



POLICY PAPER EU–AFRICA MIGRATION DIPLOMACY FROM FLOW MANAGEMENT TO STRATEGIC COHERENCE

Report 2/2026

Spanish Institute for Migration Analysis (IEAM)

in partnership with AMIStaDeS



Executive Summary

This Policy Paper proposes strategic guidance to strengthen the coherence of migration diplomacy between the European Union and its African partners, moving beyond an approach focused solely on flow management to promote a more integrated and sustainable vision of mobility.

Building on the work of the Spanish Institute for Migration Analysis (IEAM), this document is the result of a collective intelligence workshop organized in Rome, jointly by the IEAM and the independent Italian research center AMIStaDeS.

The workshop brought together a broad group of key stakeholders, including representatives from UN agencies, European institutions, national ministries, humanitarian and civil society organizations, as well as African experts. This diversity of participants enabled the exchange of institutional, operational, and analytical perspectives on Euro-African mobility dynamics. It also helped identify areas of convergence, formulate recommendations, and outline courses of action aimed at strengthening strategic coherence across migration, development, and international cooperation policies.

The analysis presented in this Policy Paper takes place within a context of profound reconfiguration of Euro-African migration diplomacy, marked by the implementation of the European Pact on Migration and Asylum, the proliferation of bilateral initiatives, and the geopolitical reshaping of the Sahel and its migration routes. In this context, mobility governance suffers less from a lack of instruments than from a deficit of strategic coordination: initiatives accumulate without an integrated framework, generating fragmentation, route-shifting dynamics, and instability in EU-Africa relations. This fragmentation is further compounded by a structural mismatch between short-term political decisions – driven by electoral cycles and media pressure – and the time needed to act on structural levers such as employment, training, legal mobility, and governance.

Strategic Messages

- **Clarify the public doctrine of migration diplomacy:** explicitly define the objectives pursued and the instruments deployed, clarify the links between security, legal mobility, and development, prioritize operational objectives, and align public communication with this doctrine in a coherent and consistent manner, regardless of electoral or political cycles.
- **Reduce fragmentation through minimal regional coordination:** embed bilateral agreements within a regional framework that allows anticipating displacement effects and limiting negative consequences on neighboring corridors, while systematically integrating the humanitarian dimension and the increased risks for migrants during route diversions.

- **Ensure the predictability of commitments:** establish multiannual financial and legal frameworks, strengthen regulatory continuity, and maintain mechanisms beyond political cycles, a condition essential to the credibility of partnerships.
- **Build effective reciprocity:** adapt strategies to African national contexts, promote co-development with measurable impacts on the ground, and ensure genuine access to legal mobility pathways.
- **Strengthen accountability:** establish an independent evaluation integrating systemic indicators – such as route shifts, regional impacts, and international protection – developed jointly with African partners and made public, in order to transform political commitments into verifiable operational frameworks.

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1. Introduction

1.1 A Pivotal Moment

EU–Africa migration diplomacy is at a moment of profound restructuring, characterized by the overlap of institutional initiatives, internal political constraints, and shifting external geopolitical dynamics.

First, the European Union is entering a phase of implementing the European Pact on Migration and Asylum, adopted in 2024, with full implementation expected by 2026. Discussions highlighted that this framework aims to further organize the management of asylum, border control, and internal solidarity mechanisms. However, a perception gap remains: what is conceived as institutional rationalization may be seen in certain African contexts or by segments of European public opinion as a tightening focused more on deterring irregular migration than on opening legal pathways.

Second, several Member States have launched ambitious initiatives, notably Italy with its Plan Mattei for Africa, presented as a comprehensive economic and geopolitical strategy. Although not formally a migration instrument, it intersects with mobility governance through investment, employment, training, and political cooperation. It should be noted that the proliferation of such bilateral initiatives, outside the EU framework, raises questions of coherence with the Union's external policy. It may also weaken the EU's collective negotiating position with African partners, whose national priorities and dynamics differ. Discussions emphasized a central point: without tangible local ownership and the creation of shared value, these initiatives can be perceived as asymmetrical, reducing their strategic impact.

Third, the EU has undertaken a review of its approach toward the Sahel, structured around principles such as differentiated engagement (i.e., modulating the level of political and economic cooperation according to partners' willingness to align with common objectives), acceptance of disagreement, and increased listening to partners. This evolution occurs in a context of regional power rebalancing, where Sahelian dynamics directly influence migration routes to the Mediterranean and the Atlantic.

Fourth, the pressure of European public opinion remains a decisive variable. The visible reduction of irregular flows is an immediate political priority, tied to short electoral cycles. In contrast, structural levers – employment, training, legal mobility, governance – operate over the long term and produce effects only gradually. This temporal mismatch between electoral imperatives and structural solutions undermines strategic continuity and favors successive adjustments rather than a sustained long-term trajectory.

Finally, this moment of restructuring is occurring amid a broader geopolitical reconfiguration, including the rising influence of Gulf countries (mainly the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar), Turkey, and Russia in several African regions (Sahel, Libya, Horn of Africa).

The central challenge identified during the workshop is not the absence of instruments. Pacts, partnerships, financial mechanisms, sectoral programs, and dialogue frameworks exist. The difficulty lies in their insufficient coordination. The accumulation of initiatives, without a clearly integrated and hierarchically structured architecture, produces fragmentation, displacement effects along migration routes, and political instability in EU–Africa relations.

1.2 Methodology

This Policy Paper is based on discussions held during a collective intelligence workshop organized in Rome, conducted under the Chatham House Rule, and bringing together European and African participants: institutional representatives, national authorities, international organizations, private sector actors, humanitarian actors, researchers, and operational partners.

The approach adopted follows three methodological principles:

1. **Analytical fidelity:** presenting the tensions and points of convergence expressed, without individual attribution and without taking normative positions.
2. **Prioritization of issues:** identifying recurring themes – strategic coherence, security, fragmentation, political timelines, regional coordination, legal mobility, international protection.
3. **Systemic perspective:** analyzing the interactions between internal EU dimensions (public opinion, electoral cycles, intra-European solidarity), African regional dynamics (migration routes, free movement, security), and the broader geopolitical environment.

The objective is not to provide an exhaustive assessment of existing policies, but to highlight the conditions necessary to strengthen the strategic coherence of Euro-African migration diplomacy. By strategic coherence, we mean the alignment between stated objectives and the instruments employed, the articulation between bilateral and multilateral initiatives, and the continuity of commitments beyond short-term political cycles.

2. Migration as a Diplomatic Tool: Increasing Prominence and Ambiguities

2.1 Migration Diplomacy as a New Paradigm

Discussions in Rome confirmed a structural shift: migration now occupies a central place in external relations between the European Union and its African partners.

It is no longer solely a matter of administratively managing flows. It shapes political negotiations, guides budgetary priorities, and influences the balance of partnerships.

The term “migration diplomacy” reflects this evolution and a broader renewal of European vocabulary. It illustrates the gradual formalization of an approach already widely practiced: treating migration as a subject of political negotiation.

Although all actors already practice some form of migration diplomacy, given that migration is inherently political, the European Union is now proposing an explicit and structured approach, particularly with African countries.

It thus refers to an integrated approach that combines political negotiation, financial instruments, and operational mechanisms. This approach is based on a “package” logic, combining:

- **Security cooperation** (border control, combating criminal networks);
- **Investment and socio-economic development;**
- **Legal and circular mobility schemes** and, increasingly, cooperation on international protection and asylum.

From this perspective, migration is no longer only about implementing public policies (rules, controls, procedures), but it becomes a full-fledged instrument of external action. It allows for negotiating “packages”, aligning incentives, structuring partnerships, and shaping diplomatic priorities.

Conditionalities play a decisive role in this architecture. Some are formalized, such as bilateral readmission agreements or commitments related to migration management. Others take the form of less formal incentives, linked to access to funding or security cooperation.

Financial instruments reinforce this centrality. Discussions highlighted the importance of funds mobilized in the EU’s external action, particularly through the NDICI (Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument), a significant portion of which is allocated to migration and refugees.

Migration has thus become a cross-cutting diplomatic tool, intersecting with security, development, regional governance, and broader geopolitical dynamics.

2.2 Structural Ambiguities

This growing centrality is accompanied by persistent tensions.

- **Development–control linkage**

Development is presented as a lever for stabilization and the creation of local opportunities. Flow control, by contrast, responds to immediate political imperatives. When these objectives are not explicitly prioritized, the overall strategy loses clarity.

- **Territorial security and human security**

European frameworks formally integrate both dimensions. In practice, their implementation remains uneven depending on geographical contexts and local political dynamics. Moreover, international protection mechanisms and border management instruments do not always evolve at the same pace.

- **Cooperation and the perception of outsourcing**

European representatives rejected the notion of an intentional outsourcing of responsibilities, understood as the transfer of migration duties to third countries.

Other participants nonetheless acknowledged that certain practices – particularly support for control capacities in partner countries – can reinforce this perception.

These divergences partly reflect the political and diplomatic constraints linked to the sovereignty of partner countries. EU action relies primarily on diplomacy and dialogue, and it strives to ensure respect for human rights as well as the principle of non-refoulement within the framework of its cooperation. The perception of outsourcing therefore stems less from deliberate intent than from the practical limits of implementation and the political interpretation of the instruments employed.

- **Announcements and implementation**

Pacts and strategies generate numerous commitments, and their operationalization depends on administrative capacities, interinstitutional coordination, and political continuity. However, the absence of robust and shared evaluation mechanisms makes it difficult to identify the adjustments needed during implementation. The pressure to deliver quick results further amplifies this gap between announcements and execution.

These ambiguities do not result from a lack of tools. They arise from a strategic architecture that remains unstable, characterized by heterogeneous timelines and priorities.

Migration Diplomacy – Stabilized Concept or Strategic Category in Development?

Migration diplomacy is now recognized as a category of European public action. Its content, however, remains evolving.

For some participants, it constitutes a coherent doctrine integrating security, legal mobility, and development.

For others, it remains an operational category that is adaptable, with its scope varying according to political contexts and national priorities.

This plasticity provides room for adjustment. It also generates uncertainty regarding evaluation criteria and the hierarchy of objectives, particularly for partners struggling to identify stable interlocutors and enduring commitments.

The central question thus becomes strategic: is migration diplomacy a stabilized framework, or an instrument still under consolidation?

3. Fragmentation and Bilateralization: An Unstable Architecture

3.1 Risk of Competition Among Partners

EU–Africa migration governance is largely organized around bilateral negotiations.

This approach responds to the need for political responsiveness. It allows for targeted agreements tailored to the specific national priorities of African partners. However, it undermines overall coherence.

Country-by-country negotiations accentuate power asymmetries. African states do not enter these relationships with the same strategic weight or negotiating capacity. Financial and security incentives tend to vary according to geographic position and perceived role in transit dynamics.

This dynamic weakens African regional positions. Multilateral frameworks – whether subregional or continental – struggle to establish a common doctrine when key decisions are taken bilaterally.

However, the marginalization of regional frameworks does not result from their absence. It primarily reflects the priority given to immediate operational arrangements. In the short term, this approach produces visible results. In the medium term, it diminishes the collective capacity for anticipation.

Fragmentation is therefore not institutional in the formal sense. It is strategic: the instruments exist, but they are not coordinated. In this respect, it is more difficult to correct than a mere organizational gap: it reflects an explicit political will to prioritize collective coherence over immediate bilateral effectiveness.

3.2 Systemic Effects

Bilateralization produces direct effects on migration dynamics. The most visible of these effects is the displacement of routes. When a corridor is blocked or an agreement alters passage conditions, flows are redirected to other parts of the system. This mechanism generates negative regional consequences, as local improvements can increase pressure elsewhere. It is also important to note that migrants affected by these successive adjustments often use less structured and more dangerous corridors, thereby exposing themselves to greater risks to their safety and integrity.

Moreover, the Atlantic and Mediterranean corridors function as an interconnected system, in which pressures observed in one area quickly influence the other, thereby fueling flow volatility. These variations do not necessarily reflect a structural transformation, but rather rapid adjustments due to control mechanisms and perceived opportunities.

However, instability goes beyond flows. It also affects inter-state relations, as unilateral measures can generate diplomatic tensions when they produce unanticipated effects in neighboring areas.

Migration management thus becomes reactive. Each adjustment generates a new adjustment. Without minimal regional coordination, bilateralization maintains a cycle of continuous adaptation rather than producing a positive long-term outcome.

Why Migration Management Cannot Be Strictly Bilateral

Migration routes constitute an integrated system.

A bilateral agreement alters economic, security, and political incentives across the entire corridor.

Three main ideas emerged from the discussion:

- Routes are interconnected;
- Displacement effects occur rapidly;
- Regional consequences are structural, not cyclical.

Strictly bilateral management ignores this interdependence.

Regional coordination does not replace bilateral agreements. It conditions their stability.

4. A fundamental tension: political urgency and long-term structural challenges

Discussions in Rome highlighted a clear tension: migration diplomacy takes place in a political environment dominated by immediate political urgencies, while its underlying determinants respond to slower, structural processes. This distinction is decisive, as it shapes the choice of instruments, budgetary priorities, and public communication.

4.1 The electoral process in Europe

In several Member States, migration is a central topic of public debate. Indeed, governments are primarily assessed on their ability to deliver immediate, measurable, and visible results on migration. Reducing irregular arrivals thus becomes the dominant indicator. Media coverage of migration flows amplifies this dynamic by highlighting isolated events that fuel demand for rapid responses.

This pressure favors instruments with quick returns: enhanced controls, targeted operational agreements, and deterrence mechanisms. Public communication aligns with this logic of control and firmness.

Electoral timing imposes a short-term horizon, reducing the scope for gradual strategies. Decisions are calibrated according to domestic political cycles rather than long-term migration dynamics. The result is governance under constant pressure, oriented toward crisis management.

4.2 The limits of the short term versus structural investments

Structural factors that have a lasting influence on mobility follow a temporal logic distinct from that of the political cycles described above:

- **Employment and industrialization in origin and transit countries** gradually modify economic incentives for affected populations;

- **Vocational training and sectoral partnerships** strengthen the alignment between skills and labor markets. Their impact depends on institutional continuity on both sides of the partnership;
- **Political stability and the quality of governance** have a lasting influence on migration trajectories, as they affect security, trust in institutions, and people's life prospects. These variables change slowly, and their effects are only noticeable in the medium and long term;
- **Legal and circular mobility mechanisms** affect the credibility of alternatives to irregular migration. Their effectiveness depends on the predictability of procedures, the consistency of commitments, and the volume of available opportunities;
- **Demographic dynamics**, in particular the growing proportion of young people of working age in African countries, constitute a long-term determining factor that control instruments alone cannot address.

These levers do not produce immediate changes in flows but gradually transform the incentive structures underlying mobility.

The observed gap between the political evaluation of migration measures and the structural transformation of mobility dynamics creates a strategic tension: policies are judged in the short term, while their decisive effects are deferred. This tension permeates all initiatives discussed in Rome.

Discordant Timelines – Governing Under Crisis Pressure

Migration diplomacy operates under two temporal regimes:

- A short-term political timeline, determined by electoral cycles and media pressure;
- A long-term structural timeline, linked to economic, demographic, and institutional dynamics.

When these timelines are not coordinated, governance becomes unstable.

Strategic coherence requires ensuring continuity of commitments beyond electoral cycles, both on the European side and on the side of African partners.

5. Conditions for Strategic Coherence

Discussions in Rome converge on a clear diagnosis: migration diplomacy suffers from a deficit of strategic coordination. The instruments exist, but their alignment remains unstable.

Three conditions determine operational coherence: predictability, reciprocity, and accountability.

5.1 Predictability

The continuity of commitments underpins the credibility of partnerships. Yet, migration orientations evolve under domestic political constraints. This variability reduces partners' trust and undermines multi-year arrangements.

Commitments must therefore be stabilized through durable financial and legal frameworks, with timelines, volumes, and implementation modalities explicitly defined. Public communication must also adhere to this logic of consistency: unstable public rhetoric – oscillating between firmness and openness according to electoral cycles – undermines the credibility of partnerships as much as normative instability does.

The prioritization of objectives is also essential. Reducing migration flows, international protection, legal mobility, and development coexist in policy discourse. The absence of an operational hierarchy creates ambiguity.

Moreover, normative instability – frequent changes to procedures, fluctuating criteria, and variable timelines – undermines the clarity of policies. Predictability therefore relies on consistent rules and continuity in mechanisms.

5.2 Reciprocity

Migration diplomacy structures relationships of interest. It cannot function on an asymmetrical basis.

African partners express clear expectations: genuine access to legal pathways, productive investments, and recognition of national priorities. For cooperation to be credible, the EU's interests must also be clarified – not to impose them, but to build arrangements that are realistic and acceptable to all.

Co-development initiatives must produce tangible effects on the ground and should not be limited to pursuing migration control objectives. Strategies need to be tailored to each country, as Africa cannot be treated as a homogeneous bloc: contexts and priorities vary significantly from one state to another, particularly in the Sahel. Local ownership of policy frameworks is essential in a context where sovereignty claims and historical tensions remain significant.

The balance in defining priorities determines the legitimacy of partnerships. The perception of a unilateral agenda undermines their durability, whereas genuine reciprocity strengthens trust, political acceptability, and the sustainability of joint initiatives.

5.3 Accountability

Strategic coherence requires robust evaluation mechanisms. The traceability of migration-related funding must be ensured, and the resources mobilized must correspond to the stated objectives.

Monitoring mechanisms must go beyond immediate indicators of flow reduction. Systemic effects – route displacement, regional impacts, and international protection considerations – must also be integrated into the evaluation.

Independent evaluation strengthens the credibility of commitments, helps identify unintended effects, and enables the adjustment of policy instruments.

Accountability thus transforms a political commitment into a verifiable operational framework.

Box 4: From Declaratory Diplomacy to Verifiable Diplomacy

The multiplication of pacts does not guarantee coherence.

Coherence relies on:

- Commitments stabilized over time;
- Explicit recognition of reciprocal interests;
- Measurable monitoring mechanisms, publicly accessible and jointly designed with partners.

Without these elements, migration diplomacy remains unstable.

With them, it becomes a lever for regional stability.

6. Operational Recommendations

The following recommendations aim to stabilize the architecture of EU–Africa migration diplomacy by strengthening its strategic coherence and political credibility.

Priority 1 – Clarify the Doctrine

1. Formalize a Public Doctrine of Migration Diplomacy

- Explicitly define the objectives pursued and the instruments mobilized.
- Clarify the articulation between security, legal mobility, and development in order to reduce strategic ambiguity.
- Ensure that public communication consistently reflects this doctrine, regardless of electoral circumstances.

2. Clearly Prioritize Operational Objectives

- Define which priorities effectively prevail in practice: reduction of flows, regional stability, international protection of refugees, legal mobility, or development.
- Indicate this hierarchy in both public and internal doctrine so that all instruments and initiatives are aligned with the stated priorities.
- Communicate this hierarchy transparently to the African partners concerned in order to reduce strategic ambiguity and improve operational coordination.
- Provide for periodic monitoring of the implementation of these priorities in order to adjust their hierarchy in light of observed results and regional dynamics.

3. Align the European Internal Framework and External Partnerships

- Ensure coherence between the implementation of the European Pact on Migration and Asylum and the agreements concluded with African partners, whose national priorities and dynamics differ.
- Stabilize the applicable rules and limit adjustments likely to generate inconsistencies.

Priority 2 – Reduce Fragmentation

4. Embed Bilateral Agreements within a Minimum Regional Framework

- Develop coordination mechanisms to anticipate displacement effects and externalities across neighboring corridors.
- Systematically integrate the humanitarian dimension into this assessment, taking into account the increased risks faced by migrants when routes are redirected.

5. Establish Regular EU–Africa Consultations on Route Dynamics

- Set up an operational mechanism with a defined frequency, bringing together European institutions, the states concerned, and regional organizations to adjust priorities and share analyses.

Priority 3 – Strengthen Credibility

6. Ensure the Stability of Multiannual Funding

- Secure budgetary allocations for migration partnerships to prevent disruptions caused by political cycles.

7. Establish Independent and Regular Monitoring

- Evaluate the instruments using quantitative and qualitative indicators that incorporate systemic effects, notably route displacement and regional impacts. This monitoring should be conducted in coordination with African partners to ensure that the evaluation reflects perceived effects on both sides of the partnership.

8. Integrate Indicators on International Protection and Legal Mobility

- Systematically measure access to regular migration channels, the quality of international refugee protection mechanisms, and the alignment between stated objectives and observed outcomes. These indicators should be made publicly available to enhance transparency and accountability for the commitments made.

These recommendations aim to stabilize existing instruments.

Strategic coherence is a prerequisite for credible and sustainable migration diplomacy – for both the European Union and its African partners.

Conclusion

EU–Africa migration diplomacy has institutionalized rapidly. Pacts, partnerships, and financial instruments have accumulated over recent years. The challenge is no longer legal or budgetary provision, but overall coherence.

The fragmentation of initiatives, the predominance of bilateral arrangements, and short-term political pressures weaken strategic clarity. Route displacement effects and diplomatic tensions are recurrent manifestations of this fragmentation.

Migration now structures EU–Africa relations on the same level as security or energy. It engages political, economic, and geopolitical balances.

Stabilizing this relationship depends on three key requirements: continuity of commitments, explicit recognition of reciprocal interests, and robust evaluation mechanisms. Strategic coherence does not guarantee the absence of tensions, but it is a prerequisite for managing them effectively.

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