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Moscow's Continent: The Principles of Russia's Africa Policy Engagement

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African perspectives
Global insights

Abstract

In recent years, Moscow's foreign policy has displayed increased interest in Africa, given its sizeable population and the economic growth of countries on the continent. This paper reflects on the increased importance of Africa to Russia's global interests. It explores the critical drivers of Africa's role within Russian foreign policy and argues that Russian foreign policy in Africa revolves around three themes: pursuing alternative economic partnerships, seeking geopolitical leverage and promoting multipolarity.

Introduction

In recent years, Moscow's foreign policy has seen a significant pivot towards non-Western markets, partners and international organisations. It is no wonder that Africa – which has a sizeable population and is one of the world's fastest-growing regions – has re-emerged as part of Russia's global agenda.

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Moscow has historical credentials as a great power in Africa, and the fact that it has no colonial past on the continent helps its foreign policy. It is important to note, however, that even before the European scramble for Africa in the 19th century, Russia had attempted to colonise parts of it, as exemplified by the failed deployment of an explorer group to Madagascar in 1723.¹ Imperial Russia made another attempt to establish a colony in Africa in late 1888, when Russian adventurer Nikolai Ivanovitch Achinov led a Cossack expedition and established a settlement in the village of Sagallo in present-day Djibouti. This colony lasted less than a month as the French dispatched warships in 1889, putting an end to the settlement after a brief fight.²

It was not until Soviet times, especially during the Cold War, that the country's policymakers would engage more actively with the continent.³ During the decolonisation period, the Soviet Union provided extensive support to African countries, particularly between the 1950s and 1970s. After the end of the Cold War, Africa dropped from the radar of Russian

1 János Besenyő, "The Africa Policy of Russia", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 132–53.

2 "Sagallo, Russia's Short-Lived Cossack Colony in Africa", *Radio Free Europe*, April 2, 2015.

3 Maxim Matusevich, "Russia in Africa: A Search for Continuity in a Post-Cold War Era", *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 1 (2019): 25.

foreign policy amid a sense of 'Afro-pessimism' among Russian elites. This distancing saw the closure of embassies and economic missions, the pullback of Russian companies and the collection of debt from African countries.⁴ This was the logical consequence of Russia's lack of resources in the 1990s to maintain the Soviet Union's influence and global presence, including in Africa.

The Russian annexation of Crimea and the fighting in Donbas in eastern Ukraine between 2014 and 2015 caused a breakdown in Russia's ties with the West. This trend was amplified by the 2022 invasion of Ukraine and Moscow's subsequent isolation from the West, including through wide-ranging Western sanctions. As a result, the country has tried to diversify its partners.⁵

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For the past 10 years, Moscow has accelerated efforts to reassert itself in Africa at every available opportunity, including through financial aid, political support, military sales and security cooperation. As a result, its diplomatic, security and economic engagement with the continent has increased, enabling it to identify new opportunities for extracting natural resources and rebuilding alternatives to Western narratives.⁶

Russia's political motivations, seen through pragmatic engagements with a strong ideological undertone, characterise its presence and relationships in Africa.⁷ However, Russian efforts to engage Africa still pale in comparison with other countries' involvement on the continent. In 2021, the overall volume of Russia's trade with Africa was calculated at slightly over \$17 billion, with African exports to Russia just over \$1.9 billion and Russian exports to Africa slightly over \$15 billion.⁸ In comparison, the continent's overall trade with China in 2021 was just over \$190 billion, with Africa's exports to China being more than \$74 billion and export slightly below \$116 billion.⁹ Africa's trade volume with the US in 2021 was more than \$38 billion, with Africa's exports to the US over \$38 billion and US exports to

4 Natalia Piskunova (Researcher at the Institute for International Relations in Moscow), interview by Vuk Vuksanović, August 2022.

5 Piskunova, interview.

6 Nicholas Ross Smith, *A New Cold War?: Assessing the Current US-Russia Relationship*, (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 44.

7 Besenyó, "The Africa Policy of Russia".

8 International Trade Centre, Trade Map, "Bilateral Trade Between Africa and Russian Federation", https://www.trademap.org/Bilateral_TS.aspx?nvpm=1%7c%7c7%7c643%7c%7cTOTAL%7c%7c%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1.

9 ITC, Trade Map, "Bilateral Trade Between Africa and China", https://www.trademap.org/Bilateral_TS.aspx?nvpm=1%7c156%7c%7c%7c7%7cTOTAL%7c%7c%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1.

Africa over \$26 billion.¹⁰ According to the EU's estimates, in 2021 the EU was Africa's biggest trading partner, with overall trade exceeding \$333 billion. Africa's exports to the EU were just over \$164 billion, with the EU's exports to Africa more than \$169 billion.¹¹ Nevertheless, Russia remains a key player whose influence is increasing owing to its expansionist economic policies and military collaboration agreements with partner states on the continent.

This occasional paper reflects on Africa's increased importance to Russia's global interests. It is the product of policy research that methodologically analysed both secondary source material and, more importantly, primary sources in the form of semi-structured interviews done online with Western and Russian experts. As a result, this study provides insight into the policymaking process in the Kremlin. When analysing Russia's policies towards the continent, it is essential to understand the Kremlin's interests and strategic considerations. An examination of the critical drivers of Africa's place within Russian foreign policy shows that, despite its increased importance, the war in Ukraine will not make Africa a central priority for Russia.

The paper begins by exploring Russian interests and strategic considerations in Africa over the past decade. This section sets out Russia's key principles of engagement and Africa's overall position within Russian foreign policy. It also shows the complexity of the policymaking process that ranges from the Kremlin, across the Russian Foreign Ministry, and all the way to Russian oligarchs and businesses. The paper then reflects on the key axes of economic ties between Russia and Africa, including specific country and regional focuses. This is followed by a reflection on the geopolitical positioning of Africa within Russian foreign policy. The paper concludes with a consideration of the role of multipolarity within Russian international engagements and how this has brought about points of synergy and convergence between African countries and Russia.

Russian interests and strategic considerations in Africa

In understanding Russia's policies towards Africa, it is essential to reflect on Moscow's foreign policy principles. In the face of the implications of its presence in Ukraine and its growing isolation from the West, Moscow has adjusted its global strategy. It has built stronger ties with countries outside the Western-led international order, especially in Asia, Latin America¹² and Africa. This has seen Russia form closer partnerships with Brazil, India, China and South Africa (BRICS), as well as with other non-Western powers, at the expense of relations with Europe and North America.

10 ITC, Trade Map, "Bilateral Trade Between United States of America and Africa", https://www.trademap.org/Bilateral_TS.aspx?nvpm=1%7c842%7c%7c%7c7%7cTOTAL%7c%7c%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c2%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1%7c1.

11 Eurostat, "Africa-EU trade in Goods: €4 Billion Surplus", February 17, 2022.

12 See, for example, Evan Ellis, "Russia in the Western Hemisphere: Assessing Putin's Malign Influence in Latin America and the Caribbean" (Congressional Paper, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, July 20, 2022).

The first key consideration in analysing Moscow's policies towards Africa is Russia's geopolitical position and relations with other global powers. It is a leading power in the world, but is not as powerful as it was during the Cold War. Its geopolitical position enables Russian diplomacy to diversify its international partnerships; an essential strategic consideration in analysing its policies towards Africa.

While Africa is not part of the Eurasian space geographically within Russian foreign policy, it is often viewed through two related lenses. First, it is regarded as a space in which Russia tries to secure its national interests while promoting a multipolar agenda and an alternative to the West. Second, many in Russia appreciate that the continent is geographically adjacent to the Eurasian landmass.¹³ In this context, it is much more accurate to speak of Afro-Eurasia than Eurasia, and this reality in part explains Russia's engagement with Africa.

In an interview, Paul Stronski of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace gave his view on how Russia classifies its priorities on the continent. According to Stronski, there are four priorities:¹⁴

- North Africa, which Moscow perceives as a sub-set of its policies towards Europe and the Middle East, mainly by securing a presence in the Mediterranean;
- The Horn of Africa and the wider East Africa, which Russia finds attractive in light of the growing presence of other players, including China, the Gulf states, the US, France and Japan, with the instability in Yemen increasing its interest;
- The rest of sub-Saharan Africa, where Russia is also eyeing opportunities to insert itself and form new partnerships; and
- Africa, as a whole, which Russia perceives as a potential partner in promoting multipolarity.

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13 David G Lewis, "Geopolitical Imaginaries in Russian Foreign Policy: The Evolution of 'Greater Eurasia'", *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 10 (2018): 1620.

14 Paul Stronski (Senior Fellow in the Carnegie Endowment for Peace's Russia and Eurasia Program), interview by Vuk Vuksanović, August 2022.

notices an opening. There is also an element of Africa's being regarded a target suitable to promote the notion of systemic transition, moving away from a US-led unipolar world.¹⁵ This opportunistic approach taken by Russia shows, to a degree, that Africa has become more of a 'theatre' of operations than a destination itself.¹⁶ Some Russian foreign policy documents confirm this idea. In 2007, for instance, the *Survey of Russian Federation Foreign Policy* stated that, despite Africa's problems, it was an essential vehicle for strengthening Russia's global influence.¹⁷

Stronski confirms that 'Africa is more of a policy tool for Russia's broader interests than an area of interest for Russia on its own'.¹⁸ Its importance has grown since the beginning of the Ukraine war, as the continent shows that Russia is not isolated after being pushed out of Europe.¹⁹ One example of this is the African tour by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in late July 2022.²⁰ Some African regions, such as North Africa, can thus be used as a testing ground for the Kremlin's various strategies.²¹

One of the interviewees claimed that the continent is not a priority for Russia, and that the country's entire African policy is limited to immediate and short-term steps.²² This implies that Africa is still evolving in the Kremlin's ranking of priorities since its alienation from the West. In the meantime, Russia is looking for easy commercial contracts with partner countries. In Russia, there are no political sensitivities regarding good governance or interference in domestic affairs, unlike Africa's engagements with the West.²³

Regarding the policymaking process, the Kremlin sets the political tone but leaves it up to other institutions to implement policies.²⁴ The Russian Foreign Ministry and individuals such as Mikhail Bogdanov, the Russian Presidential Special Representative for the Middle East and Africa, are secondary players to commercial companies or the defence industry. This makes the Foreign Ministry more a policy implementor than a policy driver.²⁵

Some experts, such as Hanna Notte of the Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, noted that in places such as North Africa, individuals had greater influence (depending on the issue and the country). Bogdanov, for example, has considerable sway in determining Russian policy towards Egypt, given that he knows the country well after having been Russia's ambassador in Cairo. The chairperson of Russia's Federation Council, Valentina Matviyenko, is another name Notte cited regarding bilateral

15 Stronski, interview.

16 Joseph Siegle, "The Future of Russia-Africa Relations", Brookings, August 10, 2022.

17 Besenyő, "The Africa Policy of Russia".

18 Stronski, interview.

19 Stronski, interview.

20 "Russia and the West Are Vying for Influence in Africa and Ukraine Is a Big Reason Why", *NPR*, July 28, 2022.

21 Hanna Notte (Senior research associate, Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation), interview by Vuk Vuksanović, August 2022.

22 Russian defence policy expert, interview by Vuk Vuksanović, August 27, 2022.

23 Piskunova, interview.

24 Piskunova, interview.

25 Piskunova, interview.

ties with Egypt. According to Notte, individuals such as Bogdanov and Matviyenko have a considerable say in shaping bilateral relations with Egypt and coordinating with other countries in the region, such as Algeria, on Libyan affairs.²⁶

One consulted source identified layers in the policymaking process. The first layer is the Kremlin and the Foreign Ministry, which frame the broader policy. The second layer comprises Russian businesspeople and CEOs of state corporations with economic interests in Africa. They use bodies such as the Coordinating Committee for Economic Cooperation with African Countries to lobby for their businesses. Within that layer, various Russian oligarchs promote Russian activities in countries with commercial interests, such as Oleg Deripaska in Guinea (bauxite mining), Viktor Vekselberg in South Africa (gold and manganese mining) and Igor Sechin in Egypt and Mozambique (oil and gas). The third layer is represented by semi-criminal or informal agents and intermediaries secretly acting on behalf of official institutions (the most prominent but not the only example being Yevgeny V Prigozhin, the founder of the Wagner Group, a private military company with strong ties to the Russian government). This final layer is less visible and transparent but arguably the most capable and substantial.²⁷

Russian policy agents can act independently to some extent because actions are based on taking advantage of circumstances and not an approach outlined in some framework

Nevertheless, Russian academic Natalia Piskunova stressed that policy planning is still a 'top-down' process, as 'nothing is done until the Kremlin gives a green light'.²⁸ Thus, the decision-making starts with the Kremlin. Grassroots organisations are not involved in this process and external experts, such as academics, are not consulted. Usually, directives are passed on to the Russian Foreign Ministry, which acts as a conduit between the presidential administration and Russian companies on the ground. However, other institutions such as the Ministry of Economic Development and the Ministry of Industry and Trade can also be included.²⁹ In addition, Russian policy agents can adapt to the realities on the ground, since the hierarchy is not as rigid as in Soviet times.³⁰ It has been noted that Russian policy agents can act independently to some extent because actions are based on taking advantage of circumstances and not an approach outlined in some framework.³¹

26 Notte, interview.

27 Russian defence policy expert, interview.

28 Piskunova, interview.

29 Piskunova, interview.

30 Piskunova, interview.

31 Russian defence policy expert, interview.

The following section examines how Africa is positioned within Russian foreign policy, focusing mainly on economic, political and international ties, and comparing Africa's importance with that of other global regions. It also identifies specific African regions where Russian interests are more prominent and looks at the reasons for this.

Russia–Africa economic ties

Overview

To grow its presence in the global arena and diversify its economic relations, Russia has been trying to increase its investments in Africa and establish serious partnerships with African states. Russia and Africa are both interested in the energy, mining, construction and military sectors. Africa can also be a market for Russian machinery and oil, which can be resold to Europe via North African pipelines. At the same time, the presence of fruit imported from Africa in major Russian supermarkets is noticeable.³²

Commercial entities, such as mining companies and the fertiliser industry, thus play a major role in policymaking.

In an interview, Piskunova said that the entire policymaking process is divided into two levels. The first is the official level of the Russian state, and the second is the level of businesses. According to Piskunova, in the years before 2010, when the Russian government started showing more open interest in Africa, Russian companies with interests in the African market such as Rusal, Rosneft and Lukoil³³ unsuccessfully lobbied for government support for their operations on the continent. As the Russian government gradually began showing interest in Africa after 2010, the state and companies began cooperating more. Russian companies, regardless of whether they are private, state-owned or have a level of state participation, get assistance from the state in the form of subsidies and tax-free agreements. Piskunova concluded that Russian policy in Africa would have been more effective if the Russian government had started providing more substantial backing to Russian companies in the early 2000s, when they demanded it.³⁴

The Russian invasion of Ukraine resulted in Western sanctions against Moscow, cutting it off from its traditional Western markets. As a result, the Russian government will be forced to enter new markets, particularly in regions such as Africa where governments have not joined the Western sanctions.

32 Piskunova, interview.

33 Rusal is a public limited company and the world's second-largest aluminum company; Rosneft is a state-controlled energy company; Lukoil is the Russian multinational energy company.

34 Piskunova, interview.

For Russia, Africa is thus a potential area of investment. Africa can cynically be viewed as an avenue for evading sanctions, but it also shows compatibility in the extractive industries, in which Russia has considerable expertise. According to Piskunova, Russia even distinguishes sub-regions of the continent based on specific economic classifications:³⁵

- Southern Africa, which is important for natural resources such as minerals and metals;
- North and East Africa, which are important for oil transit and shipping routes, including through Egypt's Port Said and the Djibouti ports; and
- Nigeria, in West Africa, which is a major oil producer and part of OPEC+, a mechanism formed by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and non-OPEC energy exporters, including Russia. In the rest of West Africa, Guinea, Equatorial Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire are also attractive because of their natural resources.

Logistics

Many African ports are essential in terms of logistics, including those in North Africa (Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria), East Africa (Kenya) and Southern Africa (South Africa). These countries do not support Western sanctions and, unlike the EU, have not prohibited Russian ships from using their ports. Russian ships can thus undergo repairs in these ports if necessary and pay for such services.³⁶ As China and India account for 40% of Russia's oil exports and the Red Sea is a significant transit route for oil tankers,³⁷ port access in the Red Sea's littoral countries – Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea and Djibouti – is also crucial. In addition, the Port of Cape Town in South Africa is useful for Russian oligarchs – they avoid having their luxury yachts seized by docking them in countries that have not joined the sanctions.³⁸

Using African airports, particularly regional airline hubs such as Cairo, is also helpful for Moscow,³⁹ as Russian businesses and tourists make use of flights to Africa. One example is Ethiopian Airlines, which renewed its flights to Russia in August 2022.⁴⁰ There have also been suggestions that Ethiopian Airlines will offer flights from Moscow to other African destinations, as well as Dubai, Bangkok, Chicago, Washington DC and New York.⁴¹ As yet, however, there are no indications that this is happening. This access is important for Russia because the EU has closed its airspace to Russian-owned and-registered planes. Equally important, the largely state-dominated banking sector on the continent can help Russia conduct international banking and financial transactions in the face of sanctions elsewhere.

35 Piskunova, interview.

36 Piskunova, interview.

37 Clyde Russell, "Column: Russian Crude Is More Reliant on India and China, But Signs of a Peak", *Reuters*, August 9, 2022.

38 Pumza Fihlani and Henri Astier, "Ukraine War: South Africa Row over Russian Superyacht's Arrival", *BBC*, October 26, 2022.

39 Piskunova, interview.

40 Sebastian Polito, "Ethiopian Resumes Flights to Moscow", *Aviacionline*, August 23, 2022.

41 Iuliia Tore, "Ethiopian Airlines to Resume Flights to Russia", *RusTourismNews*, July 1, 2022.

Crucially, Africa uses the Chinese UnionPay system, which is essential for Russia as Visa and Mastercard have left the Russian market.⁴² Russia's political and military backing of various regimes on the continent also allows it to bypass sanctions, as it has access to gold from Sudan and diamonds from the Central African Republic (CAR).⁴³ These resources are essential for the Russian budget, making the country's economy more resilient to foreign sanctions, especially since gold and diamonds are not as easily frozen and seized as financial assets.

Agriculture

The Russian Ministry of Agriculture views Africa as an agricultural partner. The Ministry of Agriculture is headed by Dmitry Patrushev, the son of Nikolai Patrushev, who is the secretary of the Russian Security Council.⁴⁴ Russia is a major partner of the continent in terms of food and fertiliser exports. Food accounts for 40% of the consumer basket in Africa, which is directly impacted by the war in Ukraine, as Russia and Ukraine account for nearly 30% of global wheat exports. More than 50% of wheat imports in Burundi, Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Sudan and Somalia come from Russia and Ukraine.⁴⁵ Russia has a key partner in Egypt, which imports Russian wheat, while Russia competes with French exporters in the Algerian market.⁴⁶ In addition, in 2021 Russia was the leading exporter of nitrogen fertilisers, the most used fertiliser on the continent, and the second-biggest exporter of potassic and phosphorous fertilisers, accounting for 14% of global exports.⁴⁷

Pharmaceuticals

Russia has not succeeded in promoting all its industries, and the pharmaceutical sector is one such failure. It tried to promote its Sputnik V vaccine against COVID-19 on the continent through so-called 'vaccine diplomacy'. However, this effort failed owing to issues with vaccine efficiency, high prices and delayed deliveries – as well as the fact that the World Health Organization has not approved it.⁴⁸

Energy

Russian energy giants such as Gazprom and Rosneft have returned to Libya after leaving the country owing to Nato's 2011 intervention there.⁴⁹ However, Russia is mindful of

42 Piskunova, interview.

43 George Clooney, Justina Gudzowska and John Prendergast, "Putin's Exploitation of Africa Could Help Him Evade Sanctions", *Time*, April 8, 2022.

44 Stronski, interview.

45 Teresa Nogueira Pinto, "Russia's War Exacerbates Turmoil in Fragile Sub-Saharan Africa", Geopolitical Intelligence Service Reports (blog), June 20, 2022.

46 Notte, interview.

47 Pinto, "Russia's War Exacerbates Turmoil".

48 Samuel Ramani, "With Sputnik V, Russia Shot Itself in the Foot", *Foreign Policy*, June 24, 2021.

49 Warsaw Institute, "Another Russian Oil Giant Resumes Operations In Libya", July 30, 2021.

security and political risks. While countries such as Libya appeal to Russia as investment destinations, it also views security stabilisation and political stability as preconditions for the influx of capital, thus putting certain limits in place.⁵⁰

Mining

Russia's mining industry has been more successful. While the country cannot compete with China in terms of infrastructure or with China, India and Japan in terms of technology, it is a more effective player in the mining industry.⁵¹ In Angola, the Russian company Alrosa, the world's largest diamond miner, is one of the owners of Catoca, the world's fourth-largest diamond mine.⁵² Angola is important to Russia because its copper reserves are crucial in producing machinery and high technology, especially considering the fact that Russian copper ore is hard to extract.⁵³ There are concerns that the sanctions against Russia and Alrosa may disrupt mining operations through a lack of spare parts and machinery.⁵⁴ In Guinea, Rusal, one of the world's largest aluminium companies (owned by sanctioned Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska) owns Dian, the world's largest bauxite deposit. About half of Rusal's aluminium ore bauxite production comes from its mining operations in Guinea.⁵⁵

Africa is also rich in the so-called 'rare earth' minerals so crucial in the production of hi-tech items (smartphones and monitors), energy conversion systems (wind turbines, photovoltaic panels and electrical machinery) and military equipment (lasers and radar).⁵⁶ While the West, particularly the US, has been wary of exploiting these elements owing to environmental activism, the Russians and the Chinese have made inroads in the mining sector on the continent to get hold of this vital resource. As a result, Russia has leverage with the West, as the technology needed for transitioning to a green economy relies on these minerals. Even the Wagner Group frequently provides security to African governments in exchange for access to natural resources. It will most likely be compensated for its collaboration with the military junta in Mali, for example, through access to uranium, diamond and gold mines.⁵⁷

Defence

The Russian defence industry is a significant element of Russian economic collaboration with Africa. Between 2015 and 2019 the Russian government signed 19 agreements related

50 Notte, interview.

51 Stronski, interview.

52 Joseph Cotterill, "Angola Seizes Stake in Diamond Miner", *Financial Times*, June 16, 2022.

53 Piskunova, interview.

54 Reuters, "Angolan Diamond Mine Says Russia Sanctions Could Hurt Operations", *Al Jazeera*, March 9, 2022.

55 "Rusal Exports First Guinea Bauxite in Nearly a Month, Data Shows", *Reuters*, April 6, 2022.

56 Pier Paolo Raimondi, "The Scramble for Africa's Rare Earths: China Is Not Alone", Italian Institute for International Political Studies, June 7, 2021. Rare earths are the vitamins of industrial society in the 21st century: they are vital to key products from hi-tech items smartphones and monitors.

57 Ariel Cohen, "China and Russia Make Critical Mineral Grabs in Africa While the US Snoozes", *Forbes*, January 13, 2021.

to military cooperation with African governments, focusing on weapon sales.⁵⁸ Russia's presence in the African arms market is expedited by the fact that many national army arsenals come from the Soviet Union, as Moscow was a major weapon supplier to the continent. In addition, Russia does not place conditionalities on arms transactions framed around human rights and governance standards. From 2017 to 2021, Moscow provided almost half of Africa's imported military equipment (44%), followed by the US (17%), China (10%) and France (6.1%).⁵⁹ Algeria, Angola, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, Morocco and Uganda are among the largest buyers of Russian weaponry.⁶⁰

It remains unclear how much the war in Ukraine, Western sanctions against Russia and the disruption in the global supply chain will impact Russian arms exports to the continent, in terms of both delivering new equipment and providing maintenance for old equipment.⁶¹ Despite the war in Ukraine and the risk of US sanctions, Russia delivered to Egypt five of the 24 Su-35 fighter jets that were agreed upon. The completion of the deal would have allowed Egypt to match Israeli air superiority, as the US had provided F-35 fighter jets to Israel but refused to do the same for Egypt.⁶² However, reports emerged that Egypt had been forced to abandon this transaction under US pressure, with the result that Russia delivered the remaining jets to Iran.⁶³ Russia does appear willing to fight for its markets, however. In August 2022 it held its 'Army 2022' military exhibition with visitors from 72 countries, during which President Vladimir Putin said it was ready to share its weapons with its allies in Latin America, Asia and Africa.⁶⁴

Nuclear energy

There are other areas where Russia has also recorded successes. One of these is nuclear energy, with Rosatom, a Russian state-owned nuclear energy company, constructing nuclear power plants and helping African nations address their energy supply needs. After a delay of several years, in July 2022 concrete was poured for Egypt's first nuclear power plant, which Rosatom will build in the town of El-Dabaa. The project was agreed to in 2017 by President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi and Putin and is 'the largest Russian-Egyptian cooperation project' since the 1950s.⁶⁵ Although South Korea has introduced sanctions against Russia because of the Ukraine invasion, a state-owned Korean company, Hydro and Nuclear Power, will provide turbine-related equipment and construction services at the El-Dabaa plant.⁶⁶ In both economic and political terms, nuclear power plant projects are suitable investments

58 Federica Saini Fasanotti, "Russia's Wagner Group in Africa: Influence, Commercial Concessions, Rights Violations, and Counterinsurgency Failure", Brookings, February 8, 2022.

59 Pieter D Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova and Siemon T Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2021" (Fact Sheet, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Stockholm, March 2022), 7.

60 Moses B Khanyile, "Sanctions Against Russia Will Affect Arms Sales to Africa: The Risks and Opportunities", *The Conversation*, March 27, 2022.

61 Khanyile, "Sanctions Against Russia".

62 "Egypt Moves Ahead With Purchase of Russian Arms Despite US Warnings", *Al-Monitor*, March 3, 2022.

63 "Report: Russia to Supply Iran with Dozens of Sukhoi Su-35 Fighter Jets", *Times of Israel*, December 25, 2022.

64 "Russia-Ukraine Updates: Moscow 'Ready to Offer' Weapons to Its Allies", *Deutsche Welle*, August 15, 2022.

65 "Russian Firm Builds Egypt's First Nuclear Plant", *Deutsche Welle*, July 21, 2022.

66 "South Korea Signs Deal with Russia to Help Build Egypt's First Nuclear Power Plant", *The Times of Israel*, August 25, 2022.

for Moscow as they create a dependency on its nuclear expertise and materials.⁶⁷ Other countries are also potential partners for the Russian nuclear energy industry and Rosatom going forward, as the continent's growing population forces it to address the issue of energy supply, with potential clients being South Africa, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Ghana, Zambia and Rwanda.⁶⁸ It is worth mentioning that South Africa had planned to build more nuclear plants, with Russia's Rosatom one of the bidders. This project was announced by former South African president Jacob Zuma, only to be cancelled by his successor Cyril Ramaphosa in 2018 for being too expensive.⁶⁹ In 2017 the South African High Court declared the contract between South Africa and Rosatom on increasing nuclear capabilities at South Africa's only nuclear power station, Koeberg, unlawful.⁷⁰

Industrial zones

Some countries, such as Egypt, are particularly interested in Russia's economic ambitions. In 2018 Russia and Egypt signed an agreement to establish a Russian industrial zone in the new Suez Canal Economic Zone, with construction scheduled to begin in 2022. However, the project has been delayed due to the Ukraine war. It was supposed to be implemented over 13 years at the cost of \$7 billion. While there is no sign that either Moscow or Cairo has abandoned this project, they are trading carefully because of the war.⁷¹ Egypt does remain interested, though, and it was a guest of honour at the 25th St Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2022.⁷²

Tourism

Tourism is also an area of importance for Russia and Egypt. Before the Ukraine war, tourists from Russia and Ukraine made up around 40% of beach holidaymakers in Egypt, and at the start of the war hotel occupancy rates in Egypt's Red Sea resorts dropped by 35–40%.⁷³ Now, the tourism sector is rebounding. In August 2022 Egypt was the second most popular destination for Russian tourists, after Turkey and ahead of the United Arab Emirates.⁷⁴ In terms of wealthier Russian tourists, from the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022 to December 2022 premium travel from Russia to Egypt was up by 181%.⁷⁵ This suggests that Egyptian tourism has profited from the war in Ukraine, to the extent that Egypt is considering introducing the Russian payment system Mir in Red Sea resorts.⁷⁶ In 2021 Russia lifted a six-year ban on charter flights to Egypt's Red Sea resorts, introduced after a bomb had caused the crash of a Russian passenger plane over the

67 Notte, interview.

68 Takeshi Kumon, "Russia and China Throw Weight Behind Africa's Nuclear Power Drive", *Nikkei Asia*, July 22, 2022.

69 "South Africa Has No Money for Major Nuclear Expansion, Ramaphosa Says", *Reuters*, January 26, 2018.

70 Clyde Russell, "South African Court Declares Nuclear Plan with Russia Unlawful", *Reuters*, April 26, 2017.

71 "Russian War Delays Major Industrial Zone in Egypt", *Al-Monitor*, March 20, 2022.

72 "Egypt Participates in Russian Economic Forum", *Al-Monitor*, June 23, 2022.

73 Mohamed Sabry, "Egypt Looks for Upsurge in Tourists from Sanctions-Hit Russia", *Al-Monitor*, June 23, 2022.

74 "Egypt Second Most Popular Foreign Destination for Russian Tourists", *Egypt Independent*, August 3, 2022.

75 Charlotte Elton, "Turkey, Thailand, UAE: Where Are Rich Russian Holidaymakers Going to Avoid Travel Sanctions?", *Euronews*, A, 2022.

76 Sabry, "Egypt Looks for Upsurge".

Sinai Peninsula in 2015.⁷⁷ In the face of the resultant economic losses to Egypt, it lobbied the Russian government through inter-legislative channels, resulting in Matviyenko's intervening in this issue. This shows the importance of tourism in bilateral economic ties.⁷⁸ Given that Africa is still growing and that Russia's primary economic focus will be to withstand the impact of Western sanctions, there is a limit to Russian economic engagement with the continent. However, Russia and African nations will use any opportunity to boost economic ties.

Given that Africa is still growing and that Russia's primary economic focus will be to withstand the impact of Western sanctions, there is a limit to Russian economic engagement with the continent

Geopolitical positioning

Another key consideration in analysing Russian policies towards Africa is Russia's need to preserve its influence in the region. This has been essential to its relations with African states since the Soviet era. The Soviet Union was one of the first world powers to expand ties with African states after the Second World War, collaborating with them in the fields of culture, education and science.

Although Russia is no longer a superpower, it still has significant influence in Africa. It has been trying to strengthen relations with African states to counter the growing influence of the US in the region. For African countries, Russia is a potentially attractive political partner that allows them to position themselves differently. African governments have a cautious approach to European governments owing to the impact of the colonial era.

Diplomacy

Russia has been able to exploit a history of anti-Western sentiment in Africa that dates back to the days of European colonialism. In francophone Africa, a powerful anti-colonial movement is taking hold in Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea, and observers anticipate that it might engulf Chad and Niger next. France is a frequent target of this animosity. Simultaneously, the popularity of Russia has grown in these countries, particularly since the start of the Ukraine war.⁷⁹ The African tour by US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken

77 Sabry, "Egypt Looks for Upsurge".

78 Notte, interview.

79 Tom Collins, 'New Wave of Anti-Colonial Populism Sweeps Francophone Africa', *Quartz*, June 6, 2022.

in August 2022 was partly motivated by the desire to combat anti-West sentiments that boost Russian and Chinese influence on the continent.⁸⁰ In addition, African nations faced with decades of Sino-American rivalry view Russia as a third power through which they can increase their geopolitical leeway.

In recent years, Russia has come to view Africa, a continent with 54 UN member states and the second largest in demographic terms, as the perfect location to earn credentials as a global power. According to the UN, the world's population is expected to increase to 8.5 billion by 2050 and 10 billion by 2080. Five African countries (the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Tanzania) are among the biggest in terms of projected demographic growth. At the same time, in 30 years sub-Saharan Africa will constitute more than half of the world's population increase.⁸¹

In the Ukraine war, many African nations have pursued a policy of non-alignment rather than placing themselves in the Western or Russian camps. Instead, the prevailing mood appears to be a desire for Africa to assert itself internationally, among other things by avoiding becoming a mere pawn in the global great power competition.⁸² The visit by Lavrov to South Africa in January 2023 is a clear example of this type of interaction between Russia and Africa.⁸³ In its pursuit of an independent course, South Africa conducted naval exercise Mosi II ('smoke', in Tswana) with Russia and China in February 2023, a repetition of the same drill from 2019.⁸⁴

Food and fertiliser

At the UN, many African countries condemn Russian actions in Ukraine. However, they are unwilling to introduce sanctions against Russia, and most are open to doing business with Moscow. Russia will use its African ties both to gain a foothold on the continent and, potentially, as leverage with the West. For instance, it has become a reliable food supplier to African nations. In June 2022 Senegalese President and AU chair Macky Sall met Putin in Sochi. Sall said that African countries were 'victims' of the Ukrainian war and stressed the need for food, fertiliser and grain to be exempt from Western sanctions.⁸⁵ In addition, when the UN and Turkey brokered a grain deal, the US encouraged agricultural and shipping companies to buy and carry more Russian fertiliser.⁸⁶ Using food supply as leverage thus appears to have worked well for Moscow.

80 Christopher Isike and Tinashe Nyamunda, "[Washington Wants to Address Anti-West Sentiment in Africa: Blinken Is Doing His Bit](#)", *The Conversation*, August 9, 2022.

81 Rob Garver, "[Continued Global Population Growth Creates Challenges, Opportunities](#)", *Voice of America*, July 14, 2022.

82 Gustavo de Carvalho, "[The War in Ukraine Calls for an Increased African Unity](#)", ISPI, December 26, 2022.

83 Mikhail Bushuev, Abu-Bakarr Jalloh and Cristina Krippahl, "[South Africa, Russia Deepen Military Ties](#)", *Deutsche Welle*, January 23, 2023.

84 "[South Africa 'Plays China and Russia' Card Against US with Joint Naval Exercise](#)", *South China Morning Post*, January 22, 2023.

85 "[AU Head Tells Putin Africans Are 'Victims' of Ukraine Conflict](#)", *RFI*, June 3, 2022.

86 Elizabeth Elkin, Daniel Flatley and Jennifer Jacobs, "[US Quietly Urges Russia Fertilizer Deals to Unlock Grain Trade](#)", *Bloomberg*, March 27, 2022.

At the same time, the US and the EU introduced exemptions to their restrictions on doing business with Russia in the fertiliser trade. It should also be underscored that a significant number of ships carrying Ukrainian grain did not reach hunger-stuck locations such as Yemen in the Middle East or Somalia in Africa despite the agreement. Commercial destinations attested that grain shipping from the area was guided by the commercial logic of lowering global food prices and not by humanitarian considerations.⁸⁷ Russia can profit from this by accusing the West of hypocrisy and blaming the sanctions for the food crisis in Africa while promoting itself as a reliable wheat supplier to the continent.

Meanwhile, it remains uncertain whether Russia will agree to renew the grain deal, which expired in November 2022. In early November, after Turkey's diplomatic intervention, Russia returned to the grain deal two days after its original decision to unilaterally withdraw from it.⁸⁸ Talks are progressing on allowing Russia to export its fertilisers. At the same time, in late October Russian Agriculture Minister Dmitry Patrushev noted that Russia was willing to provide up to 500 000 tonnes of grain for free to developing countries in the following four months. This demonstrated Russian leverage in ways that also concern Africa and that can be used to accumulate influence on the continent.⁸⁹

In the same context, the UN is aware that the shortage of Russian fertilisers on the global market can worsen the global food crisis, which is why it is in constant talks with the Russian government. To ease the ongoing food crisis, the UN got the Netherlands to unblock 20 000 tons of fertiliser stuck at the Dutch port of Rotterdam because of the EU sanctions.⁹⁰ Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin, engaged in talks with the UN, has stressed that the precondition for the new deal on grain and fertiliser is reconnecting the Russian Agricultural Bank to the SWIFT payment system.⁹¹ In December 2022 the deal was still bogged down in complications, with the UN trying to resolve a backlog of 100 ships in Turkish waters. The US accused Russia of deliberate foot-dragging with inspections, Ukraine wanted more of its ports covered by the agreement, and Russia was displeased about nitrate fertiliser shipments to the global market.⁹²

Regional security

A new component of Russian foreign policy is its attempts to unnerve the West by inserting itself close to the 'West's underbelly' and diverting attention away from Ukraine, particularly since Europe will become increasingly vulnerable to migration from, and security instability in, Africa.⁹³ By inserting itself in the continent, Russia can take advantage of Europe's vulnerability and, if necessary, instigate controlled crises through which it can gain leverage

87 Ruth Maclean, 'After Being Trapped for Months, Ships Loaded with Grain Have Left Ukraine. Where Are They Going?', *The New York Times*, August 9, 2022.

88 "Russia Rejoins UN deal to Ship Grain from Ukraine, Easing Food Insecurity Concerns", *NPR*, November 2, 2022.

89 "Russia Halts Ukraine Black Sea Grain Exports, Biden Outraged", *Euractiv*, October 30, 2022.

90 Robin Millard, "UN, Russia Grain, Fertilizer Exports Talks End Without Breakthrough", *The Moscow Times*, November 11, 2022.

91 "Russia Discussed with UN Reconnecting Russian Agrarian Bank to SWIFT", *Al Mayadeen*, November 12, 2022.

92 Michelle Nichols, "UN Calls Out Ukraine Grain Deal Backlog, Urges Improvement", *Reuters*, January 18, 2023.

93 Stronski, interview.

and bargaining chips with Europe and the wider West. This is very similar to how Russia behaves in some other regions. For instance, Russian meddling in the Balkans, an area of potential vulnerability for the EU, is a way for Moscow to push back against the West's perceived interference in what used to be 'Russia's backyard'.⁹⁴ This indicates that Russian policy in Africa fits into the broader patterns of Russian foreign and security policy.

On that front, Russia has been successful in inserting itself into regional security matters in Africa. In Sahel countries such as Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, Russia has become a preferred security provider after the coups in Mali (2020 and 2021) and Burkina Faso (2022) – unlike traditional security providers such as France and the EU, it has no governance conditionalities.⁹⁵ A perfect example of this is when the military junta in Mali withdrew from the 2014 security pact previous governments had signed with France to collaborate in combating the Islamist insurgency.⁹⁶ In August 2022 the last French soldier left Mali, ending a nine-year presence in the country, although France still has 25 000 troops in the Sahel, primarily stationed in Niger.⁹⁷ This leaves an opening for Russia to enter a region that is of growing concern to Europe in terms of migration and terrorist threats. The new military junta in Burkina Faso led by army captain Ibrahim Traoré may also invite the Wagner Group to establish a security presence there.⁹⁸ Despite this, Russia views neither the Sahel nor North Africa in the context of counter-terrorism, given its geographical distance from these regions. Instead, Moscow is focused on areas such as the Middle East and Central Asia as potential sources of terrorism threats.⁹⁹

The Russian policy towards Libya plays out in a similar context. Moscow is aware of Richard Nixon's observation that Libya occupies a 'key strategic position' on the southern flank of Nato.¹⁰⁰ Participating in military conflict management is considered a pressure tool vis-à-vis Western powers with a presence in the region, such as France, the UK and the US. Russia projects power in the eastern Mediterranean through its presence in Syria via the Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia and a naval base in Tartus, thus complicating Nato operations in the area. Russia hopes it can now establish a foothold in the south Mediterranean via Libya and so extend 'the arc of deterrence' from the Russian Federation all the way to the south Mediterranean.¹⁰¹ Moscow is trying to gain a foothold in the arc of instability in the Sahel-Sahara region (from Mali to Sudan, and from Libya to the CAR) near the eastern Mediterranean zone. With this in mind, it has military assets in Syria and a close relationship, including arms procurement, with Algeria and Egypt.¹⁰² An essential point for Russia in this framework is the configuration of the energy market in the Mediterranean –

94 Dimitar Bechev, "Russia's Foray into the Balkans: Who Is Really to Blame?" (Black Sea Strategy Paper, Foreign Policy Research Institute, Philadelphia, October 12, 2017).

95 Andrew Lebovich and Theodore Murphy, "Russia's Long Shadow in the Sahel", European Council on Foreign Relations, June 13, 2022.

96 "Mali Withdraws from Military Pacts with France", *Deutsche Welle*, May 3, 2022.

97 "Last French Soldiers Leave Mali", *EUobserver*, August 16, 2022.

98 Jason Burke, "Burkina Faso Coup Fuels Fears of growing Russian Mercenary Presence in Sahel", *The Guardian*, October 3, 2022.

99 Notte, interview.

100 Jalel Harchaoui, "The Pendulum: How Russia Sways Its Way to More Influence in Libya", *War on the Rocks*, January 7, 2021.

101 Notte, interview.

102 Russian defence policy expert, interview.

the transit of gas from Algeria and Libya to European buyers and the development of enormous gas and condensate deposits in the maritime areas off Egypt, Israel and Cyprus.¹⁰³

While it would not be an easy feat, there is always the question of whether Russia will try to transfer its anti-access/area denial weapons – like the S-400 surface-to-air missiles, tactical ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, anti-ship missiles and electronic warfare equipment – from Syria to Libya.¹⁰⁴ So far, Russian military activities are undertaken through private military companies, and it is uncertain whether Russia will establish a formal military presence in the country. Still, if one becomes a player in North Africa capable of poking the West, one becomes a player with which Nato has to reckon.¹⁰⁵ While Egypt, Libya and Algeria are considered important partners for Russia in North Africa, Moscow is aware of its limitations in terms of security and geopolitical partnerships with Tunisia and Morocco, as these countries are more firmly embedded in the Western camp.¹⁰⁶

In October 2022 Russia and Algeria conducted naval exercises in the Mediterranean ahead of joint anti-terrorist exercises dubbed ‘Desert Shield 2022’ planned for November 2022.¹⁰⁷

A perfect instrument for a Russian security presence on the continent is the Wagner Group. The group is formally a private military security company but is effectively controlled by the Kremlin. It is led by Prigozhin, a Russian tycoon known as ‘Putin’s chef’, and its military commander, Dmitry Utkin, is a retired Russian Special Forces commander. The Wagner Group has trained and penetrated local military structures in Mali, Sudan, the CAR, Mozambique and Libya.¹⁰⁸ In April 2022 Cameroon signed an agreement with Russia to boost military ties, potentially opening new doors for the Russian government and the Wagner Group.¹⁰⁹ However, the Wagner Group is not always successful – in 2019 its members were killed in ambushes by local Islamic State affiliates in Mozambique, resulting in pushback from the country.¹¹⁰

Trade and shipping

Russia aims to access the Indian Ocean via East Africa and the Horn of Africa. This would allow Moscow to increase its geopolitical clout, as it would be able to interact more effectively with the Middle East and the Persian Gulf countries. On top of that, the rise of India and China and their need to tap into foreign markets and access energy and other resources will make the Indian Ocean a unique system of global trade and geopolitical competition. This gives Russia another motive to try to establish a presence in this region.

103 Russian defence policy expert, interview.

104 Anna Borshchevskaya, “Russia’s Military Activity in the East Mediterranean Echoes Its Approach to Syria” (PolicyWatch 3334, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington DC, June 17, 2020).

105 Notte, interview.

106 Notte, interview.

107 “Algeria, Russia Hold Joint Naval Drill in Med Sea Ahead of ‘Desert Shield 2022’”, *Middle East Monitor*, October 24, 2022.

108 Declan Walsh, “Putin’s Shadow Soldiers: How the Wagner Group Is Expanding in Africa”, *The New York Times*, May 31, 2022.

109 “Cameroon Signs Agreement with Russia in Further Boost to Military Ties”, *RFI*, April 22, 2022.

110 Walsh, “Putin’s Shadow Soldiers”.

Some 30% of the world's shipping passes through the strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, squeezed between Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula and Djibouti and Eritrea in the Horn of Africa.

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More than 1 million containers in Djibouti pass annually through the country's six port terminals.¹¹¹ There are indications that Russia has already courted Sudan with the idea of opening a port on the country's Red Sea coast that would allow Moscow to project its naval power further into the Indian Ocean.¹¹² These overtures by Moscow were turned down by the Khartoum government. It feared the potential US reaction, while Egypt, Sudan's powerful neighbour, had misgivings about the presence of foreign military installations near its borders.¹¹³ Egyptians were also unenthusiastic about granting Russia a military base on their soil. (In the past, there were hints that Russia was interested in establishing a foothold in the city of Sidi Barrani, where the Egyptian Air Force has a base.) Egypt is willing to grant Russia overflight rights, especially for Russian activities in Libya, but not a military base.¹¹⁴ It is not unreasonable to expect future Russian diplomatic overtures to Egypt and other littoral countries in East Africa to pursue to potential port projects. The engagement with Egypt is useful both because of its importance in Middle Eastern and African geopolitics and to dilute the US-Egypt alliance.¹¹⁵

Promoting multipolarity

African countries and Russia tend to share a normative vision of a multipolar world where the voices of neglected African nations are heard and powers like Russia have a seat at the table. In 2019, at the Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi, Putin said:¹¹⁶

African states are confidently gaining political and economic weight, affirming themselves as one of the important pillars of the multipolar world order, and are

111 Andres Schipani, "Djibouti's Port Dream to Become the 'Singapore of Africa'", *Financial Times*, June 1, 2021.

112 Amy Mackinnon, Robbie Gramer and Jack Detsch, "Russia's Dreams of a Red Sea Naval Base Are Scuttled - for Now", *Foreign Policy*, July 15, 2022.

113 "Egypt Displeased with Sudan over Russia Military Base: Report", *Middle East Monitor*, March 7, 2022.

114 Notte, interview.

115 Notte, interview.

116 President of Russia, "Russia-Africa Summit (Statement)", October 24, 2019.

taking an increasingly important part in working out international community's decisions on key issues related to the regional and global agenda ... This will allow us to boost our efforts towards ensuring common and indivisible security, and the formation of a fairer model of the modern world.

As Hanna Notte pointed out in an interview, 'the Global South component' has become more important in Russian foreign policy since the start of the Ukraine war.¹¹⁷ The notion of a multipolar order also manifests in how African countries have reacted to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. During the March 2022 vote in the UN General Assembly on the resolution condemning its attack on Ukraine, 28 African countries (just over 51%) voted in favour of the resolution, as opposed to the 81.29% of non-African countries that voted in favour. Among the 35 countries that abstained, 17 were from Africa. Eight African countries did not vote, and only one African country, Eritrea, voted against the resolution, alongside Belarus, Russia, North Korea and Syria.¹¹⁸

In April 2022 the UN General Assembly voted on suspending Russia's membership in the Human Rights Council. A total of 10 African states voted in favour of suspension, nine were opposed, and 35 abstained or were absent.¹¹⁹ For Russia, it is essential to have African votes to push its UN initiative, and it will settle for abstentions in the absence of supporting votes. It is possibly even more important to block US initiatives at the UN that are deemed harmful to Russia's interest, not necessarily in Africa but certainly in other regions.¹²⁰

Russia will use this position of African nations to promote the idea of a multipolar world where it is not isolated and the West is no longer entitled to speak on behalf of the entire international community

While African countries support Ukraine's territorial integrity, they do not want to join the sanctions policy. They perceive sanctions as an instrument of US unipolarity that on several occasions have not only sidelined Africa and the Global South but also violated UN norms on sovereignty, territorial integrity and use of force. Russia will use this position of African nations to promote the idea of a multipolar world where it is not isolated and the West is no longer entitled to speak on behalf of the entire international community. During Lavrov's July 2022 tour in Africa, he even expressed Russian support for reforming the UN

117 Notte, interview.

118 Abraham White and Leo Holtz, "Figure of the Week: African Countries' Votes on the UN Resolution Condemning Russia's Invasion of Ukraine", Brookings (blog), March 9, 2022.

119 Antonio Cascais, "Russia's Reengagement with Africa Pays Off", *Deutsche Welle*, July 26, 2022.

120 Piskunova, interview.

Security Council in a way that would give Africa a permanent seat.¹²¹ In August 2022 South Africa's Defence Minister Thandi Modise visited Russia to attend a Moscow conference on international security, only a couple of days after Blinken visited South Africa.¹²²

Engaging with all 54 African states or with the AU is symbolic of Russia's vision of a multi-polar world. During Lavrov's visit to Africa, he went to Ethiopia and met representatives of AU member states. In his official statement, Lavrov took a jab at US unipolarity and its liberal interventionist approach, portraying Western military interventions as the negative manifestations of a unipolar world, including in Yugoslavia (1999), Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011).

Lavrov described the Russian notion of the international system and the shared principles of Russia and Africa. He stated that the global system should be based on the UN Charter, particularly its principle of sovereign equality between states (omitting a mention of Ukraine). This argument opposes the idea of a 'rules-based world order', which is seen as imposed by the US and the West on the rest of the world.¹²³

Moscow's cooperation with rogue states ruled by regimes with poor relations with the West is also a potent way of challenging the notion of Western-led order and promoting the principle of non-interference in a country's internal affairs. This is opposed to the idea of liberal internationalism where a country's domestic structures can be altered, including by using force. Countries such as Zimbabwe, the CAR and, occasionally, Sudan are potential partners of Russia on this front.¹²⁴

Conclusion

Russia has faced systemic pressure to view the world from a multi-layered perspective. This is an essential strategic consideration in analysing its policies towards Africa. The battle for soft power, the preservation of Russian influence, and the need to gain leverage with the West are vital considerations in analysing Russian policies towards Africa. These factors indicate that the Russian government seeks to expand its relations with African states and strengthen its regional presence. These are key considerations when examining its relationship with Africa.

While Africa is not a priority region for Russian foreign and security policy, its importance has grown in recent years in the wake of Russian alienation from the West. The region is attracting the attention of various policy agents in Moscow who have different degrees of influence in shaping and implementing Russian policy. The continent remains an arena where Moscow opportunistically pursues its interests rather than a primary theatre in

121 "Russia and the West Are Vying".

122 Vicky Stark, "South Africa's Defense Minister in Russia for Security Conference", VOA, August 15, 2022.

123 Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Statement and Answers to the Questions during a Meeting with Permanent Representatives of the Member Countries of the African Union and the Diplomatic Corps", July 27, 2022.

124 Stronski, interview.

Moscow's strategic focus. It is also an instrument for Russia to gain leverage with the West, boost its influence in other regions such as Europe and the Middle East, and promote the vision of Russia as a global player in a multipolar world.

The key themes of Russian engagement with the continent remain economic engagement, the search for geopolitical leverage and the promotion of multipolarity. The war in Ukraine will not change these themes, but it can be expected that they will become more pronounced as a result, given that Russia's traditional ties with the West will remain damaged for years to come. Economic engagement consists of looking for new markets and opportunities, particularly with its old Western markets currently closed to Moscow. The Russian industry sectors that will look for opportunities on the continent remain mining, food and fertilisers, military industry, and nuclear energy.

Naturally, if Russia were defeated in Ukraine this would hamper its engagement with the continent, but it would not entirely eliminate the relationship. Africa would still need a partner in the UN Security Council and, as Russia's ties with the West will be disrupted for years if not decades, Moscow will still need alternative partners. Economic ties will also not be broken easily. While the lack of access to Western technology creates potential difficulties for Russia's military and mining industry, Africa will still depend on it for agriculture, fertiliser and nuclear energy.

In terms of geopolitical leverage, Russia will try to insert itself in Africa at the expense of the West, using it to irritate and leverage Western powers. It will continue to be interested in North Africa and the Sahel as ways to influence the Mediterranean and Europe. The same goes for its interest in East Africa and the Horn of Africa, from where it can influence the Middle East and gain a stronger foothold in the Indian Ocean, given its pivot towards China and India. Local nations will engage with Russia either because they need a counterweight to the West or to gain more leeway by engaging the third power in the world in the Sino-US rivalry.

Ultimately, Africa, with its growing population and 54 UN member states, will remain an important partner in Moscow's endeavour to promote its vision of a multipolar world – with Russia as one of the poles in that world order. Moscow will use its partnership with Africa to refute the principles of US liberal hegemony, as African nations remain frustrated with many of the traits of the Western-led world. For Africa, the greatest challenge will be pursuing its non-aligned course of maintaining ties with multiple powers in the international system without endangering its political autonomy or hampering its own security and development.

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Cover image

Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni welcomed by President Vladimir Putin of Russia at the official dinner in honour of Heads of State and Government attending the Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi, Russia in 2019

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