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| From: | General Secretariat of the Council |
| To: | Delegations |
| Subject: | A renewed EU Great Lakes Strategy: Supporting the transformation of the root causes of instability into shared opportunities - Council Conclusions (20 February 2023) |

Delegations will find attached the Council conclusions on a renewed EU Great Lakes Strategy as approved at the 3932nd meeting of the Council on 20 February 2023.

A renewed EU Great Lakes Strategy: Supporting the transformation of the root causes of instability into shared opportunities

Council Conclusions

Introduction

1. The Great Lakes are a strategically important region, profoundly interlinked with the rest of the continent. Home to dynamic, resilient societies, the region has the potential to become a powerhouse for the development of the entire continent.
2. The region shares strong and longstanding human, political and economic ties with the European Union (EU). The EU, together with its Member States, is fully committed to deepening its strategic relationship and equal partnership with the Great Lakes region to support democracy, human rights, peace and security, rule of law, gender equality, poverty eradication and sustainable development.
3. In past decades, the continuous cycle of conflict, violence and tensions has undermined the talent, creativity and entrepreneurship of its people and prevented the region from benefiting from its enormous potential in terms of biodiversity, tropical forests, water and agricultural assets, and raw material deposits. In particular, the intensification of armed conflict in Eastern DRC, political instability and cyclical bilateral tensions in the region, bear testimony to the tragic human cost that will continue to be paid if lasting and comprehensive peace is not achieved. The continued instability has resulted in one of the world's worst and longest humanitarian crises and leaves the region open to the risk of becoming a stronghold for domestic and international terrorism and transnational criminal networks.

4. The root causes and drivers of insecurity and instability are complex, multi-layered and interlinked, and include poor governance and corruption, a lack of inclusive institutions, entrenched impunity and abuse of power, and violent competition for access to and control of land and other natural resources. Furthermore, the proliferation of armed groups, their instrumentalisation by foreign, regional and domestic actors, interference on the territories of neighbouring states, easy access to weapons, ethnic tensions fuelled by disinformation, manipulative communication and hate speech, serious and systematic human rights violations and abuses, violations of the International Humanitarian Law (IHL), sexual and gender-based violence, collective trauma, demographic pressure, poverty, hunger and food insecurity, long-term forced displacement and irregular movements of people, climate change and environmental degradation have all contributed to persistent conflict.
5. To successfully address these root causes, the engagement and ownership of the countries in the region, primarily Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Rwanda and Uganda, are crucial to the implementation of the necessary reforms in close cooperation with their neighbours, regional and international partners. The regional engagement should prioritise the countries' commitment to peace, respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries in the region and foster an environment of mutual trust and partnership. The diplomatic initiatives that the broader region has launched, such as the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework (PSCF) for the DRC and the region, and more recently the Luanda and Nairobi processes, are key to achieving long-term, sustainable peace and security.

The Need for a Renewed EU Strategic Engagement

6. The EU has always aspired to have a positive and tangible impact in the region. It has heavily invested in peace, stability and development in the Great Lakes region, through numerous diplomatic, political, security, development and humanitarian actions. The EU wants to take into account the lessons learned to renew and strengthen this ambition.

7. Since the security, stability and prosperity of the countries of the Great Lakes region remain a strategic priority for the EU, there is currently an urgent need and an opportunity for the EU to engage more effectively with the region itself in the short-, medium- and long-term. The new Strategy is based on a regional integrated approach and builds on the previous EU Strategic Framework for the Great Lakes Region (2013), while being more action-oriented. It focuses on certain sectors where the EU shares a genuine interest with the region and can bring added value. It also aims at better involving the private sector and civil society. The Strategy builds on the Joint Vision 2030 adopted at the European Union-African Union Summit of February 2022, is fully aligned with the 2020 United Nations Strategy for Peace Consolidation, Conflict Prevention and Conflict Resolution in the Great Lakes region, and is consistent with the PSCF.

Guiding Principles

8. The EU's renewed strategic engagement is based on respect, equal partnership, common interests, local ownership, and mutual accountability.
9. The EU will defend and promote effective multilateralism and the rules-based international order, with the UN at its core. This strategy is aligned with the UN Agenda 2030 for sustainable development and shows the EU's commitment to working towards fully achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.
10. The EU will also promote the respect of territorial integrity, sovereignty, independence and equality of states. The respect for democracy, good governance, the rule of law, human rights and IHL will remain at the centre of all EU actions. More specifically, the EU will promote free and fair elections and transitional justice as well as the fight against impunity and corruption. It will also work towards countering ethnic and other group-based discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

11. The EU will continue promoting gender equality, and the full enjoyment of human rights by all women and girls, in line with its international commitments, including through mainstreaming gender equality throughout its engagements towards the region. It will step up its action to combat sexual and gender-based violence. The EU will also sustain its strong commitment to the full respect of children's rights, enhancing efforts to end and prevent violations against children and contribute to breaking the cycle of violence, contributing to the implementation of the Children and Armed Conflict agenda, in accordance with the applicable EU Guidelines and relevant UN Security Council resolutions.
12. The EU will continue promoting inclusivity and the empowerment of civil society, women, youth, persons in vulnerable situations and marginalised communities in society. The EU will contribute to strengthening state structures and democratic institutions, which, combined with the empowerment of citizens, engagement with civil society and private sector involvement, are conducive to peaceful societies and the stability of the region.
13. The EU will further reinforce its integrated approach to conflicts and crises, and strengthen the link between humanitarian assistance, development cooperation, and peace along a triple nexus. The conflict-sensitive approach will be strengthened to ensure that the EU's efforts 'do no harm' and are regularly evaluated in relation to any secondary impact they may have.

Principal EU Objectives and Priorities

14. The EU's overarching objective and priority is to help end armed conflict and promote peace, democracy and sustainable development in the Great Lakes region by contributing to the transformation of the main root causes of insecurity and instability into shared opportunities and unlocking the region's full potential.
15. Firstly, ensuring long-term peace, security, stability and the respect of human rights in Eastern DRC and in the region, in line with an integrated approach, is a key priority for the EU.

16. Secondly, the EU will support the region in developing an African-led sustainable, fair and human rights based, and environmentally sound model of resources management as an essential pillar of its own stability and development.
17. Moreover, the EU aims at promoting stronger regional integration, including in terms of inter- and intra-regional trade, contributing to improving the economic life of local communities. This can become a stabilisation factor and future prosperity driver for the region and the entire continent.

From Tensions to Trust, Security and Stability

18. The continued presence and activities of foreign and local armed groups, in particular in the Eastern DRC, which have a devastating impact on the civilian population and have adversely affected bilateral relations among countries of the region, need to be immediately addressed.
19. Only a credible and inclusive dialogue between the countries of the region, matched when needed by national reconciliation efforts in each country, can restore and strengthen mutual trust and confidence. This is the first building block of sustainable peace, security and stability. The EU stands ready to step up its engagement in mediation, mediation support activities and dialogue, to preserve and restore peace at any stage and at all levels, between authorities, parties to the conflicts, local communities, civil society and the private sector. It stands ready to act as an intermediary, when and if requested by the relevant parties.
20. The EU strongly condemns attacks by all armed groups operating in the DRC, including the March 23 Movement (M23), the Coopérative pour le développement du Congo (CODECO), the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR), the Résistance pour un État de droit (RED-Tabara) and Mai-Mai groups, and urges the armed groups to immediately cease hostilities and follow-up with a verifiable ceasefire, withdrawal from all areas under their control and disarmament.

21. The EU firmly urges all states of the region and international actors to fully respect sovereignty and territorial integrity, and refrain from cooperation with and support for armed groups in Eastern DRC and throughout the region including through the exercise of unlawful influence beyond state borders, collaboration with violent proxies and the use of illicit networks for the trafficking of natural resources. In this context, it must be recalled that any backing of armed groups, unrequested military activities on foreign territory, violations of the UN arms embargo and sanction regimes are in direct contravention of applicable international law and of multiple commitments taken by the countries of the region. States in the region must take all measures necessary to protect the civilian population in their territories, as well as fighting hate speech, xenophobia and the incitement of violence. Those responsible for inciting violence must be brought to justice.
22. The EU commends the significant role of the United Nations in supporting the stabilisation of the region. In particular, the EU stresses the critical importance of the UN Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) for the protection of civilians in Eastern DRC. The EU supports MONUSCO for the duration of its mandate and strongly condemns all violence against UN personnel and any incitement thereto.
23. The EU welcomes regional efforts such as the Nairobi and Luanda Processes, which it will continue to support, and takes note of the deployment of the East African Community regional force. The EU will accompany existing regional instruments such as the Expanded Joint Verification Mechanism (EJVM) and stands ready to support other initiatives, such as the Regional Oversight Mechanism for the PSCF as well as complementary mediation and facilitation efforts by the EU Member States and likeminded partners.

24. National ownership is a crucial feature of Security Sector Reform (SSR). The EU stands ready to support this process through dedicated and regular sectorial dialogues. The EU will, as appropriate, continue to support SSR in the region, including the capacity building efforts of the national security forces, which is a critical condition for the success of stabilisation efforts at regional level. The EU will consider assistance within the full spectrum of security, including military, police and intelligence agencies, ministries, parliament, civil society organisations, judicial and prosecutorial bodies. In this context, the EU will also support military and law enforcement oversight, an effective and fair judiciary, the protection of human rights and any initiatives conducive to ending the culture of impunity, including transitional justice mechanisms.
25. The success of the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) of members of armed groups and the repatriation of foreign armed groups, based on lessons learned from the past, will be crucial for lasting peace and renewed trust in the region. The EU, together with international likeminded partners, will examine ways to reinforce support for this process. Through a triple nexus approach, the EU will focus on the reinsertion of former combatants and community recovery, including through community dialogue and reconciliation and addressing trauma, and contribute to sustainable socio-economic development and climate resilience in affected host communities. Specific attention will be given to the needs of women and children formerly associated with the activities of armed groups.
26. The EU will promote reinforced cooperation on land and lake border control, protection and management, including customs and security cooperation, which are key to easing tensions and creating the basis for long-term development. The EU will promote enhanced judicial and security cooperation, including in cybersecurity, the fight against arms and natural resources trafficking, preventing violent extremism, countering money laundering, financing of armed groups and organized crime.

27. The large and increasing refugee populations and the high numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Great Lakes region are a key challenge. In close cooperation with the UNHCR and other relevant organisations, the EU will support the countries of the region in addressing the needs of IDPs, asylum seekers and refugees, paying special attention to women, children, older persons and persons with disabilities. Political solutions to address refugee-related questions will also be supported with a view to settling cross-border tensions and conflicts resulting from past population movements.
28. In line with the UN's Agenda and the EU Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, the EU will pay particular attention to gender equality and the leadership of women and girls, especially in promoting peace-building and peace-keeping, better governance and sustainable development. It will support the empowerment of women and youth, their representation and full, equal, effective and meaningful participation, respecting their diversity. It will step up its action to prevent and combat sexual and gender-based violence, including as a weapon of war, targeted in particular against women and girls.
29. The EU remains committed to the promotion, protection and fulfilment of all human rights and to the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the outcomes of their review conferences and remains committed to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), in this context. Having that in mind, the EU reaffirms its commitment to the promotion, protection and fulfilment of the right of every individual to have full control over, and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality and sexual and reproductive health, free from discrimination, coercion and violence. The EU further stresses the need for universal access to quality and affordable comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information, education, including comprehensive sexuality education, and health-care services.

From Trafficking to Trade and Sustainable Development

30. In line with the European Green Deal, the EU will engage with regional interlocutors seeking to develop and implement a fair, open and rules-based trade and investment agenda. It stands ready to contribute to the development of intra-regional mechanisms for the management and sustainable governance of natural resources value chains, actively encouraging the passage from trafficking to a legitimate commerce-based economy.
31. The EU will place key emphasis on sustainable resources management. This will include conflict minerals such as tin, tantalum, tungsten and gold, and critical raw materials, such as cobalt and lithium, important for developing sustainable local value chains and for the global energy transition. The EU will continue supporting the production, processing and trade of local sustainable minerals and the development of local and international value chains, including through mutually beneficial partnerships, in consistency with existing EU legislation, international standards and regional certification mechanisms, including that of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR). This will contribute to strengthening local added value, maximizing the benefits of natural resources' exploitation for the local population. Special attention will be paid to labour rights, particularly working conditions for mine workers.
32. The EU is ready to enhance its support to the countries of the region and all relevant stakeholders and to reinforce cooperation on the management of joint environmental resources in the domains of the protection and management of transboundary forests and ecosystems, wildlife and plant species, sustainable management of water resources, climate-neutral energy production and distribution, eco-tourism and sustainable and deforestation-free agricultural value chains.

33. Climate change and environmental degradation are already having a major impact in the region. They are also a risk multiplier, amplifying pre-existing vulnerabilities, exacerbating conflicts, displacements and competition for scarce natural resources, especially land and water. The EU will continue to support the protection of biodiversity, ecosystems and natural resources, and the mitigation of and adaptation to the growing impact of climate change on the local populations, in compliance with the EU Concept for an Integrated Approach to Climate Change and Security. The EU will also support ambitious Nationally Determined Contributions under the Paris Agreement. Special attention will be paid to preserving the critical role played by the region's forests as a carbon sink. The EU will also continue promoting the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.
34. In its diplomacy, the EU will highlight the opportunities the green and digital transitions bring in terms of economic development, notably for investment, job creation and the strengthening of the private sector and the business environment, as well as in terms of human development, including access to basic social services and improvement of education and vocational training.

From Competition to Cooperation and Integration

35. As a follow-up to the EU-AU summit of February 2022, the EU, in cooperation with the countries of the region, will implement the Global Gateway Investment Package. The Global Gateway will support large-scale sustainable investments through Team Europe Initiatives and cooperation instruments, taking into account national priorities.
36. In particular, the EU stands ready to stimulate regional integration and promote transformative investments. The EU will focus on cross-border trade and economic cooperation, supporting economic integration and new strategic transport corridors to better connect the four countries of the region with each other, their regional neighbours and the rest of the world. These international corridors will connect the region to Atlantic and Indian Ocean ports.

37. Furthermore, the EU will support investments to develop cooperation on energy production and trade, including through interconnections between the electricity grids of different countries, as well as a drive to increase renewable energy supply and greater energy effectiveness.
38. The EU will support and assist the implementation of trade agreements, such as those of the East African Community (EAC), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), as well as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), that offer an opportunity for better governance of regional trade. The EU will seek to strengthen its own cooperation on trade and investment with the region, including through the Economic Partnership Agreements available to the countries in the region.
39. The EU will continue strengthening preparedness, prevention and response for disasters and pandemics, and address more effectively public health emergencies that have affected many throughout the region, including through investing in the strengthening of health systems and ensuring access to primary health services.

Partners

40. Following an approach of geographic concentric circles, the EU will seek active engagement on the region's challenges with: the DRC, Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda; countries in the wider region with specific political, diplomatic, security and/or economic interests in the Great Lakes region, including, but not limited to, the signatories to the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the DRC; and the key regional organisations and fora, namely the AU, EAC, ECCAS, SADC, ICGLR, the Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA).

41. The EU will continue to cooperate with the United Nations, in particular with the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary General for the Great Lakes Region and MONUSCO, and International Financial Institutions, as well as other international likeminded partners, in line with an integrated approach to foster further synergies.
42. The EU will stimulate tangible cooperation between public institutions and local actors, including small-scale traders and local authorities and communities, on specific issues in the collective interest of the region.
43. The EU will continue to support civil society's active and meaningful engagement in the political and socio-economic sphere. It will support regional dynamics among civil society organisations, promoting cross-border engagement and dialogue.
44. The EU will engage more actively with the private sector, which is key to formalising the economy, creating local added value and decent job opportunities, and improving industry standards, thus ensuring integration into regional and global value chains. Specific attention will be paid to improving the business climate and upholding and promoting human rights in the private sector.

The Way Forward: Tools and Policies to Implement the Strategy

45. This Great Lakes Strategy sets the framework for all EU policies and action in the region, which enable the pursuit of strengthened engagement and deliver concrete and measurable results.

46. The EU will intensify its diplomatic engagement in and with the Great Lakes region, and is willing to reinforce its presence therein, in particular in the Eastern DRC. Enhanced coordination between EU Delegations in the region, as well as with the Member States' representations will reinforce the EU's diplomatic footprint. The EU will continue regular political dialogues with each of the countries in the region. It also stands ready to engage in a regional political dialogue with the four countries primarily concerned, to identify avenues for joint cooperation, in full coordination with the other existing processes.
47. In addition to its increased diplomatic engagement, the EU will support the mediation and conflict resolution efforts led by the countries in the region, as well as by the EU Member States and likeminded partners.
48. Building on its shared values with the countries in the region, the EU will seek to reinforce its dialogue on human rights and IHL with the countries of the region. It will continue to actively engage and speak out on human rights and IHL violations. The EU will also promote further cooperation in multilateral human rights fora, including the UN Human Rights Council.
49. In response to the magnitude of the humanitarian and protection crisis in Eastern DRC, the EU will continue to provide humanitarian assistance for the most vulnerable and crisis-affected populations, including for the region's many IDPs and refugees, whilst seeking to foster durable solutions for these populations.
50. The EU reaffirms its readiness to mobilise, as appropriate, the full range of its tools and policies to implement this Strategy, including Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI-Global Europe), the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+) and the European Peace Facility (EPF).
51. The EU will encourage and support bilateral or multi-country transformative initiatives and investments, including through the Global Gateway and regional Team Europe Initiatives.

52. The EU will support peace and security, at both bilateral and regional level, and may consider further actions to enhance and support the capacities of the security and defence forces of the countries in the region for that purpose, in the context of security sector reforms.
53. The EU will continue to closely monitor and review the effect of its restrictive measures, as well as to amend them when and if needed in the pursuit of peace, security, democracy and respect for human rights, as part of its external policy objectives. The restrictive measures will remain a tool for bringing about a positive change in behaviour by the persons and entities responsible for sustaining or exploiting armed conflicts, destabilising the countries in the region and responsible for human rights violations and abuses. In that perspective, they may be used to reduce the ability of criminal networks trafficking natural resources and involved in illegal exploitation, illicit trade and illicit financial flows.
54. The EU will reinforce its public communication, with a view to promoting its contributions and policies, reacting swiftly to significant developments and regional dynamics, and actively countering disinformation, manipulative communication and hate speech from within the region as well as that originating from outside actors.
55. Recognising the need for high-level engagement with the region, and in order to support the implementation of this Strategy, the EU will seek to reinstate the position of an EU Special Representative for the Great Lakes Region. The Council invites the High Representative to submit a proposal to that effect.
56. The Council invites the European External Action Service and the Commission services to ensure that the programming and implementation of the EU's development cooperation are adjusted in line with this Strategy as well as the latest developments and lessons learned.
57. The Council will regularly consider the progress made in the implementation of this Strategy and invites the High Representative and the Commission to present concrete modalities to operationalise, monitor and evaluate the Strategy.

