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The aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has highlighted Africa's geopolitical centrality. In the UN General Assembly, about half of the African members supported the initial resolution condemning Russia's aggression, while the others either abstained or absented themselves.<sup>26</sup> Subsequently, many African countries have sought to chart a path of non-alignment and neutrality, whereas others have sided more explicitly with either Russia or the West. For their part, Russia, China, and Western countries have stepped up their diplomatic competition for African friends and allies, with a succession of high-level delegations visiting the continent. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov toured Uganda, the Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, and Egypt in July 2022, seeking to counter allegations that Russia is responsible for Africa's growing food insecurity. Lavrov's tour overlapped with President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Cameroon, Benin, and Guinea-Bissau, where he sought not only to reset France's relationship with Africa but also garner support for Europe's stance against Russia. Just days later, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken embarked on a tour of South Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Rwanda. In January 2023 Lavrov returned for a visit to Angola, Eritrea, Eswatini, and South Africa, followed hot on the heels by Janet Yellen, the US Treasury Secretary, whose continental tour included South Africa, Senegal, and Zambia. While US trade, diplomatic, and military cooperation with South Africa far outstrips that of Russia, Foreign Minister Lavrov nevertheless received his counter-part's assurances that South Africa would work with Russia and China in their efforts to create "a redesigned global order".<sup>27</sup> South Africa is hosting the BRICS summit in August 2023, and has indicated its intention to expand the bloc's membership to strengthen its global influence and challenge the dominance of Western powers.

Geopolitical competition also set the tone for the Biden administration's strategy for sub-Saharan Africa, which was launched by Secretary of State Blinken during his visit to South Africa.<sup>28</sup> The strategy is a significant shift from the US's traditional approach to Africa, promising a new partnership approach that recognises that "Sub-Saharan Africa's governments, institutions, and people will play a crucial role in solving global challenges." It also emphasises the need to "listen" and "consult" with a broad range of partners, thus acknowledging Africa's own agency and agenda in global politics – and by implication indicating a less patronising, top-down approach. At the same time, the strategy is clearly framed with reference to the current geopolitical environment. China, the strategy asserts, "sees the region as an important arena to challenge the rules-based international order",

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<sup>25</sup> See Nick Turse, "Pentagon's Own Maps of US Bases in Africa Contradict Its Claim of 'Light' Footprint", *The Intercept* (27 February 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Mahama Tawat, "Russia-Ukraine: Decoding How African Countries Voted at the UN", *The Conversation* (8 March 2022).

<sup>27</sup> Geoffrey York, "South Africa to Side with Russian on Push for Redesigned Global Order", *Globe and Mail* (23 January 2023).

<sup>28</sup> United States Government, "[U.S. Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa](#)" (August 2022).

whereas Russia uses its “economic and security ties to undercut Africans’ principled opposition to Russia’s further invasion of Ukraine and related human rights abuses.”<sup>29</sup>

This competitive geopolitical climate offers both challenges and opportunities for Africa. It also sets the context and parameters for Canada’s engagement with the continent. For Africa, the multiplicity of possible partners offers potential leverage and greater bargaining power, but also risks undermining continental unity and perpetuating weakness as individual countries choose sides in exchange for material support, including food aid and military assistance. This was the fate of Africa during the Cold War, as predicted by Kwame Nkrumah’s dire warning that without unity African countries would forever be pawns of the great powers.<sup>30</sup> Today, this makes the AU central to Africa’s ability to navigate the changing world order, and to improve its position and influence within a future order. Canada’s Africa strategy must take careful account of these heightened geopolitical tensions, as well as the complex array of interests and motivations among African governments and institutions, and avoid treating the continent as a pawn in a larger strategic game.

## **THE AFRICAN UNION AT 20**

When the AU was launched in Durban in 2002, it replaced the Organisation of African Unity, (OAU) which by then had come to be seen by many as an outdated talking shop for dictators, or slightly more benevolently, an exclusive president’s club. Inspired by Pan-Africanism, the AU has embarked on an ambitious new agenda for continental integration and sought to create an Africa that is a “strong, united and influential global player”.<sup>31</sup> Thabo Mbeki, former South African president and one of the architects of the AU, promised “a continent of democracy” in which “people participate and the rule of law is upheld”.<sup>32</sup>

Twenty years later, much has been achieved. With 55 member states, the AU is the largest regional organisation in the world. It is also one of the most institutionally developed multilateral organisations, second only to the EU. The AU has strongly endorsed democracy and human rights, and it has spearheaded the principle of “non-indifference” towards war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity. It has developed a strong peace and security architecture and has strengthened its contribution to peacekeeping. As part of this, the AU sent African troops to stop genocide in Darfur and established a mission to combat a jihadist insurgency in Somalia. The AU has also been a leading actor in conflict mediation, often through high-ranking diplomats and former heads of state, as in the recent civil war in Ethiopia. The institutional reforms spearheaded by Rwandan President Paul Kagame between 2016 and 2018 have made the AU leaner and more focused. After years of preparation, the African Continent Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) came into effect in January 2021, creating the largest free trade area in the world. Ratified by 43 states, AfCFTA has the potential to boost economic growth and speed up Africa’s post-pandemic recovery. The AU

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Africa Must Unite* (New York: Praeger, 1963).

<sup>31</sup> African Union, “[Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want](#)”, (September 2015).

<sup>32</sup> Thabo Mbeki, “[Speech at the Launch of the African Union](#)” (9 July 2002).

has also been praised for its effective and collaborative handling of COVID-19 and has played a key role in developing the Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention from a specialised technical institution to a public health agency with regional collaboration centres.

The AU has actively sought to strengthen Africa’s position and influence on the world stage, increasingly presenting a more united continental voice on key global issues. The establishment of a permanent AU mission to the UN has played a key role in this regard, coordinating between member states and the continent’s three elected members of the Security Council (UNSC), the so-called “A3”. In 2019, the A3 delivered 16 joint statements in the UNSC during both country-specific and thematic debates, an indication of the unity of its members.<sup>33</sup> The establishment of AU permanent representations at the European Union (EU) in Brussels; the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Geneva; the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) states in Brussels; the League of Arab States in Cairo; and the Organisation of American States in Washington has also contributed significantly to the continent’s ability to participate and shape international debates. The AU has also developed several so-called Common African Positions (CAPs) on issues of crucial relevance to the continent. Most well-known is the Ezulwini Common African Position on UN Reform (the so-called Ezulwini Consensus), which calls for reform of the UNSC and the allocation of two permanent seats and five non-permanent seats to the continent, whereas the CAP on the Post-2015 Development Agenda was highly influential in determining the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>34</sup>

Such achievements aside, challenges abound. *The Economist* commented on the AU’s anniversary under the headline “Older and Less Wise”, suggesting that the organisation is less effective at 20 than it was at two.<sup>35</sup> The AU’s ability and willingness to enforce democratic governance and norms have declined, and it has proved inactive and ineffective in the face of several unconstitutional regime changes in recent years. According to the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the continent today is “less safe, secure and democratic” than a decade ago.<sup>36</sup> The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), which was set up to monitor member states’ performance on good governance, is itself being audited following accusations of bad governance and financial malpractice. Earlier optimism that the military coup d’état had disappeared from the continent, thanks in part to the AU’s strong anti-coup norm, has faded as civilian governments have been disposed in a succession of coups in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, and Sudan. In particular, the AU’s failure to expel Chad when the son of President Idriss Déby seized power after his father’s death is widely perceived as setting a dangerous precedent and indicating a retreat from the norm mandating the suspension of a member state after a coup. The Union’s ambition to “Silence the Guns” seems further away than ever, as conflicts and extremist violence continue across the Sahel, Nigeria, Somalia, the DRC,

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<sup>33</sup> Gustavo de Carvalho and Daniel Forti, “How Can African States Become More Influential in the UN Security Council?”, [IPI Global Observatory](#), (12 March 2020).

<sup>34</sup> Bankole Adeoye, “Common African Positions on Global Issues: Achievements and Realities”, Institute of Security Studies, [Africa Report 30](#) (December 2020), 5, 6.

<sup>35</sup> The Economist, “[Older and Less Wise](#)” (12 February 2022).

<sup>36</sup> Mo Ibrahim Foundation, “[2022 Ibrahim Index of Africa Governance](#)”

Mozambique, and Cameroun. At the Malabo Summit on terrorism and unconstitutional changes of government in Africa in 2022, the Chairperson of the Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, admitted disappointment: “... terrorism is not weakening on the continent ... because of the failure to honour our own commitments”<sup>37</sup>

A main reason for the AU’s failure to live up to its promises is the overwhelming influence of the Heads of State Assembly, which as currently constituted can – and does – override the executive, legislative, and legal organs of the AU. Indeed, there may be many within the AU Assembly of Heads of State that ultimately do not want a functional supranational body that empowers citizens, that has the potential to hold leaders to account, and that may intervene to protect their citizens. In the most damning of anniversary commentaries, the AU has become another version of the OAU; a talking shop where too often sovereignty and realpolitik trump the principled commitment to non-indifference.

Another perennial challenge is financial. Of a total budget of only US\$650 million – 260 times smaller than that of the EU – approximately 60 percent comes from foreign donors, particularly the EU and individual European states. This over-reliance on external partners in the funding of projects and initiatives ultimately undermines the Union’s decision-making capacity and autonomy. As a remedy, the AU has since 2016 insisted on a 0.2 percent tax on all eligible goods imported into the continent, but only 17 states have implemented the levy and only about 40 percent of member states pay their union dues.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, the AU is a decisive driving force for the political and economic development and integration of Africa. Its vision for Africa’s future is set out in *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*. Adopted by member states in 2013, it is the continent’s strategic plan for transforming Africa “into a global powerhouse of the future”. The *Agenda* has seven key aspirations:

1. A prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development.
2. An integrated continent, politically united, based on ideals of Pan Africanism and the vision of Africa’s renaissance.
3. An Africa of good governance, democracy and respect for human rights, justice, and the rule of law.
4. A peaceful and secure Africa.
5. An Africa with strong cultural identity, common heritage, values, and ethics.
6. An Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children.
7. Africa as a strong, united, resilient, and influential global player.

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<sup>37</sup> African Union, [“Speech of H.E. Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairperson of the African Union to the 16<sup>th</sup> Extraordinary Session of the African Union on Terrorism and Unconstitutional Change of Government in Africa”](#), (Malabo, Republic of Equatorial Guinea, 28 May 2022).

<sup>38</sup> African Union, [“Financing the Union: Towards the Financial Autonomy of the African Union”](#); African Union, [“African Union sustainable funding strategy gains momentum”](#) (23 August 2022).

Aspiration 7 emphasises the importance of African unity and solidarity “in the face of external interference, including attempts to divide the continent and undue pressure and sanctions on some countries”. A central objective is to improve Africa’s place in the global governance system, and to this effect the AU is renewing its approach to international partnerships seeking to “acquire support to... obtain the global leverage that would enable the continent to maximise its impact on the world scene”.<sup>39</sup> Recognising that past approaches to cooperation have often been “donor driven” and “skewed in favor of the donors”, the AU’s new partnership strategy seeks to tailor partnerships to the needs of Africa, as well as the partners’ comparative advantage<sup>40</sup>

Canada’s new partnership with the AU must be guided by the strategic vision outlined in *Agenda 2063*, while simultaneously taking account of Canada’s own interests, values, and foreign policy priorities.

### **CANADA – AU: STRATEGIC AREAS OF COOPERATION**

Global Affairs Canada’s most recent mandates have emphasised the continued importance of the rules-based international order, as well as the centrality of democracy and human rights to Canada’s international engagement. Another key component is Canada’s feminist foreign policy, particularly in development, peace, and security initiatives. Many of the same values and priorities are shared by the AU and are reflected in its statutes and strategic plans, including *Agenda 2063*. While these values and principles may not always be reflected in the AU’s actions, let alone enforced by heads of states, the AU Commission considers “liberal values the foundation of its work”.<sup>41</sup> The language of democracy, human rights, and gender equality is thus a shared language where Canada and the AU can find common ground, and where Canada can strengthen the ability of the AU to act as a norm entrepreneur that helps nudge states towards greater democracy and equality.

Two interrelated principles should guide Canada’s relationship with the AU. First, Canada must avoid contributing to the escalation of geopolitical rivalry on the continent. Canada’s engagement must be fully cognisant of the current geopolitical environment and Africa’s position within it, including its sense of historical injustices and inequalities within the international system. Canada must therefore avoid approaching the AU partnership as part of a larger geopolitical struggle. Talk of “friend-shoring” might be unhelpful in this regard and risks alienating the AU and its member states. In the current climate any indication of pressure to support “the West” is likely to be interpreted as a continuation of Western domination. Second, the relationship must be built on mutual respect, even when there is a difference of opinion and interests. This

<sup>39</sup> African Union, [“Africa’s Strategic Partnership with Other Parts of the World”](#) (2022).

<sup>40</sup> Institute for Security Studies (ISS), “How to Rationalise Africa’s Many Partnerships?”, [PSC Report](#) (13 December 2019); Philomena Apiko, “Getting Partnerships Right: The Case for an AU Strategy”, Discussion Paper 313, [EDCMP](#), (November 2021).

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Kwasi Tiekou, “The African Union: Successes and Failures”, [Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics](#), (2019).



does not mean that Canada's should abandon its values of democracy and human rights, but it should not preach from a presumed moral high ground but instead engage and seek to identify shared interests, values, and vulnerabilities. Here Canada can take a leaf from the Biden administration's Africa strategy, which states that "Even when we have disagreements, we will lean in, agree to meet, and address differences head-on."<sup>42</sup>

In terms of practice and implementation, Canada's engagement with the AU must be focused and targeted in order to break with the legacy of policy inconsistency. Canada must decide how best to maximise its impact, rather than seek to do a (little) bit of everything. Our suggested areas of strategic cooperation below are thus intended as options on a menu, not an inclusive to-do-list. With limited resources, Canada should build on its comparative advantages and align with the AU's priorities to achieve a mutually rewarding partnership.

### *Peace and Security*

Canada has a long history of contributing to peacekeeping and the promotion of peace and security in Africa, and the AU is actively seeking support for its efforts to "silence the guns". This makes peace and security a logical focus of cooperation. Canada retains a positive reputation as an early leader in the field of human security and could build on this reputation by strengthening its contributions. At the conclusion of the first high-level dialogue with the AU Commission in October 2022, GAC announced that \$37 million will be allocated for peace and security initiatives.<sup>43</sup> This is a good start.

Canada's contributions to peacekeeping are, however, at a record low, both in terms of personnel and intellectual and political leadership.<sup>44</sup> To recapture its standing in this field will require concerted effort and investment, not only financially but also in terms of time and expertise. The Elsie Initiative to increase the meaningful participation of women in UN peacekeeping, as well as the Vancouver Principles on the prevention of child soldiering, are positive steps in this direction, but will require sustained resource commitments. Through close dialogue with the AU, Canada should work to support AU initiatives and priorities to find "African solutions to African problems". This might include a continuation of activities such as the training of military and police officers for peacekeeping operations, including re-orienting or expanding bilateral relationships towards AU operations. Canada should also work to ensure predictable, sustainable, and flexible financing for AU-led peace support operations, including through the use of UN-assessed contributions. As peace-support operations have become increasingly dangerous and Western countries, including Canada, have refrained from committing boots on the ground, it is paramount that African militaries are adequately supported, trained, and equipped to undertake such missions. It is also important to recognise that Canada has much to learn from the now extensive experience of African peacekeepers.

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<sup>42</sup> United States Government, *U.S. Strategy*, 12.

<sup>43</sup> Government of Canada, "[Canada and African Union Commission Conclude First High-Level Dialogue](#)" (28 October 2022).

<sup>44</sup> Walter Dorn, "Tracking the Promises: Canada's Contributions to Peacekeeping", [WalterDorn.net](#)

As a bilingual country with no colonial baggage in Africa, Canada is particularly well positioned to contribute to peace and security in Francophone countries. As geopolitical tensions have complicated France's relationship with its former colonies, Canada could partner with the AU to play a more prominent role in promoting peace and security in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Cameroun. This could include stepping up its mediation and track-two diplomacy efforts, a policy area where Canada in the past had considerable expertise and that was identified as a priority in the mandate letter to the Trudeau government's first foreign minister.<sup>45</sup> The AU itself has considerable mediation capacity, including a Mediation and Dialogue Division located within the Political Affairs, Peace, and Security Department, and productive partnerships can be built to further preventative diplomacy and conflict prevention on the continent. This might include Canadian sponsorship of quiet, long-term unofficial mediation efforts, where the stakes are particularly high. Canada could also play a leading role in diversifying the pool of mediators, especially by contributing to the training of women mediators. Support for strengthening the capacity of FemWise (The Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation), which is part of the AU's Peace and Security Architecture, is one such option that corresponds well with Canada's feminist foreign policy objectives.

### *Women Empowerment and Gender Equality*

Canada's approach to Africa is guided by its feminist foreign policy and feminist international assistance policy to promote gender equality and support women and girls as agents of change, as a means to help build a prosperous, integrated, inclusive, and peaceful continent.<sup>46</sup> The AU similarly has a strong commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment, as evident in *Agenda 2063*, which reiterates the organisation's committed to resolve and end violence against women and girls and improve their access to and control of finances, education, health, and land. Women and girls represent about half of the continent's total population and the attainment of women's empowerment is a critical factor in building an inclusive, prosperous, and peaceful Africa.<sup>47</sup>

Such convergence and agreement aside, the issues of women's empowerment and gender rights are far from straight forward for the Canada-AU relationship. There is a considerable gap between AU's normative endorsement of gender equality and the policies and practices of many of its member states, especially regarding abortion, sexual and reproductive health, and LGBTQ+ rights. Promoting a feminist foreign policy will therefore require considerable diplomatic skills and flexibility. By supporting the institutionalisation of feminist norms at the AU, Canada can potentially help strengthen the organisation's ability to act as a norm entrepreneur within member states. The Women, Gender, Development, and Youth Directorate is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the AU's Strategy on Gender

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<sup>45</sup> Peter Jones, "Middle Power Liberal Internationalism and Mediation in Messy Places: The Canadian Dilemma", *International Journal* 2019 74(1):119-134. Recent announcements of possible mediation efforts in Cameroun may indicate a return to this foreign policy priority, but also underline the diplomatic and political complexities involved.

<sup>46</sup> Global Affairs Canada, "[Results Around the World-Pan Africa Regional Development](#)", (2018).

<sup>47</sup> African Union, "[On the Road to an Inclusive Africa With Empowered Citizens...](#)", (16 June 2021).

Equality and Women's Empowerment, and Canada could seek to deepen its cooperation with this Directorate.

Canada must also recognise that gender equality and women's empowerment are no longer – if they ever were – “soft” foreign policy issues but have become an intrinsic part of broader geopolitical culture wars. Conservative, nationalist, and populist movements and NGOs are purposefully working to prevent the global promotion of liberal family values and gender equality, especially by multilateral institutions like the UN. African countries are key players in these conservative coalitions, including the World Congress of Families and C-Fam, and have contributed to a backlash against the promotion of feminist notions of gender and women's rights at the UN.<sup>48</sup> In implementing its feminist foreign policy, Canada must therefore be pragmatic and attuned to its possible geopolitical divisiveness. This will require working not only with like-minded countries, but also engaging strategically at the ideological and political level within the AU and the UN.

### *Cooperation at the United Nations*

Both Canada and the AU regard the UN as central to multilateral cooperation and the future of world order and stability. This makes the UN a crucial venue for collaboration on issues of common interest. The AU has an observer mission at the UN and is actively seeking to coordinate a strong, united African voice in the General Assembly and the Security Council. Through targeted partnerships and liaisons with the AU mission, Canada could help realise the AU's ambition to make Africa a more influential global player while simultaneously pursuing its own agenda at the UN. This could be achieved by acting as joint sponsors, or “penholders”, of resolutions on issues of importance to both parties, including for example sustainable development and climate change.

Canada should also take a clear supportive position on the AU's demand for reform of the UNSC. The current composition of the Security Council reflects the balance of international power in 1945, when African countries were still under colonial rule. The Ezulwini Consensus, adopted by the AU in 2005, calls for the expansion of the UNSC to provide Africa with a voice commensurable with its size and significance in the world.<sup>49</sup> The blueprint proposes the expansion of the Security Council from 15 to 26 members, with two permanent seats for Africa, and five non-permanent seats for each of the continent's sub-regions – north, south, east, west, and central.

Several countries, including the US, France, and Germany, have recently stated their support for Africa's demand for two permanent seats at the UNSC, underlining the extent to which its current composition is badly outdated. On his January tour of Africa, Russia's Foreign

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<sup>48</sup> See Rita Abrahamsen, “The Right Family: The Personal is Geopolitical”, [CIPS Blog](#) (December 14, 2020); Jelena Cupač and Irem Ebetürk, “Backlash Advocacy and NGO Polarization over Women's Rights in the United Nations”, *International Affairs* 2021 97(4): 1183–1201.

<sup>49</sup> African Union, “[The Common African Position on the Proposed Reform of the United Nations: ‘The Ezulwini Consensus’](#)” (March 2005).

Minister also voiced strong support for UNSC reform to accommodate African, Asian, and Latin American countries. As a member of the “Uniting for Consensus” group, Canada is a long-standing supporter of an expanded Security Council but opposes giving new members veto power.<sup>50</sup> The Ezulwini Consensus is opposed, in principle, to the veto, but argues that as long as it exists for the five permanent members (P5) it should be accorded to all permanent members. It is easy to dismiss Africa’s demands for reform of the UNSC as unrealistic, and to hide behind the insurmountable obstacles of bureaucratic inertia and the complexities of the veto. The fact remains, however, that the UNSC is perceived as hopelessly outdated and unfair by most countries in the global South. This makes reform crucial to any strategy that seeks to safeguard multilateral cooperation within an effective, rules-based international order. While the exact nature and extent of such reforms will inevitably be the subject of prolonged and intense negotiations, Canada should signal its clear intent to support Africa and the AU in this endeavour towards a more just, inclusive, and democratic United Nations.

### *The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)*

Africa is one of the fastest growing economic regions in the world. Despite global economic turmoil and the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the continent is set to experience continued growth in the years ahead. The launch of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in January 2021 has the potential to significantly boost Africa’s GDP, possibly by as much 7 percent by 2035, according to the World Bank.<sup>51</sup> The success of the AfCFTA, however, will depend on political cooperation and will require significant work to remove and reduce tariffs on goods and services, streamline customs procedures, harmonise regulatory measures and standards, etc. To this end, Canada should continue, and possibly expand, its technical support and assistance to AfCFTA. Canada has extensive expertise in the area of trade negotiations, and this experience could be leveraged to ensure more rapid progress towards a fully integrated African free trade area.

Canada is committed to diversify its trading relations, and the African continent offers multiple untapped opportunities. The AU is similarly keen to build and diversify the continent’s international economic partnerships, based on mutual benefits. Canada should therefore develop a strategy for economic cooperation with Africa, as announced in 2021.<sup>52</sup> Expanding trade with the continent will not only support Africa’s economic development, but also help Canada achieve its goal of trade diversification.

### *The African Diaspora and People-to-People Diplomacy*

As a country of immigrants, Canada is home to a significant African diaspora that represents an untapped opportunity for enhanced cooperation with the AU. According to Global Affairs

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<sup>50</sup> United Nations, [“‘Uniting for Consensus Group’ of States Introduces Text on Security Council Reform...”](#), *Press Release*, (26 July 2005).

<sup>51</sup> World Bank, [“Free Trade Deal Boosts Africa’s Economic Development”](#), (30 June 2022).

<sup>52</sup> Government of [Canada](#), [“Minister Ng Announces Virtual Trade Mission to Africa for Women-Owned and Led Businesses”](#), (2 February 2022).

Canada, the sub-Saharan African diaspora in 2019 counted nearly half a million people.<sup>53</sup> This included over 30 000 African students studying in Canada. GAC has identified this group of people as a possible point of contact for strengthening the partnership with sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>54</sup> The AU has designated the African diaspora as the continent's sixth region, and the Citizens and Diaspora Directorate (CIDO) seeks to encourage the diaspora to participate in the development and integration of the African continent.<sup>55</sup>

While recognising the crucial role that the African diaspora can play in deepening relations with the AU, GAC has yet to find productive ways of capitalising on the strength of existing people-to-people relations and mobilize new networks. Significant gains can be realised through creative initiatives to improve diaspora engagement, including strengthening economic cooperation and promoting mutual understanding. Many members of the African diaspora maintain close relationships with the continent, and many are well educated and eager to contribute. Given the shortage of personnel and expertise at the AU, Canada should explore opportunities for secondment programmes of diaspora experts to assist with defined priority areas. Diaspora experts have the advantage of cultural and language expertise and could provide crucial skills transfer to AU at a time when such assistance is in high demand.

## **CONCLUSION**

Canada's intention to develop its first Africa engagement strategy follows a prolonged period of relative neglect, during which time other countries have increased their economic, political, and strategic involvement with the continent. To rebuild its presence and reputation, Canada will need to be consistently and respectfully engaged to establish itself as a serious partner.

As Canada's ability to develop bilateral relationship with 54 different states will inevitably be limited, the AU, as the continent's regional body, should occupy a central position Canada's Africa policy. By pursuing strategic partnerships with the AU, Canada can maximise its impact and at the same time strengthen African integration and the AU's capacity to act as a norm entrepreneur on the continent and as an influential player on the global stage.

While Canada has in the past tended to approach Africa from the perspective of humanitarianism and development, this is increasingly an outdated approach. Today's Africa is home to some of the fastest growing economies in the world and wields significant political power within global affairs. Canada's future partnership with the AU must build on strategic areas of convergence, mutual interests, and shared values, drawing on Canada's comparative advantages and the AU's priorities.

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<sup>53</sup> Global Affairs Canada, "A Dynamic Partnership: Global Affairs Canada's Engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa", (2019), 3. (Released under the Access to Information request).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> African Union, "[The Diaspora Division](#)", *Citizens and Diaspora Organizations (CIDO) Fact Sheet* (2022)

Finally, at a time when the rules-based international order is under threat, Canada should look beyond its traditional allies in the West and seek to engage the AU as a serious partner in the effort to strengthen, reform, and improve multilateral cooperation. This is not only an opportunity for Canada to act as a ‘good international citizen’, but also a strategic policy option that is firmly in the country’s national interest as a middle power.

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