

Double Degree in Global Management and Politics

Chair of Diplomacy and Negotiation

National interests and Multilateral Agreements:
Italy and Portugal in the “Lobito Corridor”

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*The wisest and most effective way
to protect our national interests
is through international cooperation*

Henry Morgenthau Jr, 1944

Abstract

This thesis examines how two medium-sized EU states – Italy and Portugal – negotiate development cooperation with Portuguese-speaking African countries (PALOP) across bilateral and EU arenas, and how divergent histories and domestic politics shape strategies and outcomes. Framed by Putnam's two-level game, it analyses how domestic drivers (migration, energy/industrial policy, electoral incentives) shape win-sets and when these constraints translate into European action. Methodologically, the study employs document analysis and semi-structured interviews with national administrations, EU institutions, development financing actors, and the private sector. The Lobito Corridor Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) provides an example of the Level I–Level II entanglement. Findings show that Italy converts domestic issue salience into agenda visibility, while Portugal leverages Lusophone credibility and dense socio-economic ties to broker coalitions and provide implementation depth at a low domestic cost. In both cases, EU structures serve as multipliers of national priorities, allowing for differentiated participation backed by common financing and coordination. The thesis highlights how domestic politics and supranational platforms jointly produce negotiation outcomes in contemporary EU-Africa relations.

Keywords: PALOP; Italy; Portugal; EU-Africa relations; Domestic-international entanglement

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Introduction

Research Relevance

Africa has emerged once again as a central arena of intensified competition. A growing literature describes a “new scramble” in which long-standing European actors face a crowded field of opponents, primarily China and the United States, but also a larger group of emerging economies seeking markets, resources and political influence in a post-colonial context (Rosenthal, 2023). While the late-nineteenth-century logic of securing access to natural resources and strategic routes remains, the actors, methods, and narratives have now changed, giving rise to a more multipolar and competitive environment where development narrative, commercial ambitions and geopolitical positioning are intertwined (Ewalefoh, 2022).

The continent’s economic potential contributes to this rise of interest. As UNCTAD observes, Africa has the potential to become a major driver of global trade and economic growth, especially as regional markets may be deepening under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Indeed, increased intra-African trade, along with improvements in infrastructure and investment conditions, might create opportunities not only for African economies but also for foreign partners seeking to diversify trade and supply chains. However, persisting structural constraints deriving from high trade costs or logistical bottlenecks mean that this potential remains unevenly realised, presenting both challenges and incentives for actors eager to shape the trajectory of Africa’s integration into the global economy (UNCTAD, 2025).

Significantly, the competitive scene is no longer controlled by the well-established Europe-China-US triangle. Gulf states have also pursued a strategic economic presence that goes beyond commercial profit to include energy diversification and logistical control over maritime trade routes connecting Africa to the Middle East and Asia. Investments in ports and agribusiness contribute to integrate African economies into Gulf supply chains, as well as to project influence in regions crucial to the stability of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa (Surkov & Chiniev, 2025).

This changing environment presents both opportunities and risks to mid-sized European countries like Italy and Portugal. Because of the diversity of external actors, traditional diplomatic and economic channels have become part of a more crowded marketplace of influence, where flexibility and strategic alignment are as important as historical ties. Italy’s and Portugal’s engagement with African countries thus deals with a dual challenge, that is, protecting and expanding their own economic and political stance while coordinating within the EU’s Africa policy that increasingly operates in a competitive global setting.

Table 1: Italy and Portugal: main drivers in approaching Africa

Country	National factors				International factors	
	Trade * (2024)	Energy ** (2024)	Security *** (2024)	Migration **** (2024)	EU and other multilateral institutions	Geo-strategic drivers
Italy	Interchange with Africa: EUR 54.9 billion. Imports: EUR 34.9 billion. Exports: EUR 20 billion	>70% of Italian energy imports come from Africa, being Italy's number 1 energy partner	Participation in 20 military and cooperation missions (EUR 1.7 billion)	66.317 irregular migrants arrived on Italian shores	Active in EU-Africa cooperation frameworks; G7 membership; coordination with UN and African Union on security and migration	Strategic diversification of energy sources; stability in North Africa and Sahel as a buffer for migration; internationalisation of Italian companies
Portugal	Interchange with Africa: EUR 8.6 billion. Imports: EUR 4.1 billion. Exports: EUR 4.5 billion	>70% renewable energy. Great commitment to develop renewables in Africa	Participation in 16 military and cooperation missions	2.276 application for asylum in Portugal	Leveraging Lusophone ties within EU; promotion of CPLP priorities; engagement in maritime security through NATO	Preservation of political and cultural influence in PALOP; promotion of Portuguese companies in African markets

* Sources: MAECI (2025); INE (2024)

** Sources: Martini (2024); Lopes (2025) and IEA (2025b)

*** Sources: Ravazzolo (2024) and Ditto (2024); Defesa Nacional (2025)

**** Sources: The Italian Ministry of Interior (2024); CPR (2024). The data shows the total number of irregular migrants and asylum seekers in 2024.

Research Question and Objectives

Considering the evolving geopolitical and economic competition for influence in Africa, this thesis examines how Italy and Portugal, two European middle powers, pursue their interests and form partnerships with Portuguese-speaking African countries. The central research question that guides the study is: *How do Italy and Portugal's divergent historical and political relationships with the Portuguese-speaking African countries (PALOP) influence their negotiation strategies in bilateral and multilateral (EU) agreements?*

The objective is to analyse each country's negotiation strategies in both bilateral and EU contexts to better understand how two states with different colonial legacies and domestic priorities adapt their engagement to an African landscape marked by expanding economic opportunities and intensifying geopolitical competition. Rather than limiting the comparison to foreign policy narratives, the research explores how national interests are expressed and

defended within the broader EU framework, and how the dynamics at these two levels impact the scope and direction of their African policies.

To develop a comprehensive and nuanced analysis, the thesis will address the following sub-questions: i) Are Italy and Portugal genuinely committed to Africa's development as a global priority, or are their actions primarily driven by immediate national interests? ii) To what extent do their current approaches to Africa reflect domestic political agendas, such as electoral cycles, migration management, or the projection of economic interests in areas such as energy security, raw materials, and rare earths? iii) How do historical and colonial legacies shape each country's perspective and engagement with the PALOP? iv) In what ways do Italy and Portugal combine their national strategies with a coordinated European approach?

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Robert Putnam's Two-Level Game theory (1988) as its primary theoretical lens to examine the interaction between domestic politics and international negotiations in Italy's and Portugal's engagement with PALOP. The theory addresses a recurring challenge in international policymaking, by looking at how national leaders negotiate internationally while remaining accountable to domestic constituencies whose consent is indispensable for any agreement to be implemented.

Putnam's framework is based on the premise that diplomacy works on two interconnected levels. At Level I, government negotiators bargain with their foreign counterparts to reach a tentative agreement. At Level II, the same agreement must be "ratified" through domestic political processes, which may involve formal parliamentary votes, intra-coalition bargaining, consultations with interest groups, or shifts in public opinion (Putnam, 1988, p. 436). The success of an international negotiation therefore depends not only on finding common ground across the table, but also on whether that agreement falls within the range of outcomes acceptable to each side's domestic actors.

Central to the model is the concept of the *win-set*, as it refers to all Level I agreements that would receive the necessary majority support at Level II (Putnam, 1988, p. 437). The size of a win-set has two important implications. First, larger win-sets increase the likelihood of reaching an agreement at Level I because they give negotiators more flexibility to make concessions and package deals. Second, the relative size of win-sets affects bargaining power, as negotiators with smaller win-sets can credibly point to domestic constraints in order to extract concessions, while larger win-sets may make them more vulnerable to pressure from counterparts (Putnam, 1988, pp. 440–441). It is important to note that the two levels are not

settled in sequence. The anticipation of Level II ratification influences bargaining positions at Level I, and international commitments may, in turn, echo back into domestic politics, strengthening some coalitions, weakening others or provoking political backlash (Putnam, 1988, pp. 454–456).

This theory is particularly relevant to Italy's and Portugal's African policies, where domestic priorities (such as migration control, energy security, economic expansion, or the legacies of colonial history) constantly interact with larger multilateral negotiations in the European Union and other forums. In these cases, national leaders must ensure that their international commitments are domestically sustainable, while also using external bargaining to advance or legitimise preferred domestic agendas. This dual arena becomes even more complex in the context of African evolving dynamics, as bilateral relationships with PALOP are linked to EU-level strategies and challenged by the growing presence of non-EU actors.

The analysis includes a politics/policies distinction to operationalise the domestic dimension to be examined. *Politics* refers to the national political drivers that shape foreign policy preferences and constrain the size of the win-set, such as electoral cycles, party competition, populist rhetoric and the framing of Africa in political discourse. *Policies*, on the other hand, pertain to the concrete instruments and initiatives targeting Africa, such as development cooperation programmes, trade agreements, energy partnerships, and security operations. By mapping both spheres, one can observe how domestic agendas determine the boundaries of acceptable outcomes, and how specific policy tools are selected or adapted to fit within those constraints.

The combination of Putnam's Two-Level Game and the politics/policies lens allows to capture not only whether Italy and Portugal reach specific agreements, but also how domestic political needs and policy choices interact to define their room for manoeuvre in bilateral and EU-level negotiations with PALOP. It also provides a structured approach to compare two countries with markedly different historical trajectories in Africa, shedding light on how colonial legacies, current domestic pressures and multilateral commitments contribute to negotiation strategies in an increasingly competitive geopolitical landscape.

Methodology

This thesis adopts a qualitative, case study-based methodology to investigate Italy's and Portugal's engagement with PALOP, with a particular focus on their roles in the Lobito Corridor Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The Lobito Corridor, being an infrastructure and connectivity project linking Angola, Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo

(DRC) to Atlantic-facing ports, is a relevant and timely example, reflecting both the economic and strategic stakes in Africa’s “new scramble” and the evolving nature of EU-Africa partnerships. Its ongoing development also allows to capture contemporary perceptions, expectations and criticisms surrounding the project.

The empirical analysis draws on a combination of document analysis and primary sources. The former consists of policy papers, official communications, EU strategic documents and cooperation agreements from both Italian and Portuguese sources, as well as relevant EU frameworks such as the Global Gateway strategy and official statements from African governments. The latter includes speeches, press releases, and public interventions by political leaders and senior officials, which are examined for their discursive patterns, their strategic framing and references to Africa in the context of bilateral and EU-level diplomacy.

In addition to documentary and discourse analysis, the research involves semi-structured interviews with a wide range of stakeholders. Over twenty interviews were conducted with participants selected to maximise geographical diversity and variety of expertise. Interviewees included: i) diplomatic officials from Italy and Portugal both at the national level and within EU institutions; ii) policy analysts and EU policy officers specialising in Africa-Europe relations and development cooperation; iii) journalists covering African economic and political affairs; iv) regional experts from countries such as Angola, South Africa, Nigeria, and Côte d’Ivoire, providing external perspectives on the Lobito Corridor and its geopolitical implications. The aim was to gather insights not only on the Italian and Portuguese approaches to the Lobito project, but also on its broader strategic and development implications, in terms of potential risks and opportunities. This approach provided a more complete and fair understanding of the case, placing it in a broader African and international context.

While this methodology provides a solid foundation for analysis, it is important to acknowledge certain inherent limitations. As some information was confidential, the study draws primarily on publicly accessible materials and expert perspectives, especially considering that the Lobito Corridor is an ongoing project. Moreover, the interview sample reflects the availability and willingness of participants, which may introduce a degree of selection bias. These factors have been addressed by thorough triangulation of sources, ensuring that findings are supported by converging lines of evidence.

Structure of the Work

The thesis is organised into three main chapters, each building on the previous one to develop a comprehensive analysis of Italy's and Portugal's strategies towards PALOP and their positioning within EU-led negotiations, particularly in the Lobito Corridor initiative.

Chapter 1 examines Italy's strategy in Africa, from the domestic drivers of foreign policy (political cycles, migration and security concerns, and economic and energy interests) to how these pressures were translated into concrete policies, highlighting how Italy gradually shifted from marginal engagement to more strategic involvement culminating in initiatives such as the Mattei Plan and its participation in EU-led frameworks.

Chapter 2 focuses on Portugal's African diplomacy, which is influenced by the legacy of decolonisation, the effects of Europeanisation, and Lisbon's economic and strategic priorities in Lusophone Africa. It then analyses Portugal's involvement tools, such as development cooperation and cultural diplomacy through the CPLP, its bilateral economic relations with PALOP and its role in shaping EU-Africa relations.

The first two chapters combine historical narrative and discourse analysis to contextualise Italy's and Portugal's Africa strategies and their evolution in order to establish a baseline against which the following negotiation-specific analysis can be assessed.

Chapter 3 then applies the theoretical framework to the case study of the Lobito Corridor MoU, a major infrastructure and connectivity initiative linking central Africa to the Atlantic-facing ports. The project serves as a relevant testing ground for the two-level game analysis, as it combines strategic trade and resource access with geopolitical competition from other external actors. For Italy and Portugal, involvement offers opportunities to advance national economic and political interests, strengthen ties with Angola, and position themselves as active contributors to EU-Africa cooperation.

Conclusions summarise the findings, address the research question, and reflect on the broader implications for understanding the evolution of EU-Africa cooperation in a increasingly competitive international environment.

Chapter 1: Italy's Strategy in Africa between National Interests and Multilateral Engagement

Italy's engagement with Africa has historically been influenced by domestic political imperatives, economic interests, and broader European multilateral objectives. As a medium-sized country, Italy acts within domestic constraints while attempting to establish a strategic role in EU-African relations. This chapter investigates the domestic factors that influence Italy's negotiating posture on the international stage, particularly inside the EU. The first section examines Italy's internal constraints, such as political cycles, migratory concerns, and economic and energy interests, which influence its foreign policy agenda in Africa. The second section explores how these domestic pressures are translated into tangible policy actions, evaluating important efforts such as Italy's involvement in EU-Africa frameworks, the 2013 Italy-Africa Initiative, and the Mattei Plan. Finally, the chapter looks into the entanglement between domestic and foreign policymaking, illustrating how Italy balances national goals with EU responsibilities in Africa. Using Putnam's Two-Level Game framework (1988), this analysis identifies the fundamental reasons and limits influencing Italy's African engagement, shedding light on its negotiating power and strategic stance in the EU.

1.1. Domestic Determinants and Their Impact on Italy's Foreign Policy

1.1.1. Political Cycles and Competing Foreign Policy Narratives

Italy's Africa policy has traditionally been determined by its status as a middle-ranking power, balancing national objectives with international commitments (Gabusi & Caffarena, 2024). Italy, located at the crossroads of Europe, the Mediterranean, and Africa, has sought to establish itself as a bridge-builder between continents. As a country with limited military and economic capabilities, Italy has long sought to spread its influence through diplomatic initiatives, active involvement in multilateral institutions, and economic engagement in developing countries (Dentice & Donelli, 2021). This status has strengthened Italy's Mediterranean-centric foreign policy, establishing Africa as an important strategic partner in both economic and safety matters (Coralluzzo, 2008). However, the absence of a cohesive and stable foreign policy towards Africa has been a distinguishing aspect of Italy's international activity. This inconsistency is largely caused by domestic political instability and the contrasting foreign policy ideas of the centre-right and centre-left coalitions, which have dominated the Italian political landscape since the early 1990s (Ceccarini et al., 2013).

The oscillation between multilateral European participation and pragmatic bilateralism reflects deeper conflicts within Italy's foreign policy orientation, which have manifested in stark contrast between centre-left and centre-right governments (Brighi, 2013). The centre-left has emphasised multilateralism, European integration, and development cooperation. By contrast, the centre-right has prioritised bilateralism, economic pragmatism, migration control, and security (Andreatta, 2008). This continual shift in political coalitions has resulted in an inconsistent and reactive approach to Africa, dictated more by short-term domestic objectives than a coherent strategic vision. As each government imposed its ideological framework, Italy's relationship with the continent remained fragmented and prone to changes in political leadership, hindering the establishment of a sustainable and long-term policy orientation.

Under Silvio Berlusconi's leadership, Italy's centre-right pursued a nationalist and pragmatic foreign policy strategy, emphasising greater autonomy in achieving national interests in the post-Cold War era (Camera dei Deputati, 2002; Frattini & Panella, 2004). Berlusconi himself stated that the breakdown of bipolarism had released Italy from Cold War restraints, allowing the country to expand its area of influence and pursue a more independent foreign policy:

The fall of the bipolar system makes the international situation bear much less on our foreign policy. Our potential sphere of action is now enlarged. [...] We are no longer simply a subject belonging to one of the two poles; once again, we are now capable of an autonomous foreign policy. [...] A coherent foreign policy, one which is not tempted by any kind of utopian universalism, is the most modern and productive investment that a State can make in the world to defend national interests, increase its own welfare, and at the same time foster the world's development and international cooperation under the rule of law (Istituto Affari Internazionali, 1994a).

This perspective influenced a broader strategic orientation that favoured a nationalist view of foreign policy, particularly in terms of cultivating pragmatic bilateral partnerships with major global powers, most notably the United States (Brighi, 2013). As a result, this position sometimes required reevaluating traditional alliances and established diplomatic positions in order to embrace the principle of "effective multilateralism", which prioritised multilateral contexts only insofar as they met interests and delivered results, rather than correspond to values or ideals (Frattini, 2004). To this regard, within Forza Italia, opinions towards the European Union remained tepid, while the Lega Nord frequently displayed open cynicism towards broader European integration (M. Carbone, 2007).

This goal was realised through several crucial foreign policy ideas (Aliboni & Greco, 1996). First, the centre-right adhered to a neo-Atlantic and pragmatic bilateralism ideology, emphasising direct diplomatic engagement above reliance on EU-led initiatives. This was

especially clear in Berlusconi's 2008 Treaty of Friendship with Libya, a highly personalised arrangement with Muammar Gaddafi that eased oil transactions and migratory control measures while largely ignoring European frameworks (Coralluzzo, 2008). Yet, the concept of Italy's Mediterranean vocation was never opposed to Atlanticism or Europeanism. Rather, it was frequently used to bolster Italy's strategic role within the transatlantic alliance. Another key component of this foreign policy strategy was economic diplomacy, which attempted to enhance Italy's presence in Africa, particularly in the energy and infrastructure sectors. Italian multinational corporations, such as Eni, played an important role in shaping bilateral agreements with key African partners, thereby strengthening Italy's economic presence on the continent (Brighi, 2013). Finally, a nationalist approach to foreign policy moulded Italy's involvement with Africa, emphasising national culture, economic expansion, and migratory management. Such concept positioned Italy's African strategy as an extension of domestic political imperatives, linking foreign participation to greater nationalist and economic priorities (Fisichella, 1997).

However, despite his rhetoric about national autonomy, Berlusconi's foreign policy was frequently reactive rather than proactive. Following 9/11 and the US-led global war on terror, Italy's centre-right governments adopted a strongly Atlanticist stance, partnering with Washington on security issues rather than developing an independent African strategy (Andreatta, 2008). This dichotomy – between establishing national sovereignty and collaborating with external powers – emphasised the fundamental contradictions in the centre-right's foreign policy stance. The alleged "special relationship" with the United States was more than just a coincidence of personalities and political values, but it was part of a larger agenda. Within the centre-right coalition, there was a consensus that the advancement of national interests could only be achieved through a strengthened relationship with the United States (Ignazi, 2004). Furthermore, Berlusconi's personalisation of diplomacy frequently blurred the distinction between national objectives and private commercial endeavours, creating concerns about the true benefactors of Italy's bilateral contacts in Africa (Brighi, 2006).

In contrast, the centre-left advocated for norm-driven foreign policy, including multilateralism, European integration, and humanitarian intervention. The concept that Italy should behave within multilateral frameworks was considered the only realistic strategy in a post-bipolar world:

To Italy the end of the bipolar era offers the opportunity of pursuing a foreign policy less conditioned by the international constraints of the past. [...] [However] our country should not really conceive of unilateral foreign policies; on the contrary, it should operate more actively and consistently [...] in the main multilateral contexts. This is the only choice in line with the international interests of Italy (Istituto Affari Internazionali, 1994b).

This approach was founded on the concept that Italy should behave as a “good international citizen”, increasing its credibility within global governance structures. Prodi’s 2006 government, for instance, placed a strong focus on ethical foreign policy, aiming to restore Italy’s reputation as a responsible international actor following Berlusconi’s contentious military interventions (Walston, 2007). The centre-left alliance supported a multilateral approach, as evidenced by an idealist view of the United Nations’ primacy and a new kind of Europeanism that is far from a federalist commitment to a completely sovereign Europe, involving more pragmatic yet strong support (M. Carbone, 2007).

The foreign policy vision of the centre-left in Italy can be understood through three core elements that defined its strategic orientation. A central pillar of this approach was a strong commitment to European integration, positioning the European Union as the primary platform for Italy’s foreign policy (L’Ulivo, 2004). The overarching goal of “bringing Italy into Europe” demonstrated unwavering support for the European integration process (Missiroli, 2007, p. 92). This commitment was notably visible between 1996 and 1998, when Italy successfully qualified for Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and joined the Schengen Agreement (Sbragia, 2001). Furthermore, such an approach strengthened Italy’s role in EU-Africa cooperation programs: under the leadership of Romano Prodi, the government placed special emphasis on Italy’s active participation in the 2007 Joint Africa-EU Strategy, prioritising human rights, sustainable development, and regional stability (Italian Government, 2006).

In addition to its European orientation, the centre-left actively supported multilateralism, aiming to strengthen Italy’s position in international organisations. This international attitude was especially obvious in Italy’s disengagement from Iraq in 2005, which marked a clear turn away from unilateral military interventions and towards collective diplomatic solutions (Andreatta, 2008). Furthermore, the centre-left distanced themselves from the centre-right by emphasising humanitarian aid and development-related participation. Rather than prioritising economic and security concerns, its foreign policy towards Africa focused on developing development cooperation, improving institutional capacities, and supporting humanitarian efforts (M. Carbone, 2007). This approach reflected a broader commitment to international solidarity and the promotion of long-term stability through sustainable development initiatives.

However, despite its adherence to global frameworks, the centre-left was not immune to pragmatic, national-level policies (Brighi & Giugni, 2016). The Dini-led foreign ministry (1996-2001), for example, worked with Libya independently of European and UN consensus, demonstrating that global commitments did not prevent strategic national actions. In this regard, the centre-left's emphasis on multilateralism gave an international justification for pursuing uniquely national goals (Caffarena & Gabusi, 2017).

Walter Veltroni's 2008 election campaign exemplified these contrasts. While his platform pushed for a liberal internationalist stance, which saw globalisation as both a challenge and an opportunity, as well as European integration and the transatlantic alliance, foreign policy received little attention in public discourse. The electoral campaign was dominated by domestic issues and personal rivalries, echoing a larger pattern in which the Italian left deprioritised foreign policy, hampering the development of a coherent Africa policy (Brighi & Giugni, 2016).

Yet, despite the differences between centre-left and centre-right approaches, there has been a convergence of goals in recent years. While Berlusconi's government initially embraced nationalist language and Euroscepticism, successive centre-right administrations, like Giorgia Meloni's, have softened their stances, acknowledging the importance of European collaboration in important foreign policy sectors. Similarly, the centre-left's dedication to pacifism and multilateralism has been tempered by pragmatic security concerns, particularly in migration and counterterrorism (M. Carbone & Quaglia, 2011).

Ultimately, such ongoing policy recalibration reflects a larger pattern in Italy's foreign relations, in which domestic structures are inextricably linked to international influences. According to Panebianco (1977) and Pasquino (1974), Italy's fundamental foreign policy goal has historically been defensive, aimed to minimise external shocks that could destabilise its domestic political system. This has frequently resulted in an attitude of inactivity or "passivity" (Posner, 1978), in which Italy responds to international trends rather than shaping them proactively. As a result, its participation in Africa is reactive and inconsistent, driven by the need to protect internal stability from foreign upheavals rather than a long-term strategic goal (Isernia & Longo, 2017).

1.1.2. Migration and Security as Foreign Policy Drivers

Migration has long been a key issue in Italian foreign policy. As a middle-ranking state, Italy's structural constraints have forced it to rely extensively on foreign partnerships, multilateral collaboration, and issue-linkage methods to control migratory flows while maintaining internal

political stability. Over the years, migration has evolved from a peripheral issue to a core foreign policy concern, reflecting both domestic political pressures and international constraints (Griffini & Rosina, 2024). The centrality of the Mediterranean in Italian foreign policy, historically seen as one of the three *pillars* of Italy's external projection, has provided the geographic and political backdrop against which migration governance has developed (Rosina & Fontana, 2024).

Italy's posture to the Mediterranean has frequently changed, owing mostly to political swings (Colombo & Palm, 2019). Historically, the centre-left has emphasised a normative approach to migrant governance, placing Italy in the context of multilateral cooperation (Griffini & Rosina, 2024). This logic is consistent with the traditional humanitarian narrative, which emphasises human rights, refugee safeguards, and Italy's role as a responsible global actor. However, the realities of increased migration flows, notably following the Arab Springs, have compelled successive centre-left administrations to rethink their strategy. Conversely, the centre-right has consistently framed migration as a security threat, linking it to issues such as crime, terrorism, and economic instability. This securitisation of migration – the portrayal of migration as an existential threat necessitating an immediate security response – has fuelled policies that prioritise deterrence and border fortification. The Salvini-led interior ministry (2018–2019) represented the most extreme manifestation of this approach, enacting measures that criminalised humanitarian search-and-rescue operations and closed ports to migrant-rescuing NGOs (Abbondanza, 2024).

Yet, while these two logics of migration discourse – security-based and rights-oriented – continue to exist across party lines, there is an undeniable convergence in their ultimate policy direction. Even within centre-left alliances, support for restrictive externalisation policies has grown, reflecting a broader shift in the perception of migration as an exceptional challenge requiring extraordinary measures (Castelli Gattinara, 2017). This blurring of ideological boundaries suggests that migration governance in Italy is driven not only by party politics, but also by structural and geopolitical imperatives. Such persistence demonstrates that migration regulation in Italy has evolved into a valence issue, determined not only by electoral considerations but also by the political system itself. While contrasts in rhetoric and emphasis persist, the tangible policy outcomes have remained largely the same (Griffini & Rosina, 2024). As a result, despite ideological differences among governing coalitions, the exterior dimension of migration policy has remained remarkably consistent. To this regard, of the 12 governments in power since 2000, 10 have implemented restrictive foreign policies to handle irregular migration (Abbondanza, 2024).

Indeed, an important aspect of Italy's migration policy has been its externalisation strategy, which delegated migrant control tasks to North African and Sahelian countries (Rosina & Fontana, 2024). This approach derived from Italy's limited domestic capacity to absorb large numbers of asylum seekers, as well as its inability to secure a sustainable EU-wide burden-sharing mechanism. As a result, Italy has become more reliant on bilateral migration agreements to stem irregular flows before they reach Italian shores, signalling a partial re-orientation of Italy's Mediterranean policies toward North Africa and the Sahel (Colombo & Palm, 2019). This transition is best illustrated by the 2017 Italy-Libya Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which was signed by a centre-left government and delegated migration control responsibilities to the Libyan coast guard, despite widespread concerns about human rights violations in Libyan detention facilities (Camera dei Deputati, 2021, p. 46). Similarly, the 2023 Tunisia-Italy-EU migration agreement aimed to reduce departures from Tunisian coastlines by providing financial incentives and border enforcement support. This deal was strongly supported by the Meloni government, echoing prior efforts to externalise migration governance (Rosina & Fontana, 2024).

Furthermore, Italy's migration policy has also been impacted by its discussions within the EU, where it has repeatedly pushed for larger burden-sharing arrangements, believing that anchoring its policies to the European dimension would provide a better chance of the long-term efficacy of its efforts (Colombo & Palm, 2019). Successive Italian administrations have criticised the Dublin Regulation's shortcomings, which lay excessive responsibility on the countries of first entry and have attempted to push the EU to adopt a more equal migration governance structure system (Abbondanza, 2024). At times, Italy has played a proactive role in EU migration governance, as evidenced by Renzi's Migration Compact in 2016, demonstrating the attempt to persuade the EU to commit significant and targeted political and economic capital to engage in dialogue with Africa (Italian Government, 2016). However, when these efforts failed to yield concrete results, Italy resorted to unilateral action, negotiating bilateral migration deals outside the EU framework.

Overall, Italy's shifting posture within the EU, alternating between advocating for European solidarity and pursuing autonomous migrant deals, exemplifies the strategic use of domestic constraints in international negotiations. Italian leaders frequently exploit internal political tensions as leverage in EU forums, claiming that until migrant governance reforms are implemented, Italy will be compelled to take unilateral action (Griffini & Rosina, 2024).

1.1.3. Economic and Energy Interests: Private Sector Influence and Strategic Partnerships

Italy's economic and energy priorities have traditionally guided its engagement with Africa, reflecting the country's geopolitical reality as a Mediterranean middle power with structural dependencies on external energy sources. Among the key actors in shaping Italy's approach to Africa, Eni has been a crucial player, serving not just as an oil and gas business but also as an instrument of Italian foreign policy, frequently filling gaps left by the state's diplomatic apparatus (Bini, 2014, p. 148). Since its establishment in the 1950s, Eni has pursued an independent strategy in Africa, distinguishing itself from traditional Western oil giants by interacting with postcolonial governments on more favourable terms and presenting itself as a partner rather than an extractive force (Dechert, 1962, p. 15).

Enrico Mattei's anti-colonial ideology shaped Eni's historical relationship with African states, attempting to distance Italy from the neo-imperialist practices of the "Seven Sisters" oil cartel. This approach prompted Eni to propose more liberal revenue-sharing agreements and technological cooperation programs, giving Italy a unique foothold in North Africa, particularly Algeria and Libya (Di Gregorio, 2015). Despite geopolitical upheavals, Eni's position in Africa has remained relatively steady, ensuring Italy's continued access to critical energy resources while also adjusting to evolving political settings (Brighi & Musso, 2017). Eni's geopolitical adaptability has been particularly evident in Libya, where it continued to operate despite the fall of the Gaddafi regime and subsequent factional conflicts. Italy's ongoing involvement in the Libyan energy sector demonstrates a pragmatic approach that prioritises economic and strategic interests over political instability (Balfour & Cugusi, 2007). Beyond North Africa, Italy has also expanded its energy footprint in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Mozambique and Angola. Such projects not only strengthen Italy's energy security but also reinforce its role as a key facilitator of Europe's energy diversification efforts (Eni, 2024).

Italy's approach to economic engagement in the Mediterranean has traditionally been marked by a careful mix of ambition and caution, reflecting the complexities of its foreign policy. On the one hand, Italy has consistently advocated for strengthening the EU's southern external policy, emphasising the Mediterranean as a strategic zone for European security and economic development. On the other hand, Italy has been cautious in implementing policies that could jeopardise its immediate economic interests, particularly when these involve concessions that might disadvantage domestic industries. Such ambivalence has been particularly evident in trade relations with Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries,

where Italy has sought economic cooperation without granting large trade concessions that could damage its competitive advantages. While other European powers, particularly France, have adopted a more interventionist stance in their economic policies with African countries, Italy has focused on deepening existing commercial ties to ensure its relevance in an increasingly competitive landscape (Colombo & Palm, 2019).

Moreover, Italian strategy in Africa has undergone a substantial shift from a development aid-centric model to an investment-driven paradigm. Several political leaders have strongly advocated for private sector-led initiatives as a more effective instrument for promoting security and preventing instability (Gabusi & Caffarena, 2024).

The then-Foreign Minister Di Maio has emphasised the need of investment above traditional development aid, claiming that “the more we promote stability in regions marred by instability, the more we contribute to peace. To achieve this, we must prioritise investments, not solely development cooperation – investments that facilitate the establishment of new enterprises” (Senato della Repubblica, 2019, p. 20). This represents a significant departure from the traditional development model, shifting the focus towards long-term economic engagement as a conduit for enhancing security. Similarly, creating economic opportunities is critical to tackle the issue of migration: “Perhaps the United States and Europe, alongside other significant economic and developmental contributors (with China at the forefront), could propose a comprehensive Marshall Plan for regions in need of growth (...) and implement it locally, thereby preventing local populations from migrating to distant lands” (Senato della Repubblica, 2018, p. 26). Minister Tajani further reinforced this investment-oriented vision, highlighting that development cooperation is no longer considered as a humanitarian obligation, rather as a strategic foreign policy tool to foster economic growth. He affirmed that “halting migration flows will prove impossible unless there is resolute and robust intervention in the coming years to stimulate growth. Development cooperation serves as a pivotal foreign policy tool to bolster growth in these countries, particularly in Africa” (Camera dei Deputati, 2022, p. 6). This reflected a shift in Italy’s economic rhetoric, wherein the traditional focus on promoting democracy and social development has been replaced by a growth-driven paradigm aimed at securing economic stability as the foundation for regional security.

This shift is especially significant considering Italy’s recent efforts to establish itself as Europe’s primary energy hub, linking African energy resources to European markets. However, despite the political momentum behind this strategy, substantial challenges remain, particularly in terms of investment mobilisation, infrastructure development and competition from other European and global actors (Dupuy, 2025). Italy’s ability to successfully transition towards an

investment-driven approach will therefore depend on its capacity to translate political rhetoric into tangible economic initiatives, ensuring that its partnerships with African countries provide mutual and sustainable benefits.

1.2 From Domestic Pressures to Policy: Italy's Strategy in Africa

1.2.1 The Evolution of Italy's Africa Policy: From Marginal Engagement to Strategic Involvement

As a result of the previously discussed domestic constraints, Italy's involvement with Africa has been marked by a pattern of detachment and cautious reengagement. Such political, economic and institutional challenges have traditionally made it difficult for Italy to sustain a persistent and strategic presence on the continent. This backdrop provides an important perspective through which to evaluate Italy's developing policies in Africa, from its traditionally fragmented approach to its current attempts at more structured and deliberate engagement.

Following World War II and the breakdown of its colonial empires in Libya and the Horn of Africa, Italy essentially abandoned direct political participation in Sub-Saharan Africa. During the post-colonial period, Italy positioned itself as a donor nation rather than a political actor, prioritising humanitarian aid over organised diplomatic or economic connections. The avoidance of meaningful engagement was due to a fear of confronting its colonial past, as well as a lack of political and material means to sustain long-term commitments (Abrami & Gasco, 2024). Italy's tendency to conceal or ignore its colonial history meant that it did not build the post-colonial networks that France and the United Kingdom maintained. The only notable exception was the ten-year Trusteeship of Somalia (1950-1960), during which Italy sought to position itself as a benevolent administrator rather than a former colonial power (Dentice & Donelli, 2021). The lack in post-colonial engagement resulted in a foreign policy that remained largely Eurocentric, focussing on the Mediterranean and the Arab world rather than Sub-Saharan Africa, with efforts frequently limited to securing energy resources and ensuring stability (Mantica, 2017; Marchal, 2023).

Nevertheless, throughout the Cold War, Italian governments strove to pursue a more independent foreign policy by striking a balance between adherence to Western allies and preserving ties with newly independent African states (G. Carbone et al., 2013). Italy projected itself as a non-imperialistic European force, promoting an image of "clean hands" diplomacy compared to the post-colonial interventions of France and the United Kingdom: "Italy's post-war approach to Africa is that of an idealist European, non-colonial, non-imperialist power with

“clean hands” in contrast (by implications) with United Kingdom and France” (UKNA, 1953). This perception enabled Italy to have a distinct yet limited role in Africa, as seen by its peacekeeping missions and humanitarian efforts. Since the 1960s, Italy has participated in over 40 peace support operations (PSOs), mostly under international sponsorship, but its involvement has often been reactive rather than strategic (Camera dei Deputati, 2010). While balancing humanitarian commitments and national interests, Italy’s peacekeeping efforts have lacked consistency, aligning with multilateral frameworks to strengthen its diplomatic stature rather than asserting a clear African policy (Abbondanza, 2020).

Indeed, Italy justified its presence in Africa by claiming a civilisational mission and portraying itself as a supporter of development and modernisation, often invoking religious and humanitarian rhetoric. The Vatican’s influence helped shape Italy’s Africa policy, with Catholic missions playing an important part in Italy’s outreach to African communities (Borruso, 2014). This “people-to-people” diplomacy (Mistretta, 2021) established strong cultural and religious ties, especially through Jesuit, Salesian, and Combonian missions in Chad, Angola, Uganda, and Kenya (Abrami & Gasco, 2024). A primary example of active involvement was Italy’s role in Mozambique’s political crisis, where the *Comunità di Sant’Egidio*, with support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, mediated the 1992 Rome General Peace Accords between FRELIMO and RENAMO (Comunità di Sant’Egidio, 2017). This case highlighted Italy’s multi-centric approach, with civil society’s active role alongside state diplomacy (Caracciolo et al., 2017). Despite its involvement in Mozambique’s democratisation, including support for the 1994 municipal elections, Italy was unable to transform this success into a long-term strategic presence in the region, emphasising the country’s recurring difficulty in converting diplomatic initiatives into lasting political influence (Raffaelli, 2017). This example, although reflecting Italy’s diplomatic potential, also emphasises the exceptional nature of such involvement rather than the existence of a systemic peacebuilding strategy. Indeed, Italy’s institutional architecture lacks a consistent and well-funded framework for sustained conflict mediation, with no dedicated peacebuilding policy or budget line within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Venturi & Marinelli, 2022). As a result, Italian engagement in peace processes has frequently been based on ad hoc initiatives from qualified civil society actors rather than state-led strategic planning. While the *Comunità di Sant’Egidio* has also worked on other peace processes in Algeria, Uganda and more recently in South Sudan and Chad, these interventions have involved Italian actors, but have lacked continuity and institutional follow-up, reinforcing the perception that Italy’s role in peacebuilding remains episodic, driven more by opportunity than by strategic intent (Venturi & Giacciai, 2024).

A turning point in Italy's Africa policy came in the 2010s, when geopolitical and economic factors spurred a strategic reassessment. The aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, along with the Arab Spring of 2011 and increased migration flows from Africa to Europe, forced Italy to reconsider its engagement with the continent. The instability in Libya further exacerbated the issues, making migration control and energy security top priorities (Dentice & Donelli, 2021). Indeed, between 1985 and 2014, there had been no prime ministerial visits south of the Sahara, reflecting Italy's limited diplomatic engagement. Furthermore, its embassy presence in sub-Saharan Africa was minimal compared to that of Germany, the United Kingdom, and France, with only 19 embassies across 49 states (G. Carbone, 2023, p. 299).

Against this backdrop, the 2013 *Italy-Africa Initiative* represented a significant reorientation of Italy's foreign policy towards Africa. Launched by then-Foreign Minister Emma Bonino, the initiative aimed to move beyond episodic engagement towards a structured and systematic approach:

...An invitation to look at Africa beyond stereotypes, beyond outdated perspectives, and above all, to see it as a continent with both shadows and light – just like any other – rather than reducing it to a single, overly simplistic negative image. A whole-of-country initiative (involving both government and civil society) should be directed toward the continent, with a focus on key areas such as governance, human and civil rights, conflict prevention, and, undoubtedly, the diplomacy of growth (energy and environment), agriculture, and culture (Bonino, 2013).

The goal was to change Italy's perception of Africa from a crisis-ridden continent to one of economic dynamism, presenting Africa as a place for investment and collaboration rather than just a recipient of aid (Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013).

Prime Minister Matteo Renzi built upon this framework, becoming the first Italian leader in nearly a decade to visit sub-Saharan Africa. His visits to Mozambique, South Africa, and the Democratic Republic of Congo demonstrated Italy's renewed interest in positioning itself as a key European partner for African development (Dentice & Donelli, 2021). Renzi presented a vision of Italy as a bridge between Europe and Africa, emphasising the continent's strategic relevance in tackling global issues such as terrorism, economic development, and migration: "Italy can play a role if it has the courage to have a far-reaching political strategy. ...We invest in Africa because we think it is right for our geographical and geopolitical positioning. If we want to fight poverty, eradicate terrorism, affirm shared values Africa today is the priority. And after years of absence, Italy must be there" (Pierri, 2016).

Following such premises, Italy's African strategy peaked in the 2020 *Partnership with Africa*, the first official strategic document outlining a structured engagement with the continent (G. Carbone, 2021). The document emphasised a commitment to a "continuous, not

sporadic” relationship with Africa, framing it as a fundamental component of Italy’s geopolitical and economic outlook (Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020, p. 54). Italy aimed to distinguish its approach from that of other European countries by emphasising a “disinterested” and “value-oriented” diplomacy, reinforcing a narrative of ethical and development-driven engagement rather than neocolonial or purely strategic interests (Lobasso, 2021; Mattarella, 2016; Mistretta, 2021). The Partnership identified four key intervention zones – the Mediterranean, the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, and Southern Africa – acknowledging that Africa’s diversity requires a regionally differentiated strategy (Lobasso, 2021). Alignment with broader European initiatives was an important aspect of the Partnership with Africa. By doing so, Italy hoped to integrate its African engagement within the EU’s political and economic frameworks, while also leveraging multilateral cooperation. Indeed, the Partnership recognised external influences and emphasises the need for a comprehensive action, as done by other EU partners such as France, UK, and Germany (Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020, p. 54).

Despite its ambitious rhetoric, the Partnership primarily built on pre-existing initiatives rather than introducing radically new policy measures. This continuity suggests that Italy’s Africa strategy is still bound by both EU priorities and domestic political factors, particularly migration control (G. Carbone, 2021). Ultimately, the Partnership with Africa reinforced Italy’s strategic pivot towards a structured and sustained engagement with Africa, laying the groundwork for later initiatives. However, the effectiveness of this approach will be determined by Italy’s ability to balance the contrasting strains of domestic political restrictions and multilateral diplomatic responsibilities.

1.2.2. Italy’s Engagement in EU-led Frameworks

Italy has historically emphasised its multilateral engagement with Africa, especially through the European Union, as a means of advancing its diplomatic, economic and security objectives on the continent. Italy’s African strategy has evolved within EU frameworks as a result of consecutive initiatives that reflected both national interests and attempts to align with broader European policies. Over the years, the EU has gradually expanded its Africa policies, aiming to create more structured and comprehensive frameworks for cooperation, while Italy has sought to leverage these initiatives to strengthen its own standing in Africa.

The *Joint Africa-EU Strategy* (JAES), adopted at the 2007 Lisbon Summit, was one of the most significant steps in redefining Europe’s engagement with Africa. Italy had an active role in shaping the strategy, particularly in its emphasis on migration and security cooperation.

The JAES sought to move beyond a donor-recipient model by building an equal partnership based on mutual interests and shared governance (Council of the European Union, 2007).

The growing migration crisis in the mid-2010s forced Italy to take an even stronger role, as shown by the establishment of EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) at the 2015 Valletta Summit, as it became a key tool for addressing migration-related challenges. Italy was a significant proponent of the Trust Fund and emerged as its second-largest contributor, advocating for a greater emphasis on border control and containing migration at its source (Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015). The EUTF was organised around three main geographic regions – the Sahel/Lake Chad, the Horn of Africa, and North Africa – that Italy had identified as priorities due to their direct impact on Mediterranean migration routes.

Italy used its power inside the Fund to advocate for increased collaboration with transit and origin nations, facilitating agreements on return policies and tougher border surveillance. The EUTF also reinforced Italy's engagement with the Rabat and Khartoum Processes, two key Euro-African dialogue platforms focused on migration governance. Italy had an important role in shaping debates in these forums, particularly during its rotating leadership of the Rabat Process in 2018 (Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). Consequently, Italy's approach was largely reinforced by the broader European shift towards the externalisation of migration management, as evidenced by subsequent EU policies aimed at strengthening border controls in cooperation with African governments (COPASIR, 2025).

Besides migration, Italy has attempted to leverage EU-African economic partnerships, particularly through infrastructure and investment projects. The *Global Gateway* initiative, launched in 2021, marked a significant turn in the EU's engagement with Africa by focussing on large-scale infrastructure projects as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (European Commission, 2021). Italy established itself as a prominent actor within this framework, particularly through its participation in the Lobito Corridor, a strategic transportation project connecting Angola, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The initiative intends to enhance regional connectivity and improve access to global markets for African producers, aligning with Italy's broader economic interests in Africa (COPASIR, 2025). Italy's support for the Lobito Corridor reflects its ambition to strengthen its economic ties with Africa while also reinforcing its role within EU-African infrastructure initiatives.

Despite its active engagement in these multilateral frameworks, Italy's alignment with EU policies has not been without tensions. While Italy has largely supported European initiatives in Africa, it also attempted to maintain a degree of strategic autonomy. The balance between aligning with EU strategies and pursuing independent policies has been particularly

evident in Italy's management of migration issues, where its emphasis on immediate security concerns has occasionally clashed with broader EU objectives of long-term development cooperation (Medinilla & Teevan, 2020). Similarly, while Italy has welcomed the economic potential of programs like the Global Gateway, it has also promoted its own investment schemes, such as the Mattei Plan, in order to distinguish its involvement with Africa from that of its European partners (Darnis, 2024).

Italy's evolving role in EU-African relations highlights the complicated interaction between national interests and multilateral commitments. While Italy remains a strong advocate for a collective European approach to Africa, it faces the issue of establishing its own strategic priority inside EU institutions. The country's growing involvement in multilateral platforms has clearly increased its influence in Africa, but achieving a balance between European integration and national autonomy remains an ongoing challenge. The future of Italy's Africa strategy will most likely depend on its ability to reconcile these competing dynamics while ensuring that its engagement is both successful and durable.

1.2.3. The Mattei Plan as Italy's Attempt at Strategic Autonomy

In 2022, then-Prime Minister Mario Draghi emphasised Italy's geographical significance as a bridge between Europe and the Mediterranean, reinforcing the need for the country to reconsider its connection with Africa (Draghi, 2022). This vision was later supported by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who framed Italy's diplomatic and economic strategy within a broader narrative of interconnectedness, as evidenced by the 2024 Italy-Africa Summit, titled "A Bridge for Common Growth" (Italian Government, 2024). Meloni's government has consistently emphasised that the Mattei Plan will allow Italy to build "a relationship with Africa like no other EU country", signalling a potential shift towards strategic autonomy (Agenzia Nova, 2024). A peculiar aspect of the Plan lies in its unconventional approach to strategic planning, which prioritises immediate action over a comprehensive assessment of Africa's structural challenges. Rather than developing a long-term framework based on a thorough assessment of regional needs, the plan employs a pragmatic, project-driven approach that expands existing initiatives or starts new ones without a predetermined overarching strategy. This methodology represents a shift away from traditional development planning and towards more flexible and responsive engagement, but it raises concerns about coherence, long-term impact, and Italy's capacity to maintain a persistent strategic presence in Africa (Camera dei Deputati, 2024a).

The Mattei Plan is driven by the three core priorities shaping Italian foreign policy: energy security, migration control, and economic interests. The Plan prioritises Italy's energy interests, particularly through the role of Eni, the national energy corporation. Africa has long been an important partner in meeting Italy's energy needs, particularly in light of the European energy crisis that followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Diversification of energy providers has become a strategic need, with Italy strengthening ties with significant African producers such as Algeria, Egypt, and Mozambique. The Mattei Plan specifically includes energy infrastructure projects as a major pillar, with the goal of positioning Italy as an energy hub connecting Africa and Europe (Procopio, 2024). Eni's long-standing presence in Africa provides Italy with a solid platform for achieving these goals, and its involvement in natural gas and renewable energy projects is consistent with the larger European energy transition agenda (Stocchiero, 2024).

Migration management remains another defining aspect of the Mattei Plan. Given Italy's geographical location at the heart of Mediterranean migratory routes, Rome has continuously prioritised efforts to reduce irregular migration flows. The Plan builds on earlier Italian initiatives, such as bilateral agreements with Libya and Tunisia, while presenting itself as a more structured and long-term approach. The emphasis is not only on security and border control, but also on resolving fundamental problems through economic investment and job development in African countries (G. Carbone, Ragazzi, Antil, et al., 2024).

Economic interests are the third key component of the Mattei Plan, showing Italy's desire to broaden its influence in Africa beyond traditional development aid. The Italian government has presented the Plan as a break from previous methods of involvement, emphasising a "non-charitable" approach based on mutual gain and partnership (Meloni, 2024). The Plan promotes Italian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in African markets, an area where Italy has traditionally lagged behind other European powers such as France and Germany. By focussing on sectors such as agribusiness, infrastructure, and digital innovation, Italy seeks to establish a competitive role in Africa's economic landscape (Dupuy, 2025).

The official unveiling of the Mattei Plan at the 2024 Italy-Africa Summit marked a shift in Italy's approach to Africa, as it elevated the dialogue from ministerial-level engagements to a direct interaction between heads of state and government (Italian Government, 2024). Delegates from 46 African countries and 25 international institutions attended the conference, boosting Italy's efforts to establish itself as a prominent European mediator in Africa. However, the lack of prior consultation with African partners, as noted by African Union Chairperson Moussa Faki, raised concerns about the inclusivity of the process, emphasising that, when

addressing African peers, the Italian narrative of a non-patronising relationship between equals must be articulated thoroughly and consistently (African Union, 2024). This includes acknowledging that African states seek to maintain a multipolar orientation, keeping the autonomy to engage with a variety of partners rather than aligning with a single geopolitical bloc, that is, a concept clear to African viewers but less readily internalised by European ones. Scholars have argued that, while the Plan's rhetoric emphasises "non-predatory engagement", the actual mechanisms of engagement risk reproducing top-down structures that have characterised previous European initiatives in Africa (Simonelli et al., 2024). African counterparts, on the other hand, may see the Plan's relative vagueness as an asset, as it avoids prescribing strict, pre-formulated solutions. Although some European partners may have been critical of the Italian approach for missing formal strategic documentation, this more informal modality may allow for a slower, more adaptive form of cooperation that gives African actors greater agency in shaping outcomes (Darnis, 2024).

Furthermore, one of the key issues surrounding the Mattei Plan is whether it represents Italy's strategic departure from EU policies or whether it stays firmly rooted in the European framework. The Italian government has pointed out that the Plan is intended to complement, not compete with, EU programs such as the Global Gateway and the Team Europe architecture (Fattibene & Manservisi, 2024). Italy's participation in EU-led infrastructure initiatives like the Lobito Corridor shows a willingness to align with broader European policies while still pursuing distinct bilateral relations (COPASIR, 2025).

Nonetheless, certain aspects of the Mattei Plan point to a more autonomous trajectory. The Plan's emphasis on distinct Italian economic interests, as well as its stance as a unique African partner different from other European actors, indicate a potential rebalancing of Italy's role in EU-African relations. While Rome continues to work within the EU's policy frameworks, the Plan's clear branding as a uniquely Italian initiative reflects an aspiration to enhance Italy's strategic influence independently (Darnis, 2024). Furthermore, the Plan's flexible and incremental implementation approach allows Italy to tailor its engagement to national priorities, rather than strictly following EU policy guidelines (Stocchiero, 2024).

Still, despite its strategic ambitions, the Mattei Plan faces several challenges. The absence of Sahelian countries from the initial pilot phase has raised questions about its geographical scope, given the region's significance in migration dynamics and security challenges (Zupi, 2024). Additionally, the Plan's financial viability remains uncertain. While the Italian government has committed an initial €5.5 billion in funding, analysts have questioned whether this amount is sufficient to support long-term development partnerships,

especially considering competition from other global actors such as China and the United Arab Emirates (Simonelli et al., 2024).

Ultimately, the Mattei Plan represents a significant evolution in Italy's Africa policy, aiming to position the country as a key player in shaping European-African relations. While it does not entirely break from EU strategies, it reflects an attempt to assert greater Italian agency in Africa, balancing national priorities with multilateral commitments. Whether the Plan succeeds in establishing Italy as a truly independent strategic partner for Africa will depend on its implementation, the responsiveness of African counterparts, and its ability to navigate the complexities of European and global competition in the region (G. Carbone, Ragazzi, Menotti, et al., 2024).

1.3. Entanglement Between Italy's Domestic Constraints and International Commitments

Italy's negotiation strategies within the European Union concerning its engagements in Africa reflect a foreign policy approach deeply shaped by the interplay between domestic constraints and international commitments. Understanding this dynamic through Robert Putnam's two-level game theory (1988) provides a more precise assessment of how Italian policymakers balance domestic political imperatives with the structural realities of European diplomacy. Italy's foreign policy, which has always been flexible and adaptable, is increasingly constrained by internal economic vulnerabilities, political instability and a migration pressures. The country's posture within the EU is defined by a pattern of pragmatic yet reactive engagement, with a limited capacity to shape broader European-African strategies due to its fragile domestic foundations and external dependencies (Isernia & Longo, 2017).

The internal political landscape has long been marked by instability, with frequent government changes and coalition fragility hampering long-term strategic planning. This volatility limits Italy's ability to pursue a coherent and ambitious role within the EU, often forcing successive administrations to focus on immediate domestic political survival rather than shaping European policymaking. Giorgia Meloni's government, despite its far-right ideological roots, has sought to balance nationalist rhetoric with pragmatic engagement at the European level. Her administration has attempted to position Italy as a reliable partner within the EU, particularly in securing greater European support for its migration policies and economic investments in the Mediterranean (Pirozzi, 2025). However, her vision of a "Europe of Nations," which prioritises national sovereignty over deeper integration, has led to tensions between Rome and other European capitals. This ideological stance, combined with the broader

lack of ambition in Italy's EU policy in recent years, has resulted in a mostly transactional approach to European negotiations rather than a proactive effort to shape EU policymaking (Goretti, 2025).

Meloni's foreign policy has been shaped by the concept of pragmatic Euro-nationalism, reflecting Italy's strategic balancing between nationalist priorities and pragmatic cooperation within the EU (Fasola & Lucarelli, 2024). While Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) initially embraced Euroscepticism, once in power, her administration moved towards a more functional cooperation with EU institutions, recognising the economic and geopolitical necessity of engagement with Brussels. However, Meloni has framed this cooperation in nationalistic terms, portraying Italy as a defender of national sovereignty while leveraging EU mechanisms for domestic political gain (M. Carbone, 2008). To this regard, a prime example of how domestic constraints shape broader economic engagement with the EU is Italy's rejection of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) reform in December 2023 (ESM, 2023). While the initiative aimed to enhance financial stability in the eurozone, Italy's refusal was driven primarily by domestic political considerations rather than economic feasibility. Meloni's government framed the ESM as a threat to national sovereignty, fearing it would impose fiscal constraints dictated by Brussels (Pirozzi, 2025). Given the growing strength of Eurosceptic narratives, the government calculated that opposing the ESM reform would consolidate domestic political support while avoiding accusations of ceding economic control to external forces. However, this stance further undermined Italy's credibility as a reliable partner in European financial governance and may weaken its negotiating position in future EU economic debates (Zaccaroni, 2023).

This balance between nationalism and pragmatic cooperation is especially evident in Italy's Africa policy. While actively engaging in EU-African initiatives like the Global Gateway strategy, Italy also pursues bilateral agreements with African states, seeking to establish itself as a geopolitical actor independent from Brussels. Indeed, the government's engagement in African policy is driven by three primary concerns: migration control, energy security, and strengthening Italy's geopolitical influence in the region. Migration remains the most politically sensitive issue driving Italy's negotiating stance within the EU (Ceccorulli, 2023). The perception of migration as a national security threat has influenced Rome's policy priorities, leading it to seek for tighter border controls and greater European involvement in managing Mediterranean migration flows (MAECI (DGIT), 2018). The 2017 Memorandum of Understanding with Libya, renewed in 2020 and 2023, is a prime example of Italy's strategy of externalising migration control through bilateral agreements rather than relying on EU-wide

solutions (Griffini & Rosina, 2024). While Meloni has attempted to frame Italy's migration policy as part of a broader European approach, disagreements persist within the EU over burden-sharing mechanisms and ethical concerns regarding border control outsourcing (Torelli, 2018).

Beyond migration, Italian engagement in Africa is largely defined by energy security, with Eni playing a central role in expanding Rome's influence. Following the Russia-Ukraine war, Italy has actively pursued new energy partnerships with Algeria, Libya, and Egypt, allowing Eni to become the largest foreign energy producer in Africa (Dupuy, 2025). These agreements are not only about energy security but also reflect Italy's broader ambition to position itself as a key player in EU-African economic relations. By securing exclusive energy contracts, Italy strengthens its geopolitical leverage within Europe, as it seeks to position itself as a vital intermediary between African energy markets and European demand (Pascale, 2023). However, its financial limitations restrict Italy's ability to project power and influence abroad. The reliance on EU funding mechanisms, such as the NextGenerationEU investment package, indicates Italy's dependence on external support to preserve its geopolitical ambitions. This reliance results into a negotiation strategy that prioritises getting EU financial support for key sectors, as illustrated by the Mattei Plan (Goretti & Simonelli, 2024).

Additionally, Italy's position in African affairs is shaped by complex dynamics with other key actors, mainly France and Germany, which have traditionally dominated EU-Africa relations. France, in particular, has maintained a strong influence in North and West Africa, often sidelining Italy's attempts to expand its engagement in the region. The 2021 Treaty of the Quirinal was intended to improve Franco-Italian cooperation, yet tensions persist, particularly in migration and energy policies (Castellani, 2023). However, France's weakened position in Africa following the withdrawal of its military forces from major regional strongholds, including Chad, Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire, has altered the geopolitical balance, paving the way for other relevant actors, including Italy. The progressive disengagement of France from its former spheres of influence, fuelled by rising anti-French sentiment across the Sahel and West Africa, signals a structural shift in EU-African relations (Agid & Dupuy, 2025). This provides a potential opportunity for Italy to expand its footprint, particularly through economic partnerships that could compensate for France's reduced strategic presence.

Ultimately, Italy's negotiation strategy within the EU under the Meloni's government shows a constrained win-set, where domestic political and economic pressures limit its foreign policy choices. This pragmatic yet ambivalent approach forces Italian leaders to perceive EU diplomacy through a lens of immediate domestic demands rather than long-term planning, yet

undermining Italy's negotiating position in broader EU governance (Goretti & Simonelli, 2024). While Rome continues to demand greater European financial support for migration, its resistance to deeper fiscal integration jeopardises its ability to secure long-term structural funding for these initiatives. At the same time, Meloni's administration has strategically used domestic constraints as a bargaining tool, effectively "tying its hands" in EU negotiations to extract concessions while minimising external pressures. By presenting internal economic fragility and migration challenges as limiting factors, Italy reduces external demands that could disrupt its internal political stability. This strategy enables Rome to justify selective participation in EU initiatives while maintaining flexibility in areas that are aligned with national priorities (Isernia & Longo, 2017). However, while this approach secures short-term benefits, it risks keeping Italy's diplomacy reactive and risk-averse hindering its ability to shape broader EU policy. Moving forward, the key question is whether Italy can transition from a defensive stance to a more assertive role in European affairs without destabilising its fragile internal equilibrium.

Chapter 2: National Interests and Multilateral Engagement in Portugal's African Diplomacy

This chapter analyses how Portugal gradually reoriented its foreign policy in the aftermath of decolonisation, shifting from a former colonial power to a broker of cultural and diplomatic ties with the PALOP countries. The first section examines the domestic political, historical, and economic drivers that have shaped Portugal's African policy, particularly the enduring influence of Lusophony and the constraints and opportunities of EU membership. The second section explores how these domestic priorities have been translated into concrete initiatives of engagement in the region, from development cooperation and educational diplomacy through the CPLP to strategic economic partnerships, mainly with Angola and Mozambique. The final section investigates the entanglement between national constraints and international commitments, highlighting how Portugal's position as a small state shapes its bargaining strategy within the EU and conditions its ability to act autonomously in its African policy.

2.1. Domestic Determinants and Their Impact on Portugal's Foreign Policy

2.1.1. The Colonial Legacy and Post-Independence Identity Shift

The Carnation Revolution of 1974 marked a significant shift in Portugal's foreign policy, as the country transitioned from an authoritarian colonial empire to a democratic European state. Under the *Estado Novo* regime (1933–1974), Portugal has long resisted decolonisation, clinging to a multi-secular and pluricontinental empire and waging costly colonial wars (Manuel Sobral, 2024). This isolationist approach, along with the regime's unwillingness to engage meaningfully with European integration, has further marginalised Portugal on the international stage. Indeed, while the *Estado Novo* opposed supranational European integration, fearing it would undermine Portuguese sovereignty and force decolonisation, member states of European Communities (EC) were unwilling to embrace an authoritarian, imperialist state (Ferreira-Pereira, 2022). Moreover, the Portuguese foreign policy strategy was grounded in an Atlanticist logic, prioritising bilateralism with maritime countries such as the UK and the United States while systematically avoiding deeper continental commitments (A. C. Pinto & Teixeira, 2004).

The 1974 revolution not only marked a turning point in Portugal's internal political transformation but also necessitated a fundamental redefinition of national interests, particularly in relation to its colonial legacy (Maxwel, 1997). Prior to 1974, Portuguese foreign policy was both conceptually and structurally anchored in the preservation of its colonial empire. This paradigm was decisively overturned with the rise of the Armed Forces Movement

(*Movimento das Forças Armadas*, MFA), whose political agenda was shaped by three guiding principles: democratisation, decolonisation, and development. Each of these had significant foreign policy implications, compelling a deep reconfiguration of Portugal's external orientation (Teixeira, 2004). Among these, decolonisation emerged as the most urgent.

Responding to both domestic political shifts and mounting international pressure, Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Mozambique, Cabo Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe gained independence between 1974 and 1975 (Teixeira, 2012). The period between 1974 and 1976 was marked by deep ideological conflict and a lack of foreign policy coherence. The interim governments, often dominated by military personalities, pursued divergent and parallel diplomatic agendas, indicating a fundamental uncertainty about Portugal's international role. A significant strand of early post-revolutionary diplomacy gravitated toward the Global South, seeking special relationships with newly independent African states and promoting a Third World orientation. This was, in many aspects, the last expression of Portugal's so-called "African vocation", here stated in a socialist and anti-imperialist language (MacQueen, 2003b).

The ideological ambiguity of the revolutionary period gave way to greater strategic clarity with the promulgation of the 1976 Constitution. As Portugal's democratic institutions strengthened, a Western-oriented consensus began to emerge. The Socialist Party (PS) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD) supported a liberal democratic framework similar to Western Europe, whereas the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) favoured closer ties to the Soviet Union and the Non-Aligned Movement (Jalali, 2007). Those advocating for integration into the Western liberal order eventually prevailed, and by the early 1980s, Portugal had forcefully aligned itself with the Euro-Atlantic framework, culminating in its accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1986 (Teixeira, 2012). Democratisation, therefore, played a central role in Portugal's strategic realignment, with European integration working as both a guarantee of political stability and a pathway to economic modernisation (Teixeira, 2010). This shift in Portugal's external orientation entailed a redefinition of strategic priorities across three main axes: Atlanticism, European integration, and Lusophony (Tavares & de Jesus, 2023). They emerged as the guiding principles of Portuguese diplomacy and have guided the country's worldwide engagement ever since.

The first pillar is the Atlantic dimension, which has long been a hallmark of Portuguese diplomacy. Historically a maritime nation, Portugal has long seen the Atlantic as a key area of strategic influence. The country's geographical position at the intersection of Europe, Africa, and the Americas has strengthened this view, making it a natural participant in transatlantic relations (Hespanha, 2019, p. 26). Since 1949, NATO membership has been central to

Portuguese security doctrine, ensuring its place within the Western alliance system throughout and after the Cold War (Teixeira, 1993). The relationship with the United States has also been an important component of this axis, especially given the presence of Lajes Air Base in the Azores, which is has been strategic asset for both Portugal and NATO (Antunes, 2000). The Atlantic axis thus provided both international credibility and internal stability in the post-revolutionary context (Teixeira, 2023).

In contrast, the European axis represented a departure from *Estado Novo* orthodoxy. Portugal's EEC accession in 1986 was not merely an economic necessity but also a strategic and political project aimed at consolidating democratic governance and reintegrating the country into the European mainstream (P. S. da C. Pereira, 2018). Indeed, membership in the European Union granted Portugal access to structural and cohesion funds that significantly contributed to infrastructure development, economic growth, and social reforms (Teixeira, 2023). Beyond economic benefits, EU membership allowed Portugal to position itself as both a committed European partner and a bridge between Europe and its post-colonial partners across the Atlantic.

The third axis of Portugal's foreign policy is its involvement with the Portuguese-speaking world (*Lusophony, Lusofonia*), which enables the country to strategically preserve cultural, economic, and political ties with its former colonies in the post-colonial era (Reis & Oliveira, 2018). The creation of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP) in 1996 institutionalised these post-colonial relationships, providing a multilateral framework for cooperation among Lusophone nations (Sanches, 2014). Yet, the CPLP has also been critiqued for perpetuating older asymmetries under the guise of cultural fraternity. While Portugal lost political control over its former territories, it retains influence through the CPLP, serving as a key tool for maintaining these connections by fostering educational exchanges, trade agreements, and cultural initiatives that reinforce a common Lusophone identity (Marques, 2022). Indeed, the Portuguese language remained a powerful vector of soft power and a key instrument in projecting "Portugueseness" abroad (Farias Ferreira, 2023, p. 109).

Still, Lusophony is not without its tensions. The concept is based on the Luso-tropicalism ideology, which supported colonial justifications under *Estado Novo* by framing Portuguese rule as racially harmonious and culturally integrative (Castelo, 2011). The rapid decolonisation of the mid-1970s shattered this narrative, revealing the contradictions of the imperial project and compelling a reconfiguration of Portuguese identity (Raimundo, 2023). As José Freire Antunes notes, "amputated from the empire, the nation reoccupied its frontiers of the fifteenth century... between Africa, which had been lost, and Europe which had never

been engaged with, Portugal redirected itself... [towards] the end of a destructive ambiguity” (Antunes, 1990, p. 109). This image captures the simultaneous trauma and opportunity of post-imperial transition.

As a result, democratic Portugal’s foreign policy evolved into a difficult debate between historical legacy and present strategic imperatives. While the African continent lost its centrality in Portuguese diplomacy, it continued to serve as a platform for cultural projection and economic engagement, particularly during times of Euro-Atlantic tension (T. de A. Cravo, 2012). The CPLP, Lusophony, and bilateral ties with PALOP countries served as compensatory mechanisms that allowed Portugal to maintain a symbolic and strategic presence in Africa without explicitly recreating colonial logics.

Some scholars argue that these three dimensions have enabled Portugal to balance its historical legacy with modern geopolitical realities, maintaining its relevance in global affairs despite its small size. Indeed, while traditionally seen as a global maritime power, Portugal has had to navigate the constraints imposed by its relatively limited resources, small economy, and geopolitical position on Europe’s periphery. Unlike larger states that have the capacity to project power independently, small states tend to rely on alliances, regional organisations, and multilateral institutions to compensate for their vulnerabilities (Thorhallsson & Cunha, 2023). For Portugal, this has translated into a foreign policy that is deeply anchored in broader alliances: NATO, the EU, and the CPLP. Portugal’s status as a small state also highlights the ways in which it has handled its external relations, consistently striving to serve as a bridge between different geopolitical regions, by leveraging its historical ties and linguistic connections as elements of soft power (C. Carvalho, 2019).

A further element that helps explain Portugal’s ability to sustain a distinctive role in EU-Africa relations is the cross-party consensus that has long defined its Africa policy. Relations with Africa have always been treated with low political salience and thus protected from domestic polarisation. The Socialist Party (PS) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD) both share a broad commitment to European integration and to the projection of Portugal’s historic and cultural ties with Lusophone Africa. This bipartisan accord has produced what can be described as a consensualist approach, where Africa continues to be a consistent part of the country’s diplomatic portfolio. Hence, Portugal is seen in Brussels as a predictable broker who can introduce Lusophone perspectives into EU-Africa discussions without raising concerns of volatility. In contrast, party differences have been more noticeable in other areas of both domestic and foreign policy. Alongside the emergence of smaller or more radical parties that offer a threat to the bipartisan duopoly, issues like economic austerity measures and migration

policy have often shown ideological and policy differences between PS and PSD. These divisive themes are characterised by more vocal partisan debates and fluctuating policy orientations depending on electoral outcomes (Lobo, 2024). In this sense, the remarkable stability of its Africa policy reinforces Portugal's credibility and explains why it has been able to navigate effectively EU forums, despite its limited material weight.

Ultimately, Portugal's post-1974 foreign policy reflects the dual imperative of small states: the need to integrate within powerful multilateral frameworks for security and legitimacy, along with the desire to assert a unique international identity through soft power and historical ties. Democratisation not only reoriented Portugal's international alliances but reshaped its sense of self, allowing it to pivot from empire to Europe while retaining a symbolic presence in Africa. This transformation was not seamless, and the contradictions between post-colonial solidarity and residual coloniality remain. Yet, through the triangulation of Atlanticism, Europeanism, and Lusophony, Portugal has crafted a foreign policy that balances its past with the demands of contemporary global politics.

2.1.2. Portugal's Europeanisation and the Shift in Priorities

Portugal's accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1986 marked the most decisive reorientation of its foreign policy since the fall of the Estado Novo. More than an economic choice, European integration represented a strategic and political project aimed at consolidating democracy, modernising the economy, and anchoring the country firmly within the Western liberal order (P. S. da C. Pereira, 2018). It offered Portugal a new societal framework and international identity following the collapse of its six-century-old empire, one that promised stability, legitimacy, and access to development (Cunha, 2023).

Yet, this transformation was neither immediate nor uncontested. In the turbulent aftermath of the 1974 revolution, Portugal's foreign policy vacillated between competing ideological visions. While some factions promoted a Third-Worldist stance rooted in solidarity with the Global South and former African colonies, it was only by 1976, coinciding with the first constitutional government, that EEC accession emerged as an explicit political objective (Teixeira, 2017). From then on, European integration became the dominant axis of Portuguese foreign policy, signalling the country's definitive alignment with democracy and a market economy (Cunha, 2023).

This path was reinforced by the conditionality of the EEC itself, particularly the Copenhagen criteria, which incentivised and facilitated the institutionalisation of democratic governance (Camisão & Fernandes, 2024). At the same time, Cold War dynamics heightened

the strategic value of EEC accession as a means of securing Portugal's position within the Western bloc, effectively distancing it from any flirtation with non-alignment or socialism (Ferreira-Pereira, 2022).

Economically, Portugal's accession was driven by necessity as much as aspiration. Decades of dictatorship, protracted colonial wars, and the disruptive effects of decolonisation had left the country structurally underdeveloped. Integration promised access to structural and cohesion funds and participation in a much larger, more competitive market, as essential conditions for economic transformation (Ferreira-Pereira & Groom, 2014). Though the reforms required were substantial, ranging from overhauls in agriculture and industry to harmonisation with European standards, these were embraced as necessary steps towards modernisation. Portugal's early years in the EEC coincided with landmark developments in the Community itself, including the Single European Act, the Schengen Agreement, and the gradual formation of the Economic and Monetary Union (Cunha, 2023). These changes further increased the incentives for full Europeanisation.

The impact of EU membership permeated both domestic and international dimensions. Internally, it triggered reforms across legislation, public administration, and policymaking structures, fostering institutional convergence with European norms (Ferreira-Pereira, 2014). Politically, the post-accession period was marked by unprecedented stability, cross-party consensus on European matters, and tangible socio-economic progress (Soares, 2007). This enthusiastic embrace of Europe was also a response to Portugal's structural constraints. As Cunha (2022, p. 59) notes, the country sought to be "European by all means", not only to escape geographic peripherality but also to offset its limitations as a small state. Greater integration became a mechanism for avoiding marginalisation and securing influence in European decision-making processes, thus compensating for Portugal's modest diplomatic, military, and economic capacity. Through EU membership, Portugal gained access to multilateral institutions where it could advance its interests and exercise soft power alongside much larger states (Cunha, 2023).

One of the clearest examples of how Portugal leveraged its EU membership to broaden its foreign policy reach was its ability to internationalise the East Timor issue. Portugal's diplomatic efforts to secure East Timor's independence from Indonesian occupation benefited greatly from its EU membership, which allowed the country to raise the matter inside European institutions and gain the support of other EU member states. The added value of Europeanisation in this case was evident: the EU provided Portugal with both political shelter

and diplomatic weight, ensuring that its foreign policy objectives were amplified at the global level (J. J. P. Gomes, 2010).

As a result, Portugal remained an active participant in European foreign policy debates, as it played a key role in advocating for African interests within the EU, often positioning itself as a bridge between Europe and Lusophone Africa. Portuguese policymakers used their historical ties with Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau to pursue stronger EU engagement in African affairs, perceiving those relations as significant because of the value they could add to other dimensions of Portugal's external action (MacQueen, 1997). As the then-Prime Minister Mário Soares argued in 1977: "Portugal... is a European country and can only benefit from European integration, including for improving relations with its ex-colonies" (Vines, 2012).

Indeed, while Portugal had to realign its priorities towards Europe, it never abandoned its historical connections with Africa. Instead, it sought to incorporate its Lusophone foreign policy objectives into the broader European framework, particularly through mechanisms such as the Lomé Convention and, later, the Cotonou Agreement. This was evident in several key diplomatic initiatives, notably Portugal's involvement in Angola and Mozambique mediation attempts (Raimundo, 2013). During the 1990s, Portugal actively participated in the peace processes in both countries, leveraging its diplomatic networks and historical familiarity with local political actors to facilitate negotiations (Vines, 2012). To this regard, Lisbon's emphasis on maintaining Portuguese involvement reflected Africa's enduring role in the national imagination (Cravinho & Darviche, 2005). Lisbon's participation in the 1991 Bicesse Accords in Angola marked a first significant diplomatic breakthrough, signalling that former Lusophone colonies were willing to accept the "mother country" as an intermediary to end postcolonial civil conflicts (Vines, 2012). Similarly, in Mozambique, Portugal supported the peace talks between the ruling FRELIMO government and the RENAMO opposition, which resulted in the Rome General Peace Accords of 1992 (Armon et al., 1998).

In fact, Portuguese participation in peacekeeping and peacebuilding has supported the strategic goal of increasing Portugal's influence in global governance. Such involvement, particularly under the aegis of the UN, has raised Portugal's diplomatic profile and strengthened its stance in major international fora (M. do C. Pinto, 2012). This was evident in Lisbon's mediation role in East Timor and Guinea-Bissau, where historical ties merged with foreign policy ambitions.

East Timor represents a unique case of post-colonial interaction. Following Indonesia's 1975 invasion, Portugal suspended diplomatic ties and led a decades-long campaign in

international organisations to support Timorese self-determination. Despite the UN Security Council's limited action, Portugal kept pressuring through UNGA resolutions, legal advocacy, and diplomatic consultations with Indonesia (OECD, 2006). This persistent commitment kept the issue alive, culminating in the 1999 referendum and East Timor's independence in 2002. Hence, Portugal was able to position itself as a reliable ally and post-independence partner. This reflected both a sense of historical responsibility and a strategic effort to reinforce Lisbon's influence within the Lusophone world and beyond (T. A. Cravo & Freire, 2014). The adoption of Portuguese as an official language by the new Timorese government underscored these enduring ties.

During Guinea-Bissau civil war in 1998-1999, Portugal used a similar mediation rationale. By activating the CPLP, Portugal helped establish an international conflict resolution mechanism. A Contact Group formed at the CPLP summit in Cabo Verde led to a MoU calling for formal negotiations, a demilitarised zone, humanitarian corridors, and Lusophone peacekeepers (Massey, 2004). Although the agreement did not result in a comprehensive peace settlement, it successfully prevented the escalation of the conflict into a regional crisis and demonstrated Portugal's ability to act as a facilitator in African peacebuilding processes. Portugal's main achievement in Guinea-Bissau was not imposing solutions, but framing its engagement as a multilateral Lusophone initiative, thereby boosting the legitimacy of its role and elevating the institutional profile of the CPLP itself (MacQueen, 2003a).

Indeed, through EU accession, Portugal could join the ranks of member states with historical links to Africa (mainly the UK and France) and contribute meaningfully to deeper ties between the two continents. Thus, Lisbon would be simultaneously benefiting its own national position (Raimundo, 2013). In a public declaration issued in January 1985, the Portuguese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jaime Gama, firmly expressed this idea of reciprocal advantages:

Portugal's integration in the European communities will provide Europe with the Portuguese sensibility to African problems and will give Portugal the support of community mechanisms to expand its African vocation. As a result, it will also provide Portuguese-speaking African countries with an ally and a friend within the community structures, balancing the game of influences which has been conducted there by other linguistic areas (Gama, 1985, p. 251).

The Europeanisation of Portugal's foreign policy resulted in changes in domestic political discourse as well. The EU became the primary reference point for economic and social policy, with European benchmarks often serving as the standard against which national progress was measured. Political parties from all sides of the spectrum accepted the European model as an essential component of Portuguese governance, leading to widespread political consensus on

European integration (Cunha, 2023). Indeed, for national policymakers, Portugal's "Europeanness" was inextricably linked to its contemporary democratic identity and post-imperial national vital interests. Therefore, since 1986, it has never made sense for the parties alternating in governmental power (i.e. PS and PSD) to frame the political debate on European integration along the lines "EU versus national identity" and "participating in EU versus safeguarding national interests". The primary reason for this was that the European identity became embedded in the fabric of national democratic identity and membership in the EU's "core" was conceived as an essential part of national interests. This is an example of the identity reconstruction, to which all political elites contributed, as a result of the regime transformation. The latter enable Portugal to narrow the core-periphery divide while avoiding a vulnerable position on the fringes of European integration process (Schukkink & Niemann, 2012).

However, this consensus was occasionally challenged, particularly during economic crises such as the Eurozone crisis, which revealed vulnerabilities in Portugal's economic reliance on European financial mechanisms (Raimundo, 2013). Critics argued that Portugal had grown overly compliant with EU demands, often at the expense of national interests, a perception that fuelled debates over sovereignty and economic policy (Cunha, 2023).

2.1.3. Economic and Strategic Interests in Lusophone Africa

Portugal's relationship with PALOP countries has evolved in close alignment with its shifting economic imperatives. Although traditionally considered peripheral within Portugal's broader economic outlook – especially when contrasted with the primacy of European markets – the PALOP region has nonetheless served as a strategically important axis for economic diversification. Angola, in particular, has occupied a central role in this framework, not only due to its colonial legacy, but also because of its status as a high-growth economy and a principal destination for Portuguese exports and investment (Mah, 2019).

Portugal's economic diplomacy in Africa has been consistently shaped by this postcolonial positioning, but also by the structural realities of development cooperation. The country's accession to the EEC in 1986 marked a decisive reorientation of foreign economic policy towards the European core. Yet, this shift did not translate into disengagement from Africa. On the contrary, Portugal managed to maintain a dual role: as a former colonial power with privileged access to Lusophone African states, and as a mediating actor between Brussels and African capitals, particularly through its involvement in EU development cooperation mechanisms (P. S. da C. Pereira, 2018). Nonetheless, the immediate post-decolonisation period led to a sharp decline in Portugal's African trade and investment presence. Political instability

and protracted armed conflicts, especially in Angola and Mozambique, significantly eroded the institutional foundations needed to sustain economic ties. The deterioration of local institutional systems contributed to a temporary loss of commercial relevance and political influence for Portugal in the region (M. E. Ferreira, 2002).

Despite this quantitative decline, the qualitative weight of these relationships remained substantial. Portuguese companies have continued to hold influential positions in critical sectors of PALOP economies by capitalising on linguistic proximity, institutional compatibility, and enduring interpersonal networks. This continuity is far from symbolic. It signals structural entrenchment across areas such as infrastructure, finance, construction, energy, and telecommunications (Soares de Oliveira, 2005).

Firms such as Galp Energia, Mota-Engil, Banco BPI, and Millennium BCP have become emblematic of this persistent Portuguese economic presence in Africa. Their roles extend beyond business activity to influencing state policy, securing favourable regulatory frameworks, bilateral agreements, and investment protections (Raimundo, 2023). These companies have been very influential and efficient in shaping Portugal's policy towards Angola, often serving as informal ambassadors of national interest. At the same time, Portuguese multinationals operate as vectors of soft power. Through brand visibility, long-term partnerships, and community engagement, particularly in Angola and Mozambique, they contribute to reinforcing Portugal's image and normative presence in the region (Executive Digest, 2020).

The 2008 global financial crisis and Portugal's subsequent sovereign debt crisis further catalysed a recalibration of foreign economic policy. Under the weight of austerity and the imperative to revive growth, African markets once again came into sharp focus as strategic economic partners. This pivot was publicly articulated in the 2011 Programa do XIX Governo Constitucional, which called for deepening economic ties within the CPLP and intensifying trade and investment relations with Lusophone countries (Governo de Portugal, 2011, p. 101). The symbolic and strategic value of this turn was epitomised by Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho's 2011 visit to Luanda. In the midst of a new Angolan customs regime, he explicitly appealed for "some opening with regard to Portuguese exporters," highlighting the urgency with which Lisbon viewed Angola's economic engagement (Lusa, 2011). This moment underscored Portugal's economic vulnerability and its increasing dependence on non-EU partners to restore balance and resilience to its external economic policy (BBC, 2011).

Economic metrics from this period support this strategic reorientation. Between 2004 and 2008, Angola rose from ninth to fourth place as a destination for Portuguese exports,

remaining Portugal's largest market outside the EU until 2014, when it was affected by the worldwide oil price drop. Similarly, between 2004 and 2009, Angola advanced from fifteenth to third most important destination for Portuguese foreign investment, increasing its share from 1% to 9% (AICEP, 2016). More strikingly, Angolan investments in Portugal increased from €4 to €116 million within the same period, with a focus on important critical sectors such as banking, energy, telecommunications, and media. For many Portuguese enterprises dealing with the crisis, Angolan capital provided a lifeline (Costa et al., 2015).

This increasing entanglement exposed Portugal to a new kind of dependency. While economic relations with Angola temporarily mitigated the impact of the European crisis, they also made Portugal vulnerable to Angola's own economic fluctuations. The 2014 collapse of oil prices, which adversely impacted Angola's economy, resulted in a sharp contraction in bilateral trade and investment, affecting numerous Portuguese companies (Raimundo, 2023). In this context, the once-celebrated "strategic partnership" revealed its limitations and underscored the dangers of economic overreliance on a single African partner. Nonetheless, this phase accelerated the overall internationalisation of Portuguese economy. The establishment of the Secretariat of State for Internationalisation and the prioritisation of export diversification reflected a new understanding of economic diplomacy as an extension of national resilience (P. S. da C. Pereira, 2018).

Still, the diversification of Portugal's economic interests has extended to other PALOP countries, particularly Mozambique and Cabo Verde. In Mozambique, the natural gas sector represents a key sector for Portuguese economic engagement. The Coral Sul Floating Liquefied Natural Gas (FLNG) project, in which Galp owned a 10% share, has positioned Portugal as a participant in one of the world's largest offshore gas reserves, located in the Rovuma Basin (Velho, 2025). In parallel, Cabo Verde has benefited from Portugal's technological cooperation where bilateral cooperation frameworks have enabled investments in tourism infrastructure, ICT, and renewable energy (AICEP, 2024). Similarly, Cabo Verde has received support through AfDB-funded programs aimed at accelerating digital transition and connectivity infrastructure (AfDB, 2025).

As previously noted, the presence of Portuguese firms in Africa has become increasingly strategic. Companies such as Delta Cafés and Fidelidade have expanded their operations beyond conventional commercial activity, being integrated into national development strategies, corporate social responsibility frameworks, and, in some cases, infrastructural programs. For instance, Delta's local subsidiary, Angonabeiro, has contributed to the revitalisation of Angola's coffee sector by assisting over thousands of families and

establishing long-term production partnerships. Similarly, Fidelidade has expanded its activities in Cabo Verde, Angola, and Mozambique, offering insurance products tailored to specific local needs, while leveraging its longstanding institutional credibility to consolidate its position in these markets (Executive Digest, 2020).

More broadly, the growing integration of Portuguese enterprises into African economies underscores both the constraints of state-led development cooperation and the increasing prominence of private-sector actors in shaping contemporary economic diplomacy. As a result, Portuguese firms have emerged not merely as economic agents but as relevant stakeholders within broader frameworks of sustainable and inclusive development (Executive Digest, 2020).

In this context, Portuguese Agency for Investment and Foreign Trade (AICEP) represents the central pillar of Portugal's economic diplomacy towards Lusophone Africa, turning a broad political consensus into operational instruments of business mobilisation tools. With its role in reducing transaction costs for firms and supporting incumbents, AICEP provides continuity in otherwise volatile markets. The agency adopts a deliberately incremental approach. As former AICEP board member Luís Rebelo de Sousa has noted, expanding the pool of operators requires first on supporting existing enterprises. Such approach ensures that new entrants can fit into value chains already shaped by Portuguese incumbents (Marmé, 2023).

Trade insights point to the effectiveness of this ecosystem. Following the pandemic slump, Portuguese exports to Africa rebounded sharply, with sales to PALOP countries rising by 45.8% year-on-year in 2022 (Lusa, 2023). To this regard, AICEP's participation in 2024 Maputo International Fair (FACIM) provided an opportunity for Portugal to emphasise the centrality of its companies in Mozambique's economy. According to AICEP counsellor in Maputo, Portuguese companies are not only present in key sectors such as energy, construction, and banking, but also contribute of the country's productive fabric, employing thousands and transferring technical know-how (360 Mozambique, 2024).

At the institutional level, AICEP supports the government's internationalisation priorities by curating the state's pool of bilateral trade and investment agreements, as a "vital support tool" for trade and investment decisions, and by operating within the "articulated action" of Portugal's external network (diplomatic, consular, commercial, and tourism services). Thus, it aligns business promotion and aftercare with the broader internationalisation agenda (AICEP, 2013).

Beyond firm-level facilitation, Portugal has invested in platforms that translate soft power into tangible economic outcomes. For instance, the EurAfrican Forum brings together European and African leaders to debate growth opportunities across the two continents, strategically positioning Portugal as an international platform for building collaborative networks. More than a discussion venue, the Forum acts as a catalyst for joint action, with panels and B2B exchanges that translate political narratives into concrete partnerships. It, hence, reinforces Portugal's role as a facilitator of mutually beneficial initiatives in areas such as investment, infrastructure, and digitalisation among other sectors (Mbinza, 2025).

In conclusion, Portugal's economic engagement with Lusophone Africa represents a complex interplay between historical legacy, strategic necessity, and private-sector activism. While the overall economic weight of PALOP countries in Portuguese foreign trade remains limited, their symbolic and strategic significance has grown, especially during moments of national crisis. The internationalisation of the Portuguese economy, driven by both governmental initiative and corporate ambition, has allowed Portugal to reassert its influence in its former colonies, albeit within a new global landscape marked by competition from emerging powers.

2.2. From Domestic Pressures to Policy: Portugal's Engagement in Africa

2.2.1. Development Cooperation and Cultural Diplomacy through the CPLP

The creation of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP) in 1996 marked a significant inflection point in Portugal's postcolonial foreign policy, encapsulating an effort to recast the historical ties of empire into a cooperative and multilateral framework grounded in shared language, culture, and political affinity:

The CPLP constitutes a new political project whose foundation is the Portuguese language, the historical connection and shared heritage of the nine, forming a space that is geographically discontinuous but identified by a common language. This unifying factor has established, globally, a base for increasingly significant and influential activity. The overall objectives of the CPLP are political cooperation and cooperation in social, cultural and economic areas (CPLP, 2024).

The CPLP was established in Lisbon with seven founding members – Angola, Brazil, Cabo Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Portugal, and São Tomé and Príncipe. It later expanded to include newly-independent East Timor in 2002 and Equatorial Guinea in 2014 (Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros, 2024). The CPLP's institutional design drew inspiration from earlier post-imperial associations, such as the British Commonwealth and the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), yet was distinguished by an emphasis on formal equality among its members. This framing was not incidental, rather a calculated diplomatic

manoeuvre by Portugal to discard any remaining paternalistic connotations from its colonial past and to position itself as a peer among equals in a community shaped by a common linguistic heritage (C. Carvalho, 2018).

While the CPLP was nominally established as a platform for political collaboration, economic development, and cultural exchange, it has mostly served as a diplomatic forum with limited operational capacity. Its institutional activities, such as biannual summits, educational initiatives, and cultural programs, have primarily reflected its symbolic rather than executive nature (Mormul, 2020). However, its symbolic power is precisely where Portugal's strategic interests are most visible. The CPLP became a tool for Portugal to reassert global relevance through soft power, especially in regions where its historical ties and linguistic commonality offered comparative advantage (P. M. Ferreira et al., 2016).

Politically, the CPLP allowed Portugal to maintain privileged relationships with its former colonies through a narrative of mutual respect and cultural solidarity. Economically, it created a multilateral context in which Portugal could pursue triangular cooperation strategies, facilitating development initiatives funded by or coordinated with the EU and other international donors. Symbolically, the CPLP provided the architecture for a “foreign policy of values,” that Portuguese political elites across the spectrum constantly supported, framing Portugal as a mediator of dialogue and cooperation between Europe and the Global South (Moreira, 2014; Silva, 2020).

Language is crucial to this policy, not only as a communicative tool, but also as a vector of ideology, identity, and legitimacy. The promotion of Portuguese as a founding principle of the CPLP was a postcolonial gesture of continuity and rupture (Farias Ferreira, 2023). It represented a departure from the brutalities of the imperial era while preserving an idealised cultural unity based on language. Yet, this linguistic policy has frequently been challenged in practice. Although Portuguese was selected as the official language of all PALOP countries after independence – a choice largely influenced by nationalist leaders educated in Portugal – it did not represent local linguistic realities. Creole languages continue to dominate daily life in Guinea-Bissau and Cabo Verde, hindering efforts to build a cohesive postcolonial identity (Chabal, 2002). Critics have argued that, while portrayed as egalitarian and democratic, such linguistic policy has frequently served as a type of post-imperial nostalgia, hiding the colonial violence that supports the common linguistic realm (Mormul, 2020).

Despite these criticisms, Portugal has continued to invest substantially on linguistic and educational cooperation, viewing these domains as the foundation of its soft power. The Camões Institute, the state agency responsible for Portuguese cultural diplomacy and

development cooperation, plays a central role in this strategy. Its programs are particularly strong in the education sector. Major initiatives included the “Programa de Ensino de Qualidade” in Guine-Bissau, the “Escola Mais” project in São Tomé and Príncipe, and the “Programa de Apoio ao Reforço do Ensino Secundário” (PARES) in Angola. These projects have centred on teacher training, curriculum reform, university cooperation and the improvement of scientific and technical education, especially in key areas such as STEM (Camões Institute, 2016).

These initiatives also illustrate the various stages of Portuguese development cooperation. Initially envisioned as a continuation of historical links in the post-independence era, cooperation was formalised in the 1990s with the establishment of the Portuguese Institute for Development Support (IPAD) and strategic policy frameworks. Since 2015, there has been a shift towards merging development and economic diplomacy, with the Sociedade para o Financiamento do Desenvolvimento (SOFID), a lending organisation that encourages private sector participation in development, playing an increasingly important role (Ferreira et al., 2016). This trend is consistent with the CPLP’s own shift towards economic topics. Indeed, between 2011 and 2015, the concept of “economia lusófona” gained traction, presenting the CPLP as both a community of values and a market of chances, anchored in seven diverse regional economic zones across four continents (C. Carvalho, 2018).

However, these strategic developments have not been without contradictions. Equatorial Guinea’s membership to the CPLP in 2014, despite its authoritarian rule and terrible human rights record, underlined the conflict between the CPLP’s normative commitments and its geopolitical pragmatism. Portugal’s acceptance of this admission, despite public opposition, can be read as an attempt to broaden the CPLP’s relevance and prospective resource base, even at the expense of its moral consistency (C. Carvalho, 2019). Similarly, Portugal’s bilateral ties with Angola have alternated between collaboration and tension, driven by mistrust and economic interdependence. The Angolan state, which was previously sceptical of Portugal’s ties to UNITA, has recently become a prominent investor in Portugal, reversing old patterns of economic dependency (Raimundo, 2014).

These dynamics highlights the structural asymmetries that exist across the CPLP. The CPLP remains a relatively loose organisation, relying on the political will of its key members (Brazil, Angola, and Portugal), while lacking the financial and institutional powers of its counterparts, such as the Commonwealth or OIF (C. Carvalho, 2019). At the same time, its relevance within Portugal has grown, particularly as it allows the country to re-centre its foreign policy in moments of European disarray or economic downturn.

Ultimately, the CPLP represents a hybrid diplomatic structure – a community of values and interests that combines historical memory, strategic calculation, and normative discourse. Portugal's engagement demonstrates both the potential and the limitations of a small state leveraging its cultural instruments to navigate postcolonial asymmetries (Moreira, 2014; Pavia, 2019). While official narratives frequently use the language of cooperation and solidarity, the empirical evidence shows a more complex and contingent process, one that must continuously balance ideology and interest, memory and pragmatism, principle and power.

2.2.2 Portugal's Bilateral Development and Economic Cooperation with PALOP Countries

Over the past two decades, Portugal's economic diplomacy towards Lusophone Africa has undergone a marked transformation, evolving from a predominantly aid-driven approach to one anchored in strategic partnership, economic diversification, and geopolitical engagement. This recalibration reflects both a response to changing global dynamics and a reassertion of Portugal's role in its postcolonial sphere of influence. Central to this evolution has been the mobilisation of a multi-layered diplomatic toolkit that integrates bilateral, regional, and multilateral instruments. These frameworks have enabled Lisbon to align its development and commercial objectives with broader geopolitical aspirations, as relations with PALOP countries have shifted from largely symbolic legacies to increasingly instrumental partnerships in sectors such as energy, infrastructure, and education.

At the bilateral level, Angola and Mozambique occupy a central place in Portugal's economic diplomacy. These two countries are not only significant recipients of Portuguese official development assistance (ODA), but also increasingly important as export destinations, sites of investment, and geopolitical partners (Soares Seborro, 2024). Following the end of Angola's civil war and during the oil-driven boom years, Portugal's engagement intensified through the expansion of its business community, particularly in banking, construction, and energy. The PEC Portugal-Angola 2023-2027, one of the flagship bilateral frameworks, reflects this long-term orientation. It prioritises institutional capacity building, economic governance, and vocational training, all aligned with Angola's development needs and with the intention to create a favourable environment for Portuguese business involvement (Government of Portugal & Government of the Republic of Angola, 2022).

A similar rationale underpins the PEC Portugal-Moçambique 2022–2026, which emphasises human capital development, education, and sustainable infrastructure. However, what is notable here is the way Portugal frames such cooperation through “clusters” that aggregate public and private actors, NGOs and local institutions into long-standing

partnerships, such as the Ilha de Moçambique Cluster. This model is more than symbolic, since it strategically reproduces historical and linguistic affinities as vectors for soft power, while ensuring that Portuguese firms and institutions maintain a privileged presence in critical sectors like education, water and sanitation, and urban development (Government of Portugal & Government of the Republic of Mozambique, 2021).

Cabo Verde, despite its smaller market size, is another key node in Portugal's bilateral matrix. The PEC Portugal-Cabo Verde 2022-2026 builds on an already strong institutional relationship and targets resilience-building, maritime economy, digital transition, and environmental sustainability as its pillars. What is distinctive about this PEC is its emphasis on co-responsibility and alignment with national development plans, which has allowed Portugal to position itself not merely as a donor, but as a development partner whose goals are mutually reinforcing (Government of Portugal & Government of the Republic of Cabo Verde, 2021).

This bilateral infrastructure operates within a broader institutional scaffolding defined by the Estratégia da Cooperação Portuguesa 2030 (Camões Institute, 2023). This national strategy sets out a multi-scalar approach (bilateral, multilateral, and triangular) to enhance Portugal's global cooperation profile. Notably, the strategy frames international cooperation not only as a tool for promoting sustainable, equitable, and inclusive global development, but also as an investment yielding shared geopolitical benefits (Camões Institute, 2023, p. 4).

Portugal's distinctive contribution is also visible in its leadership in triangular cooperation, particularly under the OECD framework. The ECP 2030 positions triangular cooperation as a vehicle for multiplying the effects of bilateral and multilateral engagements, aiming to combine the know-how of Portugal with financial or technical resources from a third party (e.g., EU, AfDB) to benefit a PALOP partner (Camões Institute, 2024). The strategy frames this modality as a geopolitical multiplier, enhancing Portugal's international standing through the mobilisation of diverse resources and the creation of compound effects (Camões Institute, 2023, p. 7).

Portugal's prominence in this field is further demonstrated by its recurring role as the host of the OECD's annual meetings on triangular cooperation, positioning itself as a benchmark for best practices. Furthermore, by engaging in triangular partnerships with actors from Latin America and North Africa, Portugal is able to extend its Lusophone cooperation model to new regions, an ambition aligned with the strategy's objective to strengthen the operational capacity and international presence of Portuguese cooperation (*Objetivo estratégico 2 - Reforçar a capacidade de intervenção da Cooperação Portuguesa*).

Particularly revealing is the ECP 2030's framing of EU-delegated cooperation as a key mechanism for amplifying Portugal's development footprint in Africa. Through such programs, Portugal not only secures additional financial resources but also increases its political visibility in EU-Africa relations. The strategy explicitly outlines the need to identify EU programming cycles early and to align national sectors (ministries, NGOs, and private firms) to respond to calls for proposals. Portugal's role in the IVDCI-Europa Global framework exemplifies this proactive stance, ensuring that national priorities, such as Portuguese language education or technical training, are inserted into broader EU-funded projects (Camões Institute, 2023, p. 43).

The Lusophone Compact, signed in 2018 between Portugal, the African Development Bank (AfDB), and the PALOP countries, further encapsulates this hybrid logic. Functioning as a platform for de-risking private investment, the Compact combines concessional finance, guarantees, and policy dialogue to foster inclusive private sector growth. What makes this instrument politically significant is that it allows Portugal to shape the investment climate of Lusophone countries from within an African-led multilateral development bank, thereby enhancing its influence in regional governance while supporting Portuguese firms through SOFID and other national financial instruments. Portugal's role here is dual: as a development partner and as a broker of private capital (AfDB, 2018).

Portugal's ability to leverage national instruments while shaping and drawing on EU frameworks has been facilitated by the NDICI architecture, which was explicitly designed to broaden participation and implementation opportunities for member states. Growing demand and pressure, particularly from small and medium-sized member states, pushed for greater involvement in the design and delivery of EU external financing. In fact, successive Presidencies since 2017, notably Portugal most recently in 2021, promoted awareness on inclusiveness, which was then legally enshrined in the NDICI regulation, creating a more level-playing field for small and mid-sized states within the Team Europe approach (Jones, 2021, p. 2).

In practice, the inclusiveness principle is realised at country level through the convening role of EU Delegations, who are responsible for bringing member states, including those without a permanent mission, into the NDICI programming and implementation cycle. This is accomplished not only by widening participation in sector working groups, but also via representation arrangements that reduce information asymmetries and transaction costs. In fact, Delegations may host liaison officers from member states' agencies, and, conversely, member-state embassies can host EU antennas – that's precisely the case of Portugal's embassy in São Tomé e Príncipe. The outcome is that Portuguese thematic expertise and field intelligence enter

the process upstream, at the stage where country priorities and Team Europe Initiatives are drafted, rather than only downstream at contracting. As a result, early participation in these forums shapes implementation choices (lead/co-delegate roles, blending finance, procurement). Indeed, delegated cooperation under NDICI has been opened to include national agencies as leaders in fields and contexts where they have comparative advantages. Usually, smaller member states or agencies collaborate with larger agencies as junior partners, although in some cases, the smaller member states agency may take the lead. For instance, in Angola, Camões I.P. leads alongside French AFD in co-delegation, showing how Portugal's Lusophone embeddedness is recognised as the organising asset in an EU instrument (Jones, 2021, p. 11).

One of the mechanisms that translates these principles into reality are the Multiannual Indicative Programmes (MIPs) under NDICI. The Sub-Saharan Africa MIP explicitly recognises the PALOP-Timor-Leste (PALOP-TL) framework and signals that alignment “with the PALOP-TL grouping should be further developed”, a significant recognition of a network that Portugal has long curated and advocated for inside the EU (European Commission, 2022, p. 11). Such continuity shows not only that Lisbon's preferred geographical lenses can persist in EU programming, but also that Lisbon can help fill those lenses with competitive assets. The MIP's emphasis on research and innovation, digital connectivity, green transition, and human development allows Camões and Portuguese public entities to serve as sector leaders or co-delegates, leveraging expertise and SME networks with EU risk-sharing and scale.

More importantly for NDICI, one could note how EU higher-education and research programmes (Erasmus+, Horizon Europe) become financial tools for Portuguese science diplomacy in Lusophone Africa, with a co-building approach in which Portugal can shape the normative conditionalities of EU science activities in PALOP contexts while drawing directly on EU funds, as an example of turning inclusiveness into practical agency (Mourato Pinto & Ferreira-Pereira, 2023).

What emerges from these policy instruments is a deliberate effort to institutionalise Lusophony as a space of economic diplomacy. This is not merely a projection of cultural affinity but a calculated move to construct a Lusophone bloc that can operate coherently in multilateral settings, transcending traditional North-South binaries (Camões Institute, 2024).

The idea of an “Economia Lusófona”, championed during the government of Pedro Passos Coelho (2011-2015), exemplified this vision. Framed to reorient Portugal's external economic relations beyond the Eurozone, particularly during the sovereign debt crisis, the policy mobilised the CPLP as both an economic block and a geopolitical arena. This culminated

in increased Portuguese investment in CPLP countries, validating the strategic calculus of the Lusophone turn (C. Carvalho, 2018).

Indeed, through bilateral PECs, delegated EU projects and triangular frameworks, Portugal has managed to project influence well beyond the limits of its economic scale. Nevertheless, critical questions remain about the structural asymmetries embedded in these partnerships. As Mah (2019) has observed, the transformation of these states into more viable markets is hindered by structural issues, including weak institutional capacity, low human development indicators, and volatility in commodity dependence. These challenges constrain the effectiveness of Portugal's economic diplomacy, suggesting that deeper engagement in governance support and institutional development may be needed to sustain economic partnerships in the long term.

2.2.3. Portugal's Role in EU-Africa Relations

Portugal's involvement in EU-Africa relations exemplifies the strategic behaviour of a small state seeking to maximise its international influence through multilateral frameworks. Far from being a mere act of historical remembrance or idealistic development policy, Lisbon's approach to Africa within the EU's external action must be interpreted as a calculated strategy aimed at reinforcing its post-imperial diplomatic identity, projecting influence disproportionate to its structural capabilities, and leveraging its Lusophone ties to act as a broker between the European Union and Sub-Saharan Africa, especially the PALOP countries (Raimundo, 2020).

Despite procedural limits and a decrease of its foreign affairs powers as a result of the Lisbon Treaty, Portugal has benefited from the rotating chair of the EU Council. Indeed, the presidency is one of the few institutional instruments that small nations like Portugal can employ to raise their voices and shape the EU agenda. Lisbon's presidencies in 1992, 2000, and 2007 were not neutral administrative exercises. Rather, they were carefully employed political tools to promote long-term national interests within a supranational framework (Bunse, 2009).

Portugal's commitment to incorporating Africa into EU foreign policy dates back to its early interactions with the European Community. Since the 1986 accession to the EC, Portuguese governments have continuously considered their historical ties to Lusophone Africa as strategic assets to be used within the EU context (Teixeira, 2017). Early on, this translated into Portugal taking the lead on issues concerning the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries, and in shaping EU development cooperation frameworks such as the Lomé Conventions and their successor, the Cotonou Agreement. These frameworks created a bridge

between EU interests and Portuguese ambitions, particularly in ensuring aid and trade channels for former colonies (M. F. Pereira, 2006).

Portugal's first presidency in 1992 took place in a turbulent geopolitical period marked by the post-Cold War reorganisation of Europe and the signing of the Maastricht Treaty (Magone, 1997, p. 165; Matos Correia, 2002, p. 202). Despite its limited resources and institutional inexperience, the Cavaco Silva government sought to align Portugal's Atlanticist orientation with the emerging Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP): "To combat tendencies for excessive "continentalisation" of Europe, by maintaining an Atlantic relationship reinforced by an increased politico-economic dialogue and by triangulated cooperation with third countries" (Governo de Portugal, 1991, p. 18). Thus, the presidency pushed for the expansion of relations between the EC and Latin America, particularly with Brazil, under the rationale of triangulated cooperation among Europe, Africa, and Latin America (de Vasconcelos, 1996), thereby legitimising a more inclusive foreign policy, which allowed for Portugal's African rapprochement to be further developed through the 1990s (Robinson, 2015). Yet, no common position towards developing countries was adopted. Overall, while the broader African agenda remained underdeveloped in 1992, Portugal achieved a significant milestone by obtaining recognition for the PALOP group as a distinct regional cluster under the Lomé IV Convention framework, an act that institutionalised Lusophone identity in EU-African relations (Raimundo, 2020).

Portugal's second presidency in 2000 portrayed a more confident and integrated actor within the EU (Teixeira & Hermenegildo, 2018). To this regard, it played an important role in shaping the evolving European framework by launching the Lisbon Strategy for socio-economic modernisation of the EU (European Council, 2000). However, the main outcome of this rotating presidency was the Lisbon government leveraging its position to institutionalise its Africa agenda by organising the first EU-Africa Summit in Cairo in April 2000 (Magone, J.M., 2004). The initiative was the direct result of Portuguese diplomatic advocacy, which began as early as 1996, and it represented the first time the EU and African leaders met in a bi-regional setting (J. D. S. Carvalho, 2000). Though the summit's accomplishments may have been modest, it set an important precedent: Africa was formally inscribed into the EU's strategic vision, and the role of Lusophone Africa within that framework was normalised (Magone, 2015). It was evident that Portugal was translating national priorities into EU-wide commitments, with the presidency serving not just as an administrative mandate, rather as a platform for geopolitical entrepreneurship (Ferreira-Pereira, 2008).

Beyond summit diplomacy, Lisbon's influence extended to defining the architecture of the EU's development and trade relations with Africa. The Cotonou Agreement (2000), negotiated during the Portuguese presidency, expressed Portugal's preference for integrating cultural and linguistic diversity, hallmarks of the Lusophone identity, into the political dialogue and cooperation mechanisms of the EU-ACP relationship (Raimundo, 2014). Similarly, Portugal favoured flexible trade provisions within the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), frequently advocating for transition periods beneficial to its former colonies. This highlighted Portugal's ability to act as both a policy entrepreneur and a "guardian" of Lusophone African interests within the EU (Raimundo, 2020).

The success of the Cairo summit boosted Portugal's presidency, to the point where it offered to host the next EU-Africa Summit in Lisbon in 2003 under the Greek Presidency (European Council, 2000, para. 78). Yet, the latter never managed to realise it, hence the second EU-Africa summit could only take place during Portugal's presidency in 2007 (Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros, 2007). It was framed as a response to what Prime Minister José Sócrates saw as an "incomprehensible failure" of European foreign policy – the seven-year gap since the first summit (Sócrates, 2007, p. 4).

The resulting 2007 Joint Africa-EU Strategy was not only a symbolic renewal of the partnership but also a pragmatic instrument reflecting Portugal's dual objective of fostering inclusive multilateralism and ensuring visibility for Lusophone actors (Teixeira & Hermenegildo, 2018). Furthermore, the Portuguese presidency effectively exploited its bilateral connections with Cabo Verde to institutionalise a special EU-Cabo Verde partnership and pushed for formal cooperation between the European Commission and the CPLP (Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros, 2007).

Some scholars argue that Portugal's strategic use of the EU presidency can also be seen in the context of a broader spectrum of compensatory strategies used by small states. Lisbon has consistently adopted a multilateral approach, portraying itself as an honest mediator and reliable interlocutor, thereby minimising perceptions of unilateral national interests, all while increasing its legitimacy. Specialising in African affairs allowed Portugal to acquire expertise, gain key positions within EU institutions, and set the Brussels agenda in subtle but effective ways (Raimundo, 2020). Lisbon's focussed approach was further enhanced by coalition-building with like-minded states, such as France and Belgium, and through informal alignment with the European Commission, especially during Durão Barroso's presidency (Seabra, 2019). Ultimately, Lisbon was successful in externalising national interests and incorporating them into the larger logic of EU external action through multiple presidencies, diplomatic framing,

coalition building, and bureaucratic embedding. This strategy was not without limitations: structural asymmetries, competing interests, and institutional reforms all hampered Portuguese agency. Nonetheless, Portugal's African policy within the EU is a striking example of how a small state may use multilateral tools to strengthen its voice and shape regional diplomacy in accordance with its historical affinities and strategic interests.

2.3. Entanglement Between Domestic and International Politics: Portugal's Bargaining Strategies in the EU

The alignment of Portugal's national interests with EU-level objectives has always relied on a dual imperative: proving a commitment to European integration while pushing foreign policy priorities founded in its Lusophone heritage. Portuguese elites viewed the EU not just as a platform for domestic modernisation, but also as a means of elevating the country's historical and geopolitical links with Lusophone Africa to the European level (Ferreira da Silva, 2015).

This entanglement was most visible in Portugal's long-standing efforts to position its privileged relationships with the PALOP countries as vitally important to the EU as a whole. Lisbon's adoption of a multilateral European approach towards Africa was influenced by the fact that, at the time of accession, Brussels already had established policies targeting the continent. While Portugal was compelled to accept the *acquis*, it also received access to the decision-making process, allowing it, like other minor states, to mitigate asymmetric power dynamics while projecting influence (Vines, 2012). On one hand, the EU mitigated the likelihood of bilateral rivalry, particularly with France and the UK, while also buffering external competition from actors such as the Soviet Union and, subsequently, China. On the other hand, it allowed Portugal to better link its historical ties with PALOP countries with broader EU aims and institutional processes (Raimundo, 2020). As a result, Portuguese diplomacy incorporated Lusophone priorities into evolving frameworks: first the European Political Cooperation (EPC), then the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), resulting in a shift from passive adaptation towards an increasingly proactive approach. This transformation was most obvious under the country's Council presidencies in 1992, 2000, and 2007 (Ferreira-Pereira & Vieira, 2013; Magone, 2006).

By 2007, Portugal had strategically reframed its national interests as European common goods, rather than just projecting them. The second EU-Africa Summit and the adoption of the Joint Africa-EU Strategy represented the Europeanisation of national agendas (Robinson, 2015). In this aspect, Portuguese diplomats were eager to highlight the country's non-hegemonic status, contrasting it with the interventionist legacy of larger former colonial

powers, and positioned their African diplomacy as collaborative rather than paternalistic (Raimundo, 2020).

Indeed, Portugal's reputation as a “bridge-builder” between the EU and Africa has never been based on imposition, but rather on setting themes and connecting global policy instruments with national networks and diplomatic capital. This mediation role was supported by a strategy of specialisation, through which Portugal focused on African dossiers to gain credibility and institutional memory within EU entities. Lisbon successfully positioned itself as an *interlocutor privilegiado* through persistent advocacy, a stance reinforced by its perceived differences from other former colonial powers (Reis & Oliveira, 2018).

Importantly, this strategy extended well beyond the terms of individual presidencies. Portugal effectively embedded Lusophone priorities into the EU's external relations, earning a solid reputation that endured over time. Despite the absence of significant coercive power, Portugal managed to position itself as a credible and influential actor in shaping EU engagement with sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Maghreb (Robinson, 2015). Portugal's negotiation strategy has thus necessitated a delicate balancing act: connecting national aims with broader EU goals while avoiding accusations of localisation. Yet, the framework of EU decision-making, particularly the necessity for unanimity in foreign policy, imposes significant limits. Furthermore, the Lisbon Treaty's concentration of foreign policy under the High Representative may have limited the agenda-setting authority traditionally granted to rotating presidencies (Ferreira da Silva, 2015).

The entanglement between domestic and international dimensions is also evident in the institutional evolution of Portugal's national parliament. Initially marginal and underfunded, it has developed as an important forum for debate, scrutiny, and communication with EU institutions, particularly through its Committee on European Affairs (EAC). The EAC became a key node in the articulation of European matters domestically, engaging civil society and helping convey information from Brussels (Resende & Paulo, 2012). The EAC's integration into multilevel governance reflects Portugal's overall diplomatic strategy. Participation in inter-parliamentary networks and alignment with like-minded EU member states have increased Portugal's domestic legitimacy and exterior credibility. However, institutional adaptation has not led to structural empowerment. The parliament and the government frequently coordinate informally and *ad hoc*, while the parliament's role in pre-Council discussions remains limited (Magone, 2006). Nonetheless, the Europeanisation of Portugal's Africa strategy has not only allowed Lisbon to remain important in Brussels but has also provided internal legitimacy,

allowing political elites to frame its foreign policy achievements as European accomplishments (Ferreira da Silva, 2015).

Moreover, in the face of financial crises and evolving geopolitical landscapes, Portugal has adjusted the articulation of its national interests. Rather than challenging the EU framework, Lisbon has defined development, migration and interregional cooperation in terms that align with Brussels' priorities, allowing it to present Lusophone concerns as part of a broader European agenda (Santos Siva, 2019). For instance, while its efforts to gain special treatment for the PALOP under EU-Africa frameworks were met with suspicion from larger Member States, Portugal tempered this by forming coalitions, mainly with Spain, Belgium, and, on occasion, Germany and Italy (Raimundo, 2020). Such coalitional strategies allowed Lisbon to amplify its diplomatic reach without appearing obstructionist.

Portugal's multifaceted strategy has also included technocratic capacity building. The appointment of Portuguese officials to prominent positions within the Commission and EU delegations, particularly in Lusophone countries, has strengthened Lisbon's power to affect Africa-related policy from the inside (Raimundo, 2020). These low-profile strategies reflect a small-state approach, relying on competence and credibility rather than veto power. While generally considered a policy-taker, Portugal has showed the ability to shape policy in the Africa portfolio, particularly when national goals are successfully Europeanised (Magone, 2006).

To this regard, Portugal influence on EU-Africa policy has been exercised mainly through agenda-structuring in Brussels' working machinery. For instance, during the 2021 Council Presidency, it co-organised a High-level EU-Africa Green Investment Forum in Lisbon with the EIB to establish green investment and the energy transition into the agenda. Officials described the Forum as a months-long structured dialogue that brought together member states, the Commission, the AU, African organisations and the private sector to align needs, financing conditions and implementation expectations. This strategy that Portugal put in place allowed to establish a common goal and paved the way for a more fruitful dialogue ("this was Portugal's biggest contribution to this integrated development agenda, it had everyone talking to each other" (Portuguese NGDO Platform, 2021, p. 35)).

A similar role in shaping EU positions can be found in the preparatory circuitry, such as Council formations and working groups (i.e. Africa Working Party - COAFR, External Action - RELEX). Portugal has been keen on pressing the EU to move Global Gateway from a narrative into an operational structure. Concretely, Lisbon has pushed for a systematic overview of ongoing EU-Africa projects to be showcased in ways that are comprehensible to

African counterparts. The aim was to calibrate programming and increase the visibility of existing efforts in order to create a baseline for co-ownership with African decision-makers. This approach was replicated at home, with Portugal establishing one of the first national Global Gateway task forces to align its sectoral capabilities with EU instruments and set up a single access point for enterprises and agencies engaging in Team Europe initiatives ([Interview #20](#)). Indeed, Portugal has put a great deal of preparatory work into transforming the relations between Europe and Africa by shifting the donor-receiver relationship to one of real partners (Marmé, 2023).

Ultimately, Portugal's entanglement between national identity and European diplomacy exemplifies a model of small-state influence, based on its ability to project and transform national interests within the EU framework through strategic framing, coalition building and leveraging institutional opportunities, particularly Council presidencies. Yet, Portugal's strategy in Africa is tightly linked to the traces of postcolonial memory, which continue to affect both domestic political thinking and external expectations from PALOP partners. Rather than seeking to erase this legacy, Portuguese diplomacy has reframed it as partnership-based narratives built on cultural affinity and shared language, allowing Lisbon to differentiate itself from larger European actors in Africa. At the same time, Portugal's economic vulnerabilities, amplified by the Eurozone crisis and structural dependency on EU funding, have reinforced the strategic logic of multilateralism. Embedding its Africa policy within EU instruments is not just a matter of normative alignment, but also of pragmatic necessity, as it ensures access to financial resources and enduring political presence. As a result, the degree of influence is greater where trust, sector expertise and long-term cooperation are decisive, and lower where financial volume and administrative scale are dominant. Thus, Portugal has developed a diplomatic profile that is neither marginal nor hegemonic, rather privileges endurance and execution. This entails seeking continuity in partnerships with local actors, while ensuring that Lusophone inputs are actually incorporated into EU documents and programmes.

Chapter 3: A Two-Level Assessment of Italy and Portugal’s Strategies in the Lobito Corridor

This chapter analyses how Italy and Portugal have engaged with the Lobito Corridor Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), interpreting their behaviour through the lens of Putnam’s two-level game framework, looking at how international and domestic pressures interact to shape each country’s approach. The Corridor serves as a case study to understand how different historical and political relationships with PALOP influence their negotiation strategies in bilateral and EU-led multilateral agreements. The first section situates the project within the broader EU-Africa framework, showing how the Global Gateway strategy provided the structural setting in which the Corridor was negotiated, and why this case is relevant for understanding EU negotiation dynamics. The second section interprets the involvement of Italy and Portugal, highlighting how their domestic drivers shaped their strategies: Italy’s emphasis on migration, energy security, through the Mattei Plan; Portugal’s reliance on its structural embeddedness and Lusophone ties. It also examines the entanglement of these domestic constraints with the EU negotiation process, mediating both alignment and divergence. The final section assesses the outcomes of the negotiations, considering to what extent Italy and Portugal managed to advance their domestic goals, how African agency influenced the process, and what this reveals about the bargaining strategies of small and mid-sized states within EU development diplomacy.

3.1 The EU-Africa Framework and the Emergence of the Lobito Corridor

The Lobito Corridor represents a significant empirical case for examining the contemporary evolution of European Union external action in Africa, particularly in its ability to illustrate the complex interplay between supranational policy frameworks and member state strategic interests.

3.1.1. The Lobito Corridor: Structure, Stakeholders, and Strategic Geography

The Lobito Corridor, though rooted in a century-old railway line traversing Angola’s interior, has in recent years reemerged as a focal point of international interest and investment. Its strategic importance lies in its ability to link three critical mineral-rich states, Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Zambia, directly to the Atlantic Ocean through the port of Lobito. At its core, the Corridor consists of the Lobito port (its logistical “heart”), the Benguela railway (the major “artery”), and a network of roads that feed into the corridor

from Angola's fertile hinterland, particularly the agro-industrial zones of Cuanza-Sul province (Baldoni, 2024).

In 2022, the Angolan government granted a 30-year concession for the Corridor's operation and rehabilitation to the Lobito Atlantic Railway (LAR) consortium, consisting of European firms Trafigura (Switzerland) Mota-Engil (Portugal) and Vecturis (Belgium) (M. Gomes, 2025). This agreement represented a pivotal shift in Angola's international relations, given its longstanding dependency on Chinese infrastructure finance and engineering. The concession entails significant investment to rehabilitate 1,300 kilometres of railway in Angola and extend the line into the DRC's mining areas and eventually to Zambia, thereby transforming the Corridor into a critical export route for copper and cobalt, as minerals essential for green industrial transitions and clean energy technologies worldwide (Castellet Nogués, 2024).

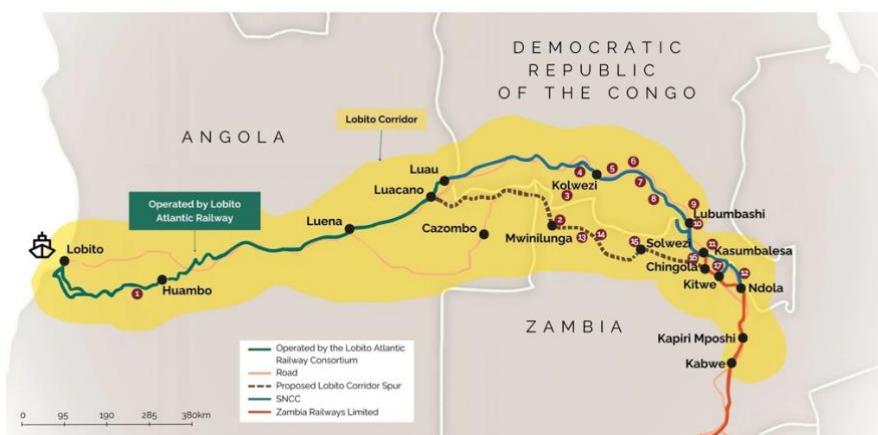


Figure 1: Route of the Lobito Corridor
Source: (Wala Chabala & Hofmeyr, 2025)

Yet, this infrastructure is not solely a logistical upgrade, but a transformative economic and political project. The Corridor is intended to significantly reduce transportation times and logistical costs. Current export routes from central Zambia to ports like Durban or Dar es Salaam require 40-50 days of transit. In contrast, a fully operational Lobito Corridor would reduce the travel to 20 days, saving logistics expenses by an estimated 15-20% (Forcellino, 2025). Moreover, it avoids the volatile Red Sea and Suez Canal regions, lowering insurance premiums and making the Atlantic coast, and by extension Europe, a more natural export destination. Nonetheless, the Corridor's significance extends beyond efficiency. It offers a western-facing alternative to existing east-bound logistics routes, notably the Chinese-backed TAZARA railway to Dar es Salaam (Wala Chabala & Hofmeyr, 2025). It thus serves a geopolitical function, by redirecting the flow of critical raw materials (CRMs) toward Western markets and away from China's logistical dominance. This redirection of trade and

infrastructure networks occurs in the midst of a rapid increase in global CRMs demand. The International Energy Agency (IEA) predicts that demand for cobalt, lithium, and nickel will increase twenty- to fortyfold by 2040, largely due to their use in battery production, electric vehicles (EVs), and green technologies (IEA, 2025a). This places the DRC, which alone supplies around 70% of global cobalt, and Zambia at the centre of a global scramble for resources.

This centrality is what distinguishes the Lobito Corridor as a high-stakes platform for multilateral cooperation, geopolitical competition and competing visions of development. It also serves as a test case for how African countries, despite debt dependency and historical asymmetries, are leveraging competing partnerships to pursue domestic economic goals, such as local value chain development and mineral processing capacity.

3.1.2. The Lobito Corridor in EU-Africa Relations

Following its initial official endorsement by the EU and the US under the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) at the 2023 G7 Summit and reinforced under the 2024 Italian G7 presidency, the Corridor has been recast as a geopolitical and geoeconomic asset for both the EU and its African partners (G7, 2024; Way, 2024). For the EU, the Corridor contributes to a number of interconnected strategic objectives. First, it reduces dependence on China for CRMs supplies, so advancing the Union's overarching goal of securing strategic autonomy. Second, it facilitates green and digital transitions by providing direct access to copper, cobalt, and other critical inputs for battery and cleantech manufacture. Third, it positions Europe as a credible partner for African industrialisation, potentially providing alternatives to China's state-led investment model and avoiding the debt traps that have sparked criticism of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Carrai, 2024). Indeed, the Corridor is both a substantive policy experiment and a critical test of the EU's ability to operationalise multilateral infrastructure diplomacy. These multidimensional characteristics make the Corridor particularly useful for analysing EU policy formulation, negotiation processes and implementation mechanisms.

The European Commission's 2020 document *Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa* serves as the conceptual underpinning for this engagement, articulating a vision of partnership based on mutual interests and shared priorities (European Commission, 2020). This strategic orientation was put in action with the announcement of the Global Gateway in 2021, a framework aimed to mobilise up to €300 billion in investments globally by 2027, with a particular emphasis on digital, energy, transport, and health infrastructure (European

Commission, n.d.-a). The strategy is based on the “Team Europe” approach, which brings together EU institutions, member states, and their respective development finance instruments, including the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), in order to catalyse private sector investment for long-term systemic transformation (European Commission, n.d.-b). Unlike the BRI, the Global Gateway does not combine strategic goals and the private sector to the same extent, rather it considers the private sector a crucial implementation partner and portrays itself as a rules-based, values-driven alternative model (Carrai, 2024). This vision was further reinforced in 2024 when the Commission transitioned from a “geopolitical Commission” to what could increasingly be referred to as an “investment Commission”, indicating a greater focus on external competitiveness and economic diplomacy. The Global Gateway has since grown into a hybrid instrument, serving as both the external dimension of EU industrial policy and an instrument for projecting strategic autonomy in an increasingly contested international environment. This evolution may be seen in the growing emphasis placed on concepts like “geopolitical realism”, “supply chain resilience” and “strategic partnerships,” particularly in regard to CRMs and sustainable connectivity (Global Gateway Forum, 2025).

The analytical significance of this project extends beyond its material dimensions to include its procedural aspects. The Corridor is the result of complex negotiation processes involving many governance levels and institutional actors. The formalisation of EU support under the seven-party MoU signed in October 2023 – encompassing the EU, the United States, Angola, Zambia, DRC, African Development Bank (AfDB), and Africa Finance Corporation (AFC) – goes beyond traditional development cooperation mechanisms (Lobito Corridor MoU, 2023). In fact, it reflects a fundamental reconfiguration of EU development and foreign policy instruments, shifting from traditional top-down aid-donor cooperation models to geo-economic engagement frameworks that require coordination with member state ambitions, private sector participation, and strategic positioning against external powers (Karkare & Byiers, 2025).

Hence, the Corridor shows how member state preferences fundamentally impact strategic implementation processes. Portugal’s influence through the participation of Mota-Engil, a key partner in the Lobito Atlantic Railway (LAR) consortium, allows for direct engagement with operational dynamics, whereas Italy has integrated the Corridor into its Mattei Plan framework under the Italian G7 presidency in 2024, demonstrating national efforts to align with Global Gateway priorities while asserting leadership in African diplomacy (G7, 2024; Teixeira Alves, 2023). All these considerations have contributed to the renewed interest on the Corridor from the EU perspective.

Furthermore, African agency represents a structural role in shaping the course of the Lobito Corridor. Angola, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo have not approached the initiative as passive recipients of European infrastructure policy but have actively leveraged it as a platform for partnership diversification and economic recalibration. This strategic use of the Corridor reflects a deliberate effort to broaden diplomatic and commercial alternatives and regain policy space for autonomous industrial development. The MoU lays out the possibility for the parties to “work in collaboration to expand an economic corridor that will enhance regional trade and growth,” suggesting that the Corridor’s logistics function will be integrated into broader regional development strategies (Lobito Corridor MoU, 2023, p. 2).

Beyond the aim of redirecting mineral exports from east to west coasts, both Zambia and the DRC have expressed strong desires to advance up the vital minerals value chain. Their plans for a joint battery precursor plant represent not only a commitment to processing capacity and local beneficiation, but also an advanced understanding of the shifting geopolitics of global supply chains (Karkare & Medinilla, 2023). These efforts are underpinned by a broader agenda of resource-based industrialisation and energy transition. According to African Union’s green minerals agenda, African governments seek to capitalise on their natural resources regardless of geopolitical rivalries, with the objective of developing “green mineral value-chains for equitable resource-based industrialisation and electrification, creating green technologies and sustainable development to enhance the quality of life of its people” (African Union, 2025).

In this context, the Lobito Corridor shows how African priorities – market integration, industrial sovereignty, and regional connectivity – have gained prominence in the negotiation space. This calls into question simplistic narratives that portray African governments as objects of strategic competition between the West and China. Instead, the initiative illustrates how EU external action is increasingly shaped through mutual agenda-setting, with African actors wielding growing influence over both the form and substance of engagement. The EU itself has acknowledged this shift. Through the Global Gateway strategy, it promotes a model of “mutually beneficial partnerships” that combines internal policy priorities, such as supply chain resilience, green transition, and strategic autonomy, with external objectives of promoting socioeconomic development and regional integration (Global Gateway Forum, 2025; Karkare & Byiers, 2025).

As a result, the Lobito Corridor stands out as a noteworthy case in this evolving context. It aligns, in principle, a wide range of European and African interests, demonstrating how infrastructure cooperation can become a space of convergence between geopolitical objectives and long-standing development ambitions. The examination of the Lobito Corridor’s

emergence within EU-Africa relations lays the groundwork for highlighting how specific member states, particularly Italy and Portugal, navigate the complex terrain between national strategic interests and collective European action. The analysis will illustrate the mechanisms through which historical relationships, domestic political pressures and institutional constraints shape member state engagement within multilateral frameworks.

3.2. The Lobito Corridor as a Two-Level Game

3.2.1 Italy and Portugal's Likely Strategies and Behaviours (Level II)

Italy

Italy's involvement in the Lobito Corridor can be seen as part of a broader effort to consolidate its presence in Africa in a context of evolving global competition and internal redefinition of strategic priorities. The country's decision to formally sign the MoU in mid-2024 was not based on long-standing bilateral ties with the countries involved, nor on an established presence in Southern Africa (Struttura di Missione, 2025). Instead, it arose as part of a larger recalibration of Italy's external action under the Mattei Plan, which sought to restore consistency and visibility to a so far fragmented approach to the continent.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the Meloni government launched the Mattei Plan as a central pillar of Italy's Africa strategy, addressing interrelated concerns about migration governance, energy security and economic diplomacy. However, in its early stages, the Plan was characterised by institutional volatility and a rather undefined operational framework, prompting a search for initiatives that could serve as both symbolic flagships and vehicles of immediate diplomatic projection (Simonelli et al., 2024; Zupi, 2024). In this context, the Lobito Corridor offered a particularly appealing opportunity: a high-profile infrastructure initiative already endorsed by the EU, the United States, and key African partners, aligned with broader multilateral goals, and capable of being integrated, at least in terms of narrative and intentions, into Italy's emerging vision for Africa (Interview #3). Importantly, by becoming the only EU member state to formally sign the MoU, Italy gained a unique position at the negotiation table (Interview #1).

Participation in the Lobito Corridor thus responded to both external stimuli and internal needs. On a domestic level, collaborating on a regional project allowed the government to widen the geographical focus of its Africa engagement beyond the traditional Mediterranean and Sahel regions. It also helped to lay out an investment- and development-oriented dimension of the Mattei Plan, which complemented the more securitised narratives associated with

migration management. As a result, the Corridor's positioning as a catalyst for local industrial development, small and mid-sized enterprises (SMEs) integration and regional connectivity coincided with the Italian government's efforts to present its engagement with Africa as based on partnership, reciprocity, and long-term cooperation (Camera dei Deputati, 2024b).

From a diplomatic standpoint, the Corridor also provided an opportunity to strengthen Italy's position in a fast-changing multilateral environment. Rome had a clear interest in aligning itself with the strategic direction taken by both the EU and the United States, through the Global Gateway and the G7 PGII respectively. Italy's G7 membership allowed it to be visibly present in a framework where major global actors were investing political and financial capital, and to assert its intention to contribute actively to the shaping of Africa's infrastructure future. In this sense, the choice to join the Corridor initiative was not only reactive but also reflected a deliberate effort to avoid marginalisation and to maintain a voice in decisions involving strategic access to CRMs, connectivity routes, and long-term industrial partnerships ([Interview #2](#)).

Such framing was reinforced when Italy hosted “The Mattei Plan for Africa and the Global Gateway” Summit in Rome in June 2025, when the alignment between the Mattei Plan and EU objectives was officially reaffirmed (Italian Government & European Commission, 2025). Italy positioned itself as a bridge between national initiatives and broader European frameworks, emphasising the added value of national experiences within the Team Europe approach (Meloni, 2025). The convergence of narratives around “non-predatory” investment, “win-win” cooperation and local value creation helped position Italy as a constructive actor within this multilateral configuration, despite the lack of a longstanding commercial or institutional foothold in the Lobito region.

Indeed, one of the characteristics that distinguishes Italy's participation in the Corridor is the relative imbalance between its political-diplomatic commitment and its tangible presence on the ground. Unlike other Member States (such as Portugal), who have firms actively involved in the management and upgrading of the railway infrastructure, Italy lacks significant industrial or logistical actors operating in the region ([Interview #4](#)). The role of public financial institutions, such as CDP and SACE, in facilitating possible Italian contributions remains to be explored, and concrete projects involving Italian companies are still limited in scope. This, however, does not diminish the relevance of Italy's involvement. Rather, it represents a broader strategy of diplomatic activation, in which Rome aims to use symbolic participation to strengthen its position within strategically sensitive multilateral spaces.

Such an approach reveals the importance of institutional adaptation in Italian foreign policy. The Lobito Corridor provided Italy with an opportunity to engage with an initiative that, while not conceived in Rome, was structurally compatible with the government's emerging Africa agenda. By participating, Italy could project coherence between its domestic political narrative and its international engagements, without having to take on leadership or alter the project's design. This pragmatic form of involvement, based on strategic convergence, timing and diplomatic visibility, allowed Italy to secure its position within a multilevel governance environment, while also increasing the perceived credibility of the Mattei Plan ([Interview #3](#)).

In sum, Italy's likely strategic behaviour in relation to the Lobito Corridor is best understood as the result of an evolving process of foreign policy consolidation. Italy chose to link itself with a project whose relevance extends beyond bilateralism, motivated by the need to give institutional depth to its Africa strategy and the requirement to be present in the main international fora for infrastructure and development cooperation. Its role reflects a broader trend of European foreign policy in Africa, in which engagement, alignment and narrative construction are equally important as tangible leadership. In this way, the Lobito Corridor serves not only as a space for economic cooperation, but also as a platform for Italy to improve its geopolitical identity as a mid-sized European state seeking influence through multilateral engagement.

Portugal

Portugal's support for the Lobito Corridor initiative represents a broader strategic continuity posture rooted in a long-standing bilateral relationship with Angola, as well as a foreign policy orientation based on Lusophony. Portugal's involvement is best understood as an extension of its historical familiarity with the region, its embedded economic networks and its institutional preference for low-conflict, facilitative diplomacy, as opposed to Italy, whose engagement with the Corridor is shaped by recent shifts in strategic focus or domestic political recalibration.

This structural embeddedness arises mostly from Angola's relevance to Portugal's foreign policy identity. It has symbolised not only post-colonial continuity, but also a core pillar of Lisbon's Lusophone axis, which is part of a three-pillar paradigm that balances Atlantic, European, and post-imperial affiliations. Crucially, this perspective is politically uncontroversial. Foreign policy towards Angola has historically been protected from electoral volatility, with succeeding governments strengthening its importance, regardless of ideological orientations ([Interview #11](#)). This remarkable level of domestic consensus has enabled a constant projection of Portuguese interests in Angola, without the need for reframing or

rhetorical justification. As a result, Lisbon's support for an initiative like the Lobito Corridor did not constitute a departure from existing strategic priorities but rather fitted seamlessly into them. This also meant that Portugal could participate in the project without requiring public manifestation or political repositioning, thereby supporting a tradition of development diplomacy that is perceived domestically as low-cost and pragmatic rather than strategic or securitised ([Interview #13](#)). Thus, Portugal's engagement with the Corridor highlighted the structural consistency between its own strategy in Angola and the project's objectives, such as regional integration, improved connectivity and infrastructure-led development. Indeed, public statements by national authorities placed particular emphasis on the socioeconomic potential of the initiative ("corridors of opportunities"), emphasising its role in strengthening local value chains, expanding the reach of Angolan logistics networks and contributing to regional cohesion (ANTT, 2024).

Economically, this approach is reinforced by a dense web of commercial ties. Portuguese SMEs have had a long-standing operational presence in Angola in sectors connected to the Corridor's implementation, primarily construction, logistics and infrastructure services. These actors do not merely represent foreign investment, rather they have become locally integrated over time, gaining knowledge of administrative procedures, informal networks and regional constraints ([Interview #15](#)). Their presence creates a diffused but significant domestic constituency that is clearly interested in maintaining Angola as a stable and accessible market. Hence, domestically, the Lobito Corridor was viewed as an extension of current economic logics, rather than a new frontier. Mota-Engil, one of Portugal's major companies in Angola, is a key central partner in the Lobito Atlantic Railway (LAR) consortium, demonstrating this continuity (Teixeira Alves, 2023). Its role combined operational capability and long-term presence with some type of political reassurance. Indeed, its embeddedness in Angola made Portugal a reliable liaison not only with African partners but also with the EU, demonstrating that the country could provide technical expertise and enable cooperation without altering its policy stance (Filipe, 2025).

Portugal's behaviour in this context was defined not only policy continuity but also by its ability to align early and subtly with greater European goals. While not explicitly taking a leadership role in designing the structure of the Global Gateway's operationalisation in southern Africa, Portugal acted in a way that increased the coherence and credibility of the initiative, particularly in relation to Angola. Its contribution was less about financial volume or political visibility and more about reinforcing the project's legitimacy and implementation capacity via existing bilateral channels and commercial ties ([Interview #13](#)).

Therefore, Portugal's approach in relation to the Corridor can be best understood as an example of structural compatibility between domestic preferences and multilateral opportunities. With no pressure to politicise its engagement, and no need to rethink its Africa policy, Lisbon entered the negotiation space with a pre-existing engagement logic that could be readily integrated into the broader EU-African infrastructure dialogue. This not only reduced the costs of participation but also increased Portugal's ability to act as a facilitator by leveraging existing trust with Angolan authorities and local actors, contributing technical knowledge accumulated over decades and supporting the project's regional development potential without politicising its participation. Portugal's capacity to act as a discreet anchor within this initiative, neither disruptive nor marginal, enabled it to consolidate its historical partnerships while contributing meaningfully to the EU's credibility in southern Africa. In this sense, the country's engagement was driven not by a desire to expand its role, rather by the ability to maintain and reinforce existing channels of influence in a rapidly evolving regional scenario.

3.2.2. Entanglement: Domestic Constraints in the EU Negotiation Process (Level I-II)

In line with Putnam's two-level game theory, the negotiation dynamics around the Lobito Corridor show how domestic constraints do not only shape national preferences but also influence the pathways by which these aspirations can be projected or adapted at the international level. The EU represents a complex institutional environment in which national priorities must be framed, timed and communicated in ways that are acceptable to multilateral structures. The concept of entanglement becomes analytically useful in this space of interaction, as national strategies and EU frameworks co-adapt. It refers not only to the interdependence between domestic and international arenas, but also to the mutual filtering through which national constraints affect, and are shaped by, supranational structures. Indeed, the Lobito Corridor offers a particularly valuable case for assessing how Italy and Portugal manage a negotiating environment that is still in the making, as the Corridor is at the early phases of its implementation. Instead of focussing on finalised treaties or binding commitments, one should consider how both governments are already engaged in negotiating positions, articulating goals and building coalitions that will influence outcomes once the project enters a more consolidated phase.

For Italy, entanglement took the form of a conscious effort to combine an emerging Africa policy based on the Mattei Plan with pre-existing EU structures, such as the Global Gateway and its operational mechanisms. As previously mentioned, the Mattei Plan coupled normative aspirations, framed as win-win cooperation and non-predatory investment, with

more contingent political imperatives, such as the need for political leadership in migration management and energy diversification (Camera dei Deputati, 2024b). These domestic drivers may narrow Italy's win-set, as any international initiative should resonate with the government's Africa narrative and yield politically communicable results.

Italy's eventual signing of the MoU in mid-2024 might thus be interpreted as a calibrated move, designed to match the Mattei Plan with the EU's foreign investment priorities and timed to maximise symbolic visibility while not overextending its operational capability. Within the EU negotiation space, Italy presented a narrative of complementarity between national and European instruments, portraying itself as a "bridge" between bilateral ambition and multilateral framework (Italian Government, 2024). This positioning allowed Rome to avoid internal inconsistencies in its Africa policy, such as the underdeveloped presence in southern Africa, by integrating its participation within a broader political frame that had already previously received high-level endorsement from Brussels and Washington. In this sense, EU structures addressed Italy's domestic constraints by providing symbolic anchoring and diplomatic coordination, as well as visibility mechanisms that allowed participation without previous institutional planning. Italy's win-set was thus widened not by domestic compromise, but by the opportunity to externalise national goals through an already underway multinational project.

Portugal's entanglement, on the other hand, was based on a logic of structural compatibility rather than strategic recalibration. Lisbon's Africa policy has historically revolved around a very consistent set of principles: political continuity, economic integration, and diplomatic prudence. The resulting domestic configuration, anchored in bipartisan consensus and an extensive network of SMEs in Angola, allowed Portugal to enter the EU negotiation space without the need to modify its national strategy or elevate its public profile. However, this stability also imposed a particular set of constraints, reflecting those of a small-sized state (Thorhallsson & Cunha, 2023). Indeed, Portugal's foreign policy apparatus, while institutionally mature and diplomatically credible, operates with limited financial and bureaucratic resources, naturally limiting its ability to lead or scale up initiatives at continental level. In the case of Angola, these structural constraints were further heightened by reputational considerations, since any overtly imposing posture risked recalling colonial memories and undermining the climate of trust that Lisbon has carefully cultivated over decades. As a result, discretion was not simply a default mode of involvement, but a strategic choice shaped by the need to balance historical sensitivities with operational realism (Interview #13).

These limits influenced Lisbon's timing and style of engagement. Portugal did not seek to influence the high-level political formulation of the Lobito Corridor or to shape the Global Gateway's governance mechanisms. Instead, it took an early and modest approach, bringing experience, technical credibility and economic legitimacy, particularly through Mota-Engil's anchoring presence in the LAR consortium. This strategy may not have required explicit negotiation of national aspirations, but it did indicate a form of tacit alignment in which Lisbon's contributions were channelled through its existing ties with Angolan institutions. More broadly, Portugal's strategy also relied on leveraging its diplomatic and institutional know-how in Brussels and in Africa. Indeed, smaller member states like Portugal often seek to influence EU external action by proactively deploying national officials and diplomats in key EU services, whether in policymaking units or field delegations, ensuring early-stage access to strategic discussions and embedding national perspectives into broader EU approaches. Hence, Portugal's approach rests on discreet, anticipatory influence through embedded presence and policy entrepreneurship at the technical level ([Interview #12](#)). As a result, Portugal's win-set expanded not through active bargaining, but through the latent compatibility between its Africa policy and the EU's evolving approach to investment-based development cooperation.

What enabled both Italy and Portugal to operate under these varied constraints was the institutional design of the Global Gateway itself. Rather than needing harmonised national inputs, the framework is built on a flexible model of EU external action that incorporates member state contributions via the so-called Team Europe approach ([Interview #9](#)). This framework brings together financing, expertise, and implementation capacity from the European Commission, the EIB, and member states' development institutions, while retaining variable geometry in terms of visibility and coordination. At the operational level, platforms like the European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFSD+) and guarantees from national export credit agencies (such as Italy's SACE or Portugal's COSEC) enable countries to participate in differentiated ways (European Commission, n.d.-a). The same structural flexibility that allowed Italy to convey diplomatic ambitions, despite limited tangible engagement in the local economy, also allowed Portugal to make meaningful contributions without actively performing on the political foreground.

Furthermore, EU institutional actors, mainly under the supervision of Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), played a key role in mediating these different modes of engagement. The European Commission does not anticipate uniformity across member states but rather encourages them to engage in ways that reflect their comparative advantages, whether through political signalling, development cooperation, or

commercial embeddedness ([Interview #10](#)). This pragmatic logic explains how both assertive and discreet behaviours can coexist and be mutually reinforcing within a single initiative. As a result, the EU becomes more than just a constraint on national agency, but also an enabler of differentiated strategies, as long as they align around shared external objectives.

In this sense, the entanglement refers to a configuration in which the boundaries between Level I and Level II are porous, and where international structures serve as both a platform for domestic projection and a filter through which national aspirations are reinterpreted. Italy's need for political visibility was absorbed into an arrangement of EU statements and actions that reinforced its Africa narrative. Portugal's desire to maintain discretion was supported by decentralised implementation channels that gave room to commercial actors and institutional knowledge without requiring a shift in diplomatic tone. In both cases, the EU did not weaken national preferences but rather incorporated them into a broader plan of action. By allowing for differentiated participation while maintaining rhetorical and strategic coherence, the EU has proved its ability to mediate entangled national interests without reducing them to a single uniform perspective. Moreover, the highly competitive geopolitical context limits the scope for bilateral bargaining between Italy or Portugal and African partners, instead shifting the focus to coalition-building within the EU and with global actors, which offered the two countries the opportunity to enlarge their win-sets rather than attempting to stand alone, ensuring that they would not be sidelined when taking decisions about the project's financing and governance.

3.3. Outcomes and Implications for EU-Africa Cooperation

The Lobito Corridor case offers a valuable lens through which to evaluate how national preferences, supranational coordination, and third-party agency interact in shaping the outcomes of EU external action. Framed through the logic of a two-level game, the Corridor highlights how win-sets are not only negotiated between national and international arenas, but also co-constructed in dialogue with partner regions, that is, a politically assertive and development-oriented southern Africa. Italy and Portugal, despite not being main actors in the project's technical design, provided various types of engagement that gave insights on the broader dynamics of EU-Africa cooperation.

Italy's commitment to the Corridor was marked by a deliberate effort to wave domestic priorities, particularly the strategic goals of the Mattei Plan, into the narrative and diplomatic momentum of Global Gateway (Italian Government, 2025). Although the operational elements of the Corridor were mostly established prior to Italy's formal accession to the MoU, Rome

succeeded in amplifying its symbolic presence, positioning itself as a key interlocutor between EU institutions and African counterparts. This approach illustrates how narrative convergence and strategic timing can serve as tools for mid-sized EU member states to increase their visibility even in the absence of significant material leverage. Hence, Italy was able to expand its win-set by integrating national rhetoric, such as the emphasis on non-predatory investment and partnership-based cooperation, into political discourse at the multilateral level.

Portugal, by contrast, exerted influence through a posture of embedded continuity. Without engaging explicitly in agenda-setting, Lisbon reinforced the credibility of the EU initiative by aligning it with its longstanding bilateral relations and economic footprint in Angola. This anchoring role was not the result of a structural compatibility, as the project's developmental goals and geographic orientation overlapped with existing Portuguese networks and priorities. Portugal's win-set thus expanded not through new strategic ambitions, but through the consolidation of pre-existing preferences within a multilateral context. This reveals an alternative channel through which smaller member states may influence EU external action, that is, through facilitation, trust capital and reputational coherence.

Yet, the structure and outcome of the Lobito Corridor cannot be understood by focusing solely on European actors. A key element of the negotiation dynamics was the strategic role of African governments, particularly Angola, which took advantage of the project to reposition itself on the continental and global stage. Under President João Lourenço, Angola did not just agree to external investment flows, rather it actively leveraged the Corridor to diversify its partnerships and reduce dependency on any geopolitical actor, most notably China ([Interview #21](#)). This recalibration was deliberate, as part of a broader effort to show Angola's availability as a credible and reliable partner to Western actors, including the EU, the United States, and international financial institutions. Hence, Angola sought to translate geopolitical competition into economic opportunity, presenting itself as an appealing country capable of ensuring regulatory stability and strategic access to raw materials, all of which could anchor a Western-aligned infrastructure initiative on the continent ([Interview #19](#); [Interview #23](#)). This repositioning was supported by tangible institutional behaviour. Angola firmly controlled the governance structure of the Lobito Corridor and guaranteed that the public-private partnerships operating in its territory respected national development priorities, particularly in logistics, local procurement, and industrial upgrading. In doing so, Angola signalled that engagement would occur on its terms, and in alignment with long-standing national goals, not merely foreign financing logics.

What distinguishes the Lobito Corridor is that it allowed African partners to translate external competition into bargaining leverage. This was made feasible in part because of the parallel transformation occurring on the European side. The initiative unfolded as a test case for the EU Global Gateway strategy, which reflects a broader reassessment of European external action. The EU's previous posture, which was mostly oriented around aid and normative conditionality, has gradually given way to an approach grounded in co-investment, mutual interests and geopolitical pragmatism (Global Gateway Forum, 2025). Within this shift, the Lobito Corridor represented a new model of EU-Africa cooperation, in which African agency is structurally integrated into the project architecture, and member states and EU institutions act less as donors and more as co-developers of connectivity and investment strategies. This is consistent with commitments expressed in the recent EU-AU Joint Communiqué of the 3rd Ministerial Meeting in May 2025, where ministers from both continents endorsed a new vision of mutual interest, structural interdependence, and shared responsibility for implementing the 2030 Joint Vision and Agenda 2063 (European Union & African Union, 2025). The emphasis on value addition, regional value chains, energy transition and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) shows a renewed understanding that future cooperation must address African-defined priorities while also allowing European actors to maintain strategic presence in a competitive geopolitical environment.

Ultimately, in the Lobito Corridor example, the negotiation space was not defined by a single centre of gravity but by the mutual entanglement of domestic constraints, EU institutional incentives, and African strategic preferences. Within this complex geometry, African actors could influence both the process and substance of cooperation, modulating timelines, asserting eventual objections on governance structures and shaping the conditions under which EU participation could be politically viable and normatively legitimate. Their role in “reframing the game” is therefore central to understanding the entanglement of levels in this initiative, that avoided a top-down execution of European strategic interests. In this perspective, the future of EU-Africa relations will depend less on formal rhetoric about development cooperation mechanisms and more on the EU's ability to internalise African agency as a structuring force, moving beyond declared ownership to actual co-decision and balancing strategic self-interest with equitable development into a renewed model of partnership-based diplomacy.

Conclusions

The comparison of Italy's and Portugal's involvement in the Lobito Corridor reveals an unexpected contrast in the way each country has positioned itself within the project. Italy appears to lack a long-standing economic presence in Angola, particularly in the mining and logistics sectors that are critical to Lobito. Yet, it has emerged as one of the most visible and politically assertive supporters of the initiative. Portugal, on the other hand, possesses the structural advantages that might be expected to translate into prominent political leadership, such as deep and resilient bilateral relations with Angola, extensive business networks and direct participation of one of its major companies, Mota-Engil, in the Lobito Atlantic Railway (LAR) consortium that won the concession for the implementation of the railway. However, Lisbon has opted for a lower-key, more discreet approach to the project's political narrative.

The explanation involves a combination of capacity and intention. For Italy, the Lobito Corridor offered a timely opportunity to align the launch of the Mattei Plan with a high-profile, EU- and G7-backed infrastructure project, at a time when both Europe and the United States were looking to strengthen their presence in strategic African supply chains. The project was quickly integrated into Italy's political discourse as proof of its ability to lead on African issues, reinforcing domestic narratives of renewed strategic engagement and raising its reputation within the EU and G7. In this view, Italy's active visibility is not the outcome of deep pre-existing ties to Angola, rather it stems from a deliberate exercise in political positioning, with Lobito serving as a symbolic platform for projecting influence.

Portugal's approach reflects a different set of incentives and constraints. While its embedded presence in Angola gives Lisbon unique access and credibility, these advantages are balanced by a greater awareness of historical sensitivity. Any overly assertive posture risks reviving neo-colonial perceptions, potentially weakening the trust that sustains Portugal's influence. Moreover, the scale of its financial and diplomatic resources prevents it from maintaining leadership in various high-profile initiatives at once. As a result, Lisbon has preferred to channel its influence through the EU's Global Gateway framework (i.e. Team Europe), shaping project priorities from inside, ensuring that Lusophone expertise informs EU-Africa dialogue, while securing its long-term position through subtle but sustained engagement.

Despite these differences in style and visibility, both countries belong to a select group of EU member states that can combine significant knowledge of African contexts with a genuine interest in promoting cooperation with the continent. In this common area, both Italy

and Portugal aspire to act as “bridges” between the EU and Africa, though using different methods. Italy does so through enhanced political projection and narrative leadership, while Portugal operates more subtly by leveraging cultural proximity, sectoral expertise and established networks to achieve influence without visibly seeking attention. In practice, these approaches are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, they show two complementary strategies for middle powers to influence EU-Africa cooperation, with one emphasising the expansion of the win-set through high-profile participation and the other enlarging it through discreet brokerage and embedded networks.

On the basis of Putnam’s Two-Level Game theory, the Lobito Corridor shows how both Italy and Portugal have been able to operate with unusually large win-sets. The EU’s strategic need to secure critical raw materials, along with uncertainty over the scope of future US engagement in the project, has created a favourable context in which national preferences can be successfully projected into EU negotiations. In Italy’s case, the Mattei Plan provided a political framework that remarkably aligned with the EU’s Africa priorities, allowing international commitments to reinforce domestic legitimacy and vice versa. For Portugal, the lasting bipartisan consensus on strong relations with Lusophone Africa meant that any agreement consistent with this orientation would be welcomed with domestic approval, even when pursued discretely. In both cases, the interaction between stable domestic support and the opportunities created at EU level broadened the scope for negotiation, even if the channels and methods were different.

The contrast between Italy’s prominent political role without a deeply rooted presence in Angola and Portugal’s discretion despite its established position shows that influence in EU-Africa projects cannot be assessed only in terms of material capabilities or sectoral participation. Indeed, political timing, narrative framing, and reputational risk management are equally important. Italy’s strategy indicates how visibility may be used to compensate for structural limitations, while Portugal’s trajectory shows how long-term relationships and technical credibility can be mobilised without the need for high-profile leadership.

Looking ahead, the Lobito Corridor case study highlights the need of combining political initiative with deep knowledge in EU-Africa cooperation. As competition for African partnerships intensifies, success will depend on aligning domestic political will with realistic capacity assessments and leveraging comparative strengths within the EU framework. If Italy can turn its political prominence into concrete results and Portugal can continue to transform its discreet influence into tangible outcomes, both will remain influential in bridging European and African priorities.

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List of Interviews

N. Interview	Professional Role	Area of Expertise	Date
Interview #1	Diplomatic Advisor to Prime Minister on Africa	Italy	07.07.2025
Interview #2	Editor of a business-focused magazine on Africa	Italy	16.07.2025
Interview #3	Il Sole 24 Ore Journalist	Italy	18.07.2025
Interview #4	Consultant for private sector engagement in African markets	Italy	21.07.2025
Interview #5	<u>Formiche.net</u> Journalist	Italy	23.07.2025
Interview #6	Senior representative of Chamber of Commerce Italy-Angola	Italy	29.07.2025
Interview #7	Retired Diplomat	Italy	09.07.2025
Interview #8	Retired Diplomat	Italy	28.07.2025
Interview #9	Head of Division at European External Action Service (EEAS)	Italy / EU	09.08.2025
Interview #10	Head of Department at Cassa Depositi e Prestiti (CDP)	Italy	05.09.2025
Interview #11	Policy Officer at European Commission (DG INTPA)	EU	15.07.2025
Interview #12	Managing Director at European External Action Service (EEAS)	Portugal / EU	31.07.2025
Interview #13	Former Minister of Foreign Affairs	Portugal	08.07.2025
Interview #14	ISCTE-IUL Scholar	Portugal	07.08.2025
Interview #15	ISCTE-IUL Scholar	Portugal	30.07.2025
Interview #16	Attorney in International law firm	Portugal	30.07.2025
Interview #17	Senior representative of Chamber of Commerce Portugal-Angola	Portugal	08.08.2025
Interview #18	ISCTE-IUL Scholar	Portugal	21.08.2025
Interview #19	Alternative Executive Director World Bank Group	Portugal / UN	29.08.2025
Interview #20	Diplomat at Portuguese Permanent Representation to the EU	Portugal / EU	03.09.2025
Interview #21	Political and security risk consultant	Southern Africa	24.07.2025
Interview #22	Political and security risk consultant	Southern Africa	04.08.2025
Interview #23	Journalist	Nigeria	28.07.2025
Interview #24	Policy Analyst	Angola	26.07.2025
Interview #25	Managing Editor of a publication on China-Africa relations	China-Africa	06.08.2025
Interview #26	Policy Analyst	Angola	30.07.2025
Interview #27	Entrepreneur	Angola	08.08.2025
Interview #28	Deputy Managing Editor at a Think Thank	Southern Africa	30.07.2025

Appendix: Interview Protocol

This interview protocol contributes to the methodological framework of Chapter 3 of the thesis, which uses a qualitative case study methodology to examine how Italy's and Portugal's national interests influenced their negotiation techniques in the Lobito Corridor Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The interviews serve as a primary source of empirical information, supplementing document analysis and allowing for the process tracing of important negotiation processes. This protocol contributes to a better understanding of how domestic priorities interact with EU-level commitments in shaping foreign policy outcomes by triangulating insights from interviews with findings from Chapters 1 and 2, which focus on Italy's and Portugal's historical and political engagement with Africa, respectively, in line with Putnam's Two-Level Game framework.

Interviewee Selection

Interviewees were selected through a purposive, theory-driven sampling technique to capture insights relevant to both Level I (international negotiation) and Level II (domestic constraints), following Robert Putnam's Two-Level Game framework. The aim was to ensure a multi-level and cross-national perspective on the negotiation and implementation of the Lobito Corridor MoU. The research conducted more than 20 interviews, balancing representation across the following stakeholder categories:

- At least 5 interviewees from Italy (MFA, trade agencies, or diplomatic staff);
- At least 5 from Portugal (same institutional range);
- At least 2 EU-level officials (relevant units involved in Global Gateway);
- At least 2–3 private sector representatives involved in Angola-related infrastructure, finance, or trade initiatives, as well as regional experts and analysts from African countries.

This threshold ensures comparative depth between Italy and Portugal and allows for a triangulated view incorporating both national and multilateral perspectives.

Selection criteria included:

- **Institutional affiliation:** Officials from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, national development agencies (e.g., Camões I.P., Mattei Plan Task Force), Trade Promotion agencies, Permanent Representations to the EU, European Commission, Chamber of Commerce, and private sector companies operating in Angola.

- **Role relevance:** Interviewees were selected for their direct or strategic involvement in negotiation, coordination, or implementation activities related to the Lobito Corridor and broader EU-Africa connectivity initiatives.
- **Comparative balance:** Efforts were made to secure institutionally and hierarchically comparable profiles from Italy and Portugal for a thorough cross-country comparison.
- **Availability and willingness:** Final inclusion depended on consent to participate and availability within the research timeline.

Given the political and diplomatic nature of the interviews, particular attention is paid to potential bias and ambiguity in elite discourse, including institutional messaging, political framing of events, and diplomatic restraint around sensitive themes. To reduce risks, interviews are structured to focus on processes, experiences, and mechanisms, cross-validate responses with documentary evidence, and maintain researcher reflexivity during analysis to account for institutional position, phrasing, and context. This reflexive approach improves methodological transparency and allows for more credible interpretations of interview data.

Interview Question Structure

Interviews are conducted using a semi-structured format, combining comparability across cases with flexibility to explore context-specific insights. The questions are organised into six thematic blocks:

1. **National priorities** and motivations behind engagement with the Lobito Corridor.
2. **Role within the EU negotiation process**, including coordination mechanisms and influence strategies.
3. **Interaction with African counterparts**, focusing on perceptions of receptivity and negotiation dynamics.
4. **Coordinating bilateral and EU-Level initiatives**, exploring complementarities or tensions.
5. **Institutional capacity** and policy learning in managing cross-continental infrastructure projects, and whether the process fostered policy learning or improved future capacity for complex infrastructure diplomacy.
6. **Perceptions of EU-led multilateralism versus bilateralism** focusing on influence, flexibility, and alignment with national interests and historical ties to Angola.

To maintain comparability, the base questionnaire is largely consistent for all interviews. However, essential adjustments are made based on the interviewee's institutional role:

- EU officials are asked about collective Member State coordination, coherence mechanisms, and African partner engagement under Global Gateway.
- National officials discuss about political drivers, national interest considerations, and bilateral diplomacy.
- Private sector and independent experts (including analysts, consultants, and regional observers) are asked about infrastructure cooperation models, strategic positioning, and perceptions of national and European engagement in the Lobito Corridor and beyond.

Interviews are intended to elicit concrete, experience-based responses while reducing political sensitivity. Particular care is taken to frame questions neutrally and avoid adversarial or judgmental tones.

Data Analysis

The interview material has been integrated into the thesis using a qualitative interpretive approach, primarily to enrich and substantiate the thematic analysis developed through document review and secondary literature. The interview data has been used as contextual evidence to support the interpretation of key dynamics related to EU-Africa cooperation, national positioning, and the negotiation processes surrounding the Lobito Corridor.

Findings from interviews are systematically cross-referenced with:

- Documentary analysis of the Lobito Corridor MoU and related EU, Italian, and Portuguese communications,
- Public statements, reports, press releases and institutional statements,
- Relevant secondary literature on EU-Africa relations, development cooperation, and infrastructure diplomacy.

This triangulation enhances validity and robustness, ensuring that emerging patterns are cross-validated across multiple sources.

Confidentiality, Ethics, and Data Management

All interviews will be conducted in compliance with ethical research guidelines, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and data protection.

Participation is strictly voluntary. Prior to the interview, each participant will be given a brief information sheet outlining the goal of the study, how the data will be used, and the option to remain anonymous. Consent will be requested explicitly, either in written or recorded oral form, and interviewees may decline to answer any question or withdraw at any point.

Unless otherwise agreed, interviews will be recorded solely for transcription purposes, and recordings will be securely stored and deleted after coding is completed. All transcripts and cited material will be anonymised, unless the interviewee explicitly consents to attribution. Institutional roles may be referred to in broad terms (e.g., “Senior official, Portuguese MFA” or “Official, European Commission”), while direct quotes may be paraphrased as needed to maintain confidentiality.

For sensitive institutional roles, a summary validation method may be used: in such circumstances, a brief summary of crucial aspects may be communicated with the respondent to validate factual accuracy and avoid misrepresentation, without requiring interpretation permission.

All data will be managed in accordance with the university’s research ethics policy and GDPR regulations, where applicable.