between Senegal and Mauritania, Africa is emerging as a key player in this sector. Algeria, ranked the tenth largest gas producer in the world, along with Nigeria, Angola, Egypt, and Libya, could become essential pivots to reduce European dependence on Russian gas.

However, the success of this strategy requires reciprocal collaboration. Africa must tackle corruption and poor governance that persist on the continent—scourges long neglected, and in some cases even exploited, by Western countries. For its part, Europe must recognize and support Africa's rising influence on the world stage by aligning its actions with African priorities without compromising on the values that underpin it: respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including those of minorities.

This dynamic can only flourish through the harmonious commitment of EU member states, a sine qua non condition for synergy with the overall visions of the European Commission. Any unilateral strategy of a member state, primarily focused on managing immigration in its African policy, is inherently doomed to failure. This was notably manifested with the Memorandum of Understanding on Migration, spearheaded by the Italian Prime Minister. When they started negotiating the details for the implementation of an anti-migration policy, Tunisia backtracked, saying that it cannot serve as the EU's coastguard.

There is reason to fear that the Mattei Plan is merely an extension of this memorandum, turning African leaders gathered in Rome into mere coast guards for the EU in exchange for a few micro-projects in renewable energies, or even gas. Such an orientation not only risks undermining the depth and richness of Euro-African relations but also reduces African heads of state to peripheral roles, far from the balanced and mutually beneficial cooperation that should characterize the ties between the two continents. Moreover, such a deal raises grave concerns for human rights violations, as Italian authorities are fully aware that the tools they are potentially providing will be instrumental to more human rights violations in Libya and in Tunisia. The Memorandum of Understanding on Migration – signed on February 2, 2017, to provide Libyan authorities with financial and technical support to “combat illegal immigration” – was automatically renewed for a second time in 2022. This renewal occurred amid warnings by humanitarian organizations that this might make Rome and the European Union complicit in crimes against humanity.

Implementation of the Mattei Plan legitimizes Meloni's racist anti-immigration policy and whitewashes the thousands of migrants deported to the Libyan desert, where they are vulnerable to extortion, abuse, and murder.

Africa must not be reduced to a role of detention zone for Italy. For many African observers, right now the Mattei plan looks increasingly like a proposal with fascist undertones where Giorgia Meloni would recklessly pump African gas and carelessly deport migrants. ❖

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