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### **UK-Africa relations after the end of the Brexit transition**

The transition period will come to an end on 1 January 2021 and the true effects of Brexit will start to be realised. Africa will not be spared the disruption. Continuity agreements that “roll over” the terms of the EU’s Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) are in place with a significant number of African countries and regions, and these will undoubtedly help minimise confusion and additional barriers to trade. Nonetheless, African exporters to the UK will face new rules and procedures, while the many who distribute to the UK via Europe will face additional non-tariff barriers.

In the longer term there is some scope for the UK and Africa to renegotiate these agreements, replacing them with trade deals more tailored to the specific needs of both parties. For example, the EU’s EPAs maintain tariffs on many agricultural goods from middle-income countries such as South Africa and Nigeria – albeit at reduced rates – that a UK less protectionist about agriculture could reduce or remove. But the limitations of any newly negotiated trade arrangements must be acknowledged. There are problems with the EU’s EPAs, but they are ones without simple solutions that will entail difficult political trade-offs. Negotiating a “better deal” with any of Africa’s trade blocs will be complex and time consuming at a time when the UK’s limited negotiating capacity will be spread thin.

The potential benefits of Brexit for Africa come more from the UK’s desire to promote “Global Britain” than any tangible change in rules and regulations. In a bid to prove that this was more than just a slogan, the UK paid renewed attention to Africa following the 2016 Brexit referendum. Theresa May’s August 2018 visit to South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya was the first to the continent by a British prime minister since 2013. She pledged to make the UK the G7’s largest investor into Africa by 2022 and opened new diplomatic missions on the continent. Boris Johnson started his premiership by hosting the inaugural UK UK-Africa Investment Summit in January 2020, where he stated that he wanted the UK to become Africa’s “investment partner of choice”.

This approach is not immune to criticism. It seems more a slogan rather than a policy; beyond a broad shift in engagement from aid to trade and in focus from former colonies to promising markets there are still few indications of a coherent long-term strategy. More recently, the “Global Britain” narrative so ubiquitous in the Brexit debate has become rather quiet over the past year as the COVID-19 pandemic pushes Brexit off the front pages and forces the UK government to turn its attention to domestic issues. But it did lead to an initial boost in UK trade with and investment in Africa after years of decline.

More importantly, Brexit fits into a wider context of steadily rising geopolitical interest and competition in Africa over the past decade. Traditional giants – the US, EU and China – are shifting their engagement strategies in the face of increased interest from Russia, the Gulf States, Turkey and others. The international community is starting to recognise and deal with Africa as a commercial partner rather than simply as a recipient for aid, as evidenced by the “Prosper Africa” initiative of the US or the EPAs of the EU. Post-Brexit Britain looks set to follow these wider trends, with a renewed focus on Africa and recognition of the economic opportunities it represents. The COVID-19 pandemic may have temporarily pulled its focus inwards currently and the challenges of Brexit may confine any wider ambitions in the short-term, but the political and economic need to reassert the “Global Britain” narrative remains as pressing as before even if currently pushed down the list of priorities.

Savvy African governments have successfully exploited this geopolitical competition. It is no coincidence, for example, that Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta chose to visit both the US and China in the space of a week in late 2018. Kenyatta has more recently been vocal in his refusal to “pick a side” and, in this context, it is perhaps little surprise that the US is courting Kenya for its first post-AGOA free trade agreement. Other African governments have taken advantage of this geopolitical competition to

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broaden their range of creditors, investors and trading partners. African economies have benefitted from private-sector investment backed by the development and export finance of foreign governments.

The short-term impact of the end of the Brexit transition period may be more disruption than opportunity for African companies, and tangible changes in trade and investment frameworks may be limited in the coming years. But, despite years of relative neglect in its relationship with Africa, the UK remains a major player. In the longer-term, its renewed participation in the geopolitical competition for influence is likely to translate to increased development finance towards Africa, greater support for trade with and investment in Africa, and an increased recognition of the commercial opportunities the continent holds. And African governments have proved adept at turning such outside interest to their own advantage.