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Will the Invasion of Ukraine Change Russia-Africa Relations?

Ronak Gopaldas

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Introduction

With ties forged under Soviet rule, Russia has historically enjoyed warm relations with many African countries, as their economic and ideological ambitions often align and their ties are bolstered by a mutual mistrust of the West. The spread of Africa's votes on United Nations (UN) resolutions to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, indicates three key themes. Firstly, many African countries are pulled in competing directions by broader global geopolitics—for many, abstaining was the rational choice. Secondly, Russia's support on the continent may be overstated and is not unconditional. Finally, Russian influence is often limited by the extent to which it can influence the political elite of a country and in some cases co-opt that elite into patronage networks.

The split in the way African countries voted to condemn Russia's actions is an important departure point for an exploration of the changing nature of Africa's ties to Russia. There have been myriad interpretations of the votes, most of which have focused on the failure of several African countries to denounce the invasion. Few have questioned whether the nonaligned stances of these countries were tacit refusals to be used as supporting actors in public displays of condemnation by the United States and European Union (EU), to distract from the inability to offer meaningful practical or military support. Fewer still have explored whether the nonaligned stances signal weakening Russian influence on a continent it has typically relied on for support.

This paper examines political relations between Russia and Africa, delving into the legacy of independence, military support, diplomatic and foreign policy stances, aid, foreign direct investment, and trade. It will also unpack whether Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a catalyst for what appears to be Russia's diminishing influence or whether the former Soviet Union's waning global standing and economic relevance precipitated a loosening of ties.

The fluidity of geopolitics has left many African states between a rock and a hard place. What does this mean for Africa, not only in terms of its relationship to Russia but also more broadly on the geopolitical stage? Further, how would Africa be positioned on the global stage should Russia prevail, should the war drag on, or, more interestingly, should Ukraine emerge victorious?

The Vote: Winner, by Split Decision

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) has held five significant votes on the matter:

1. In March 2022 to condemn the invasion¹
2. In April 2022 to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council (UNHRC)²
3. In October 2022 to reject the country's annexation of Ukrainian territories³
4. In November 2022 to call for Russian reparations for Ukraine⁴
5. In February 2023 to call for peace on the one-year anniversary of the war⁵

In analyzing the voting patterns from African members across the five votes, the continent's tendency toward nonalignment—and, in some cases, divided loyalties—becomes clear, as does Russia's influence (see figure 1).⁶

Figure 1: African Voting Patterns in the UN General Assembly on the Ukraine/Russia Conflict

		Vote Spread					%					
Key		Condemn	Suspend	Annex	Reparations	End War	Average	Condemn	Suspend	Annex	Reparations	End War
Abstain	A	17	24	19	27	15	38%	31%	44%	35%	50%	28%
Yes	Y	28	10	30	15	30	42%	52%	19%	56%	28%	56%
No	N	1	9	0	5	2	6%	2%	17%	0%	9%	4%
Not Present	NP	8	11	5	7	7	14%	15%	20%	9%	13%	13%
Total		54	54	54	54	54	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Date	Country	02-Mar-22 Condemn	07-Apr-22 Suspend	12-Oct-22 Annex	14-Nov-22 Reparations	23-Feb-23 End War
	Algeria	A	N	A	A	A
	Angola	A	A	Y	A	A
	Benin	Y	NP	Y	Y	Y
	Botswana	Y	A	Y	A	Y
	Burkina Faso	NP	NP	NP	NP	NP
	Burundi	A	N	A	A	A
	Cabo Verde	Y	A	Y	Y	Y
	Cameroon	NP	A	NP	NP	NP
	Chad	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	CAR	A	N	A	N	A
	Comoros	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Republic of the Congo	A	N	A	A	A
	Côte d'Ivoire	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	DRC	Y	Y	Y	NP	Y
	Djibouti	Y	NP	NP	Y	Y
	Egypt	Y	A	Y	A	Y
	Equatorial Guinea	A	NP	NP	A	NP
	Eritrea	N	N	A	N	N
	Eswatini	NP	A	A	A	NP
	Ethiopia	NP	N	A	N	A
	Gabon	Y	N	Y	A	A
	Gambia	Y	A	Y	A	Y
	Ghana	Y	A	Y	Y	Y

Date Country	02-Mar-22 Condemn	07-Apr-22 Suspend	12-Oct-22 Annex	14-Nov-22 Reparations	23-Feb-23 End War
Guinea	NP	NP	A	A	A
Guinea-Bissau	NP	A	Y	A	NP
Kenya	Y	A	Y	Y	Y
Lesotho	Y	A	A	A	Y
Liberia	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Libya	Y	Y	Y	A	Y
Madagascar	A	A	Y	A	Y
Mali	A	N	A	N	N
Malawi	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Mauritania	Y	NP	Y	A	Y
Mauritius	Y	Y	Y	A	Y
Morocco	NP	NP	Y	NP	Y
Mozambique	A	A	A	A	A
Nambia	A	A	A	A	A
Niger	Y	A	Y	Y	Y
Nigeria	Y	A	Y	A	Y
Rwanda	Y	NP	Y	A	Y
São Tomé and Príncipe	Y	NP	NP	NP	Y
Senegal	A	A	Y	NP	NP
Seychelles	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Sierra Leone	Y	Y	Y	A	Y
Somalia	Y	NP	Y	Y	Y
South Africa	A	A	A	A	A
South Sudan	A	A	A	A	Y
Sudan	A	A	A	A	A
Tanzania	A	A	A	NP	NP
Togo	NP	A	A	Y	A
Tunisia	Y	A	Y	A	Y
Uganda	A	A	A	A	A
Zambia	Y	NP	Y	Y	Y
Zimbabwe	A	N	A	N	A

Source: Author calculations of UN Digital Library voting data. See United Nations Digital Library, "Voting Data," accessed March 28, 2023, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/search?cc=Voting+Data&ln=en&c=Voting+Data>.

In the first vote, the assembly voted overwhelmingly (73 percent or 141 of the 193 members) to reaffirm Ukraine’s sovereignty and demand an unconditional Russian withdrawal. Twenty-eight of those votes were from Africa’s fifty-four states.⁷ Africa is a sizeable voting bloc, constituting 28 percent of the general assembly’s members.⁸ To illustrate how disjointed Africa’s stance was, there were fifty-two countries that did not vote in favor of the resolution—half of which were African nations. **In the second vote**, just 19 percent of African states voted to suspend Russia from the UNHRC. **In the third vote**, 56 percent of African countries voted not to recognize the annexation claims of Ukrainian territories, and the UN noted in a press release on the vote outcome that most countries abstaining were African nations. **In the fourth vote**, which was on whether Russia should pay reparations to Ukraine, 50 percent of African countries abstained from voting, while less than a third voted in favor (see figure 1). **The fifth and most recent vote**, calling for an end to the war, saw the highest number of African states voting yes across all resolutions. Six of the fifty-four African countries voted “Yes” in all five votes, while an additional nineteen countries supported at least three of the resolutions.

Joseph Siegle,⁹ head of research at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, broadly grouped Africa’s voting alignments into four categories after the first vote. The first category, who exclusively abstained or voted no across all five votes, consists of the Central African Republic, Mali, and Sudan, whose leaders all lack political legitimacy but have been brought to and kept in power through Russian arms and mercenary support. The second grouping, who either abstained or did not vote on the first resolution, are those whose leaders and elites have close ties to Russia and benefit from its political cover: Algeria, Angola, Burundi, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea, Madagascar, Mozambique, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

A third group—Morocco, Namibia, Senegal, and South Africa—likely disagree with Russia’s actions but upheld their tradition of nonalignment by refusing to be drawn into voting. The fourth and final group Siegle identifies, who voted in favor in the majority of votes, are among Africa’s more advanced democracies—Botswana, Cabo Verde, Ghana, Malawi, Mauritius, Niger, Nigeria, Kenya, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, and Zambia.¹⁰ Of course, these are not clear-cut groupings. There are areas of overlap and opacity, and while Siegle developed his groupings at the time of the first vote, subsequent voting suggests these categories largely hold. The motivation for each country’s decision shows Russia’s targeted but limited presence on the continent and the extent to which Russia is still well regarded by Africa for its backing of the continent’s liberation movements and history of standing up to perceived Western neocolonial slights.

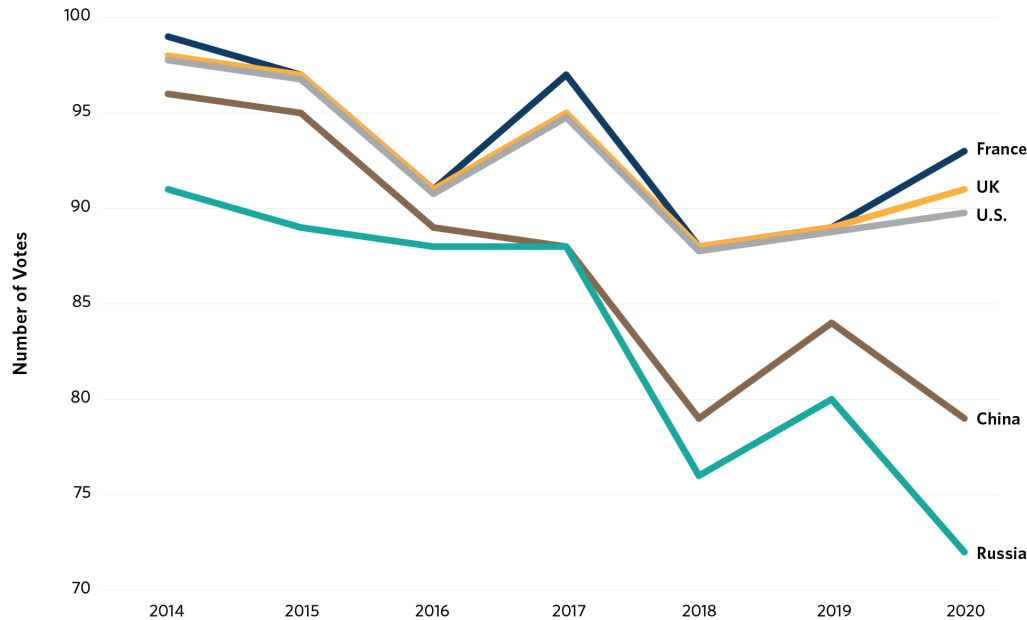
Viewed collectively and on balance by aggregating vote outcomes across the five votes, the majority (52 percent) of African states either abstained from voting or effectively did the same by not attending (see figure 1). This fragmented voting pattern stunned many and drew sharp criticism from various Western capitals, and even from some of the African countries themselves.¹¹ But Africa is not a country. The vote outcome shouldn’t have been a surprise. It highlights the lack of consensus within Africa, not just on Russia but also on a broader willingness to take a collective position between large power rivals like the United

States, China, and Russia. The African Union (AU), Africa’s representative body, was clearer on its position: while it stopped short of outright condemnation, it asked Russia to respect international law and Ukraine’s sovereignty. The AU even offered to mediate talks between the two countries.¹²

A 2021 study by two independent South African public policy think tanks, the South African Institute for International Affairs and the Institute for Security Studies, scoured the voting data of Russia and African countries on the UN Security Council (UNSC) between 2014 and 2020.¹³ The UNSC is made up of five permanent members—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (the P5)—and ten nonpermanent members. Of the ten nonpermanent members, Africa is allocated three seats (the A3), but countries serve as individual members and not on behalf of the AU or its Peace and Security Council. By contrast, the UNGA is the main policymaking body of the UN, comprising all 194 member states with equal voting rights.

While Russia was a clear outlier in its willingness to employ its veto power or abstain from voting altogether, African countries almost always opted to abstain from voting on controversial resolutions. The study notes that the relationship between Russia and the A3 has historically converged but is slowly diverging; voting alignment between the A3 and Russia has fallen from 91 percent in 2014 to 72 percent in 2020 (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Average Coincidence of “In Favor” Votes Between the A3 and P5 UNSC Members



Source: Priyal Singh and Gustavo de Carvalho, “Walking With the Bear? Russia and the A3 in the UN Security Council,” South African Institute of International Affairs, October 2021, <https://saiia.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Policy-Insights-118-singh-de-carvalho.pdf>.

A3 membership on the UNSC is only a small sample of Africa's numbers in the UNGA, and UNSC voting patterns¹⁴ cannot be extrapolated onto UNGA votes. It does, however, suggest that African perceptions of Russia have indeed shifted over time.¹⁵

For Russia, the outcome of the first Russia-Ukraine vote could be considered a symbolic victory at best. It showed the West that Russia was not as isolated as many would have expected¹⁶ and that the West should not take African support for granted.¹⁷ Indeed, Russia has expertly crafted a narrative that champions a multipolar world where the imposition of Western democratic ideals is resisted and the ideological sovereignty of non-Western nations is respected. The irony of Russia's claims in the context of the Ukraine invasion is glaring, but Moscow's narrative finds an audience in parts of Africa where colonial rule gave way (sometimes with Russian support for anticolonial movements) to strongman rule¹⁸ or where such strongmen still hold on to power, often with backing from global powers, particularly in the West and in Central Africa.

A natural corollary of Africa's split vote, however, is that Russia should not take African support for granted either. Despite the disappointment Western countries voiced at the number of African abstentions, they are acutely aware that an abstention is not tacit support and that African countries have both agency and wider geopolitical considerations at play.

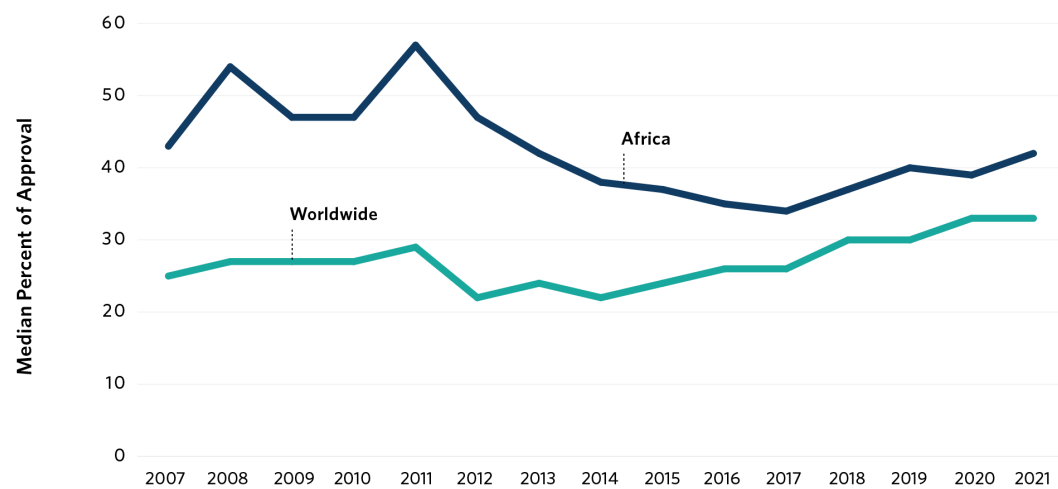
Russia's Changing Influence on the Continent

Country votes at the UNGA do not necessarily represent the voice of citizens, as evidenced by the public outcry over abstentions or nonparticipation by several countries, such as South Africa and Uganda, whose leaders were quick to invoke neutrality. A 2021 Afrobarometer survey showed that as many as half of respondents in Africa felt that elected officials did not represent their views,¹⁹ a perception exacerbated by high levels of corruption, weak economic outcomes, and growing inequality. While this sentiment is by no means uniquely African, there are other signs on the ground that suggest African perceptions of Russia are cooling.

A poll by Gallup of more than a thousand African respondents across twenty-three countries found that African approval of Russia's leadership, while low, has remained consistently higher than the global average (see figure 3). Russia has always positioned itself as an equal of African states, similarly opposed to Western paternalism and reluctant to meddle in domestic affairs on the continent. This positioning combined with the legacy of support it showed African liberation movements has earned the country extensive goodwill, not just among African leaders but among African citizens.

The same survey indicated that Africans nevertheless assigned higher approval ratings to U.S., Chinese, and German leadership at 60 percent, 52 percent, and 49 percent respectively.²⁰ Russia's approval in Africa reached a peak of 57 percent in 2011 but was in steady decline, worsened by the 2014 annexation of Crimea. After a low of 26 percent in 2017, African perceptions of Russia's leadership on the continent began to improve. The turnaround coincides with Russia's renewed push into Africa as the country launched a host of hard- and soft-power measures to bolster its multipolar world narrative and side up to embattled African leaders.

Figure 3: African Citizens' Approval of Russia's Leadership From 2007 to 2021



Source: Zach Bikus, "Africans Divided on Russia's Leadership Before Ukraine War," Gallup, April 13, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/391718/africans-divided-russia-leadership-ukraine-war.aspx>.

Russia's overall approval rating in Africa, however, is artificially boosted by almost extreme high scores in certain regions, West Africa in particular. When viewed on a country-by-country basis, the effects of Russia's targeted forays into Africa are telling (see figure 4). Russia has an 84 percent approval rating in Mali, where mercenaries from the Wagner Group—a paramilitary outfit with close links to the Kremlin and Russian military intelligence—opportunistically took advantage of a French troop withdrawal after then president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was overthrown in a coup. Malians were seen taking to the streets waving Russian flags.²¹ This was despite the Wagner Group being accused of human rights atrocities in the country when more than 350 Malians were killed in the village of Moura.²² Similar incidents of protesters waving Russian flags have been witnessed in Burkina Faso, Niger, and the Central African Republic and highlight the efficiency and effectiveness of Russia's ability to manipulate both the narrative and the optics. The Russian narrative positions Wagner troops as liberators from despotic regimes, a framing that is eagerly embraced by long-suffering citizenries unaware that newly installed governments are seldom much different from the last, apart from being newly indebted to Russia.

Figure 4: Russian Approval Ratings in Africa

	Approve %	Disapprove %	Don't know/ Refused %	Change 2020-2021 pct. pts.
Mali	84	8	8	+25
Côte d'Ivoire	71	20	9	+17
Guinea	67	11	21	-5
Gabon	64	21	15	+13
Togo	61	12	27	*
Cameroon	60	21	19	-1
Republic of the Congo	54	25	21	+1
Nigeria	53	13	35	+13
Burkina Faso	50	15	35	-3
Sierra Leone	50	9	41	*
Ghana	49	12	39	+10
Benin	38	21	41	+2
Senegal	36	14	50	+5
Kenya	45	37	19	0
Mauritius	43	35	22	-4
Malawi	42	33	25	*
Mozambique	41	27	32	*
Namibia	40	46	14	+5
Zimbabwe	39	35	26	+8
Uganda	37	39	24	+1
Tanzania	32	34	34	-1
South Africa	30	26	44	-4
Zambia	22	12	66	-20

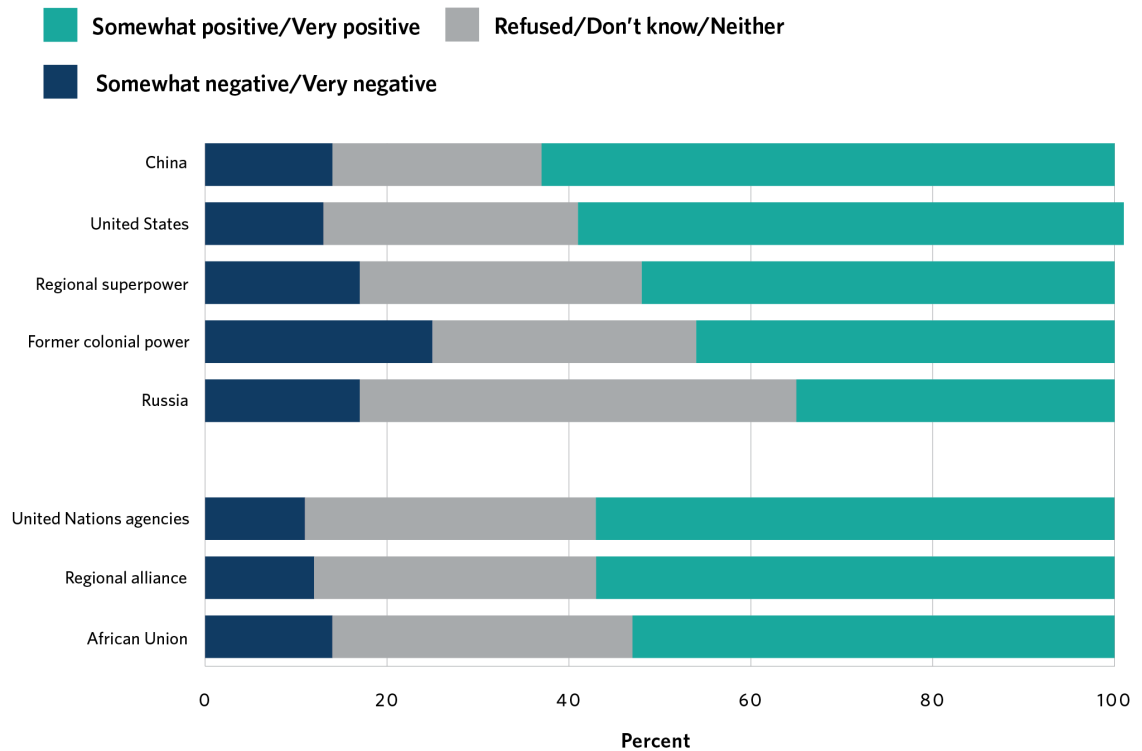
Source: Zach Bikus, "Africans Divided on Russia's Leadership Before Ukraine War," Gallup, April 13, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/391718/africans-divided-russia-leadership-ukraine-war.aspx>.

In a whistlestop tour of Africa (Egypt, Ethiopia, Republic of the Congo, and Uganda) in July 2022, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was at pains to spin fuel and food security concerns in Africa as the fault of Western sanctions, not Russia's invasion of a sovereign nation.²³

Russia has gone to great lengths to manage its image in Africa with mixed success. A 2021 survey by Afrobarometer²⁴ showed that just 35 percent of African respondents viewed Russia's presence on the continent as positive, lower than the 46 percent rating for

former colonial powers (see figure 5).²⁵ The previous year’s survey found that 38 percent of respondents viewed Russian influence as positive, while 16 percent viewed it as negative. Perceptions of Russia in Africa are slipping, albeit slowly.

Figure 5: External Influence: Positive or Negative?



Source: Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Edem Selormey, “Africans Welcome China’s Influence but Maintain Democratic Aspirations,” Afrobarometer, November 15, 2021, https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ad489-pap3-africans_welcome_chinas_influence_maintain_democratic_aspirations-afrobarometer_dispatch-15nov21.pdf.

To assume that Africans are more susceptible to Russian propaganda²⁶ is a simplification and discounts that Africans feel ignored by the West. African countries have long bemoaned economic and political marginalization at international forums like the UN, where many feel unheard. The continent does not have a permanent seat in the G20 or on the UNSC, but this may change given recent support from the German and French foreign ministers for two permanent African seats on the UNSC²⁷ and from U.S. President Joe Biden, who has backed Africa’s bid for one permanent seat, albeit without veto powers.²⁸

In addition to feeling ignored, members of the African diaspora regularly experience racism and xenophobia in the United Kingdom, Europe, and China, with the two most recent instances being in China and Ukraine. In Guangzhou, at the height of the coronavirus pandemic, Africans were evicted by landlords, refused restaurant service, and forcibly tested for coronavirus. At the start of the war in Ukraine, African students and professionals trying

to flee the fighting were forced off busses and trains to make space for Ukrainian citizens. Images of these scenes were widely shared across social media and have done little to generate sympathy for the plight of Ukraine among Africans.

Russia effectively leverages this sentiment, using hints of truth mixed with blatant propaganda that offers both African citizens and leaders a sense of relevance, even if Africa is less of a priority for Russia in the broader global power play than many on the continent would like to believe.

For Russia, Africa is a useful theater in which it can distract the attentions of the West from its own regional ambitions and force Western countries to spread their diplomatic, military, and financial resources more thinly to assuage fears of Russia's growing presence on the continent. All of this is done by committing very limited Russian resources, the bulk of which are private, and extracting mineral resources and wealth in the process.

Russia's Africa Playbook

Unlike several other European countries (like France, Italy, Portugal, and the United Kingdom), Russia has never had any formal colonial presence in Africa, although it has a deep and violent colonial history in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe.²⁹ The closest it came in Africa was in 1889, when Russian explorer Nikolai Ashinov undertook an unsanctioned mission to secure a foothold on the continent for his country. He landed with a small contingent in Sagallo, a town in what is now Djibouti, and briefly declared it "New Moscow." Djibouti was, however, already occupied by the French, who sent the brazen Ashinov and his men packing in less than a month.³⁰

Russia's geographic isolation from access to the continent, and the fact that many of its European counterparts had beaten it to Africa, meant that it would have to change tack to gain a foothold on the continent. No less interested than Europe in Africa and the strategic benefits and resources it offered, Russia crafted a shrewder means to extract wealth from Africa and increase its strategic reach and influence. The Soviet Union, looking for allies during the Cold War, identified with the exclusion many African countries felt and leveraged their sympathy to embed influence and, in some cases, patronage networks among the political elite. Importantly, their advances were not simply passively accepted but often sought by African leaders. This model is traceable until the present day, where it continues to be a simple yet highly effective mode of outreach to decisionmakers and power brokers to wield outsized influence and returns for very little investment. In terms of traditional bilateral transactions (such as investment, aid, or trade), Russia brings relatively little to the table economically, but what it offers politically and financially to a few affords it extensive influence.

Modes of Financial Influence

Investment: In total, Russian investment amounts to less than 1 percent of foreign direct investment into Africa, much smaller than investments from Europe, North America, and Asian countries. In 2019, Russian foreign direct investment was less than one-sixth that of the biggest investor, the Netherlands, and only 20 percent of what China had invested in the continent in the same year. It was also significantly less than what South Africa and Mauritius had invested on the continent. Like most of these other countries, Russia has concentrated its investment almost wholly on resources and energy extraction.³¹

Aid: Russian direct aid too is scant, mostly symbolic, and usually comes in the form of debt forgiveness or contributions to humanitarian crises,³² often in kind.³³ In the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, Russia's Ministry of Emergency Situations (EMERCOM) delivered 25 tons of personal protective equipment, medical products, and disinfectants to the Central African Republic, the Republic of the Congo, and Zimbabwe.³⁴ It also aggressively promoted its Sputnik V vaccine across the continent, but received a lukewarm reception at best, as the vaccine was expensive, shrouded in concerns around safety and efficacy, extensively constrained by logistical and delivery difficulties, and tainted by corruption allegations.³⁵ South Africa, despite being one of Moscow's closest partners on the continent, refused to authorize the vaccine's use.³⁶

Trade: In 2020, Russia-Africa trade reached \$14 billion, about 2 percent of the continent's total trade, paling in comparison to larger trading partners like China, France, India, and the United States. Moreover, the trade relationship is wholly asymmetric. Russia exported \$12.4 billion in goods and services to the continent, while importing just \$1.63 billion, leaving Africa with a near \$11 billion trade deficit.³⁷

Almost a full 30 percent of Africa's imports from Russia are wheat and cereals, bought by countries like Algeria, Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, South Africa, and Sudan. Minerals such as fuels, chemicals, and gas account for another 20 percent of Russia's exports to the continent. For its part, Africa exports predominantly agricultural products to Russia.

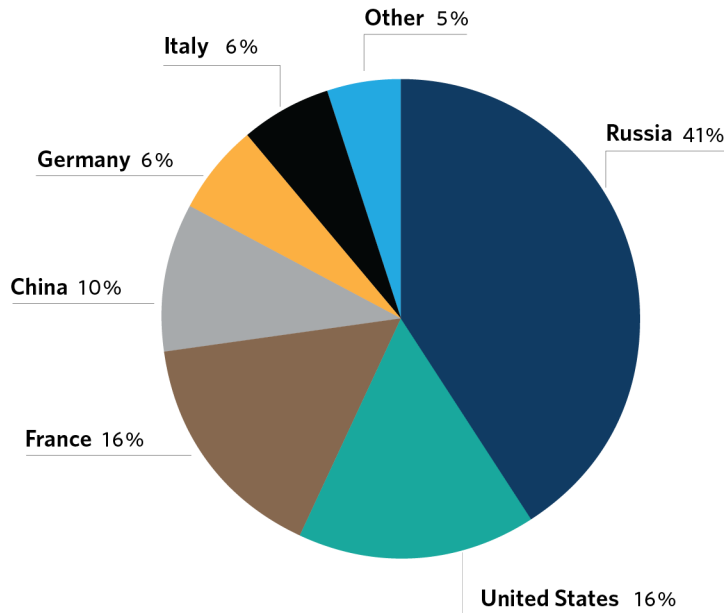
If the investment, aid, and economic ties between Russia and African countries are so thin, what then has made the relationship so close?

Brothers in Arms

Much of the balance of Russia's exports to Africa is made up of military equipment and arms. Indeed, Moscow has been the biggest arms seller on the continent for more than a decade,³⁸ and nearly half of all of Africa's military imports are from Russia, while 20 percent of all Russian arms sales are to Africa (see figure 6).³⁹ Admittedly, these numbers are skewed by sales to Algeria and Egypt, which collectively account for well over half of Africa's Russian arms imports.⁴⁰ These include tanks, MiG fighter jets, warships, helicopters, rockets,

and small arms. The scale of Russian arms sales to the continent dwarfs that of countries like the United States (16 percent), France (16 percent), China (10 percent) and Germany (6 percent). Moscow has promised the creation of joint arms production or maintenance facilities on the continent but generally has not lived up to its promises of transferring any technological capabilities.⁴¹

Figure 6: Arms Sales to Africa by World’s Top Arms Distributors, 2011-2021



Source: Author calculations of SIPRI Trend Indicator Values (TIV) data. See Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, “Arms Transfers Database,” March 2022, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>. SIPRI calculates the volume of transfers to, from, and between all parties using the TIV and the number of weapon systems or subsystems in a given year. The TIV is based on the known unit production costs of a core set of weapons.

Note: The Arms Transfers Database covers major weapons, such as aircraft, artillery, missiles, and ships. The database does not cover other military equipment, such as small arms and light weapons.

The country has supplied arms to more than eighteen African countries since 2010, including in Southern, Northern, and Central Africa.⁴² The biggest buyers on the continent are Algeria, Angola, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, Morocco, and Uganda. Notably, these countries overwhelmingly abstained from voting against Russia in the UNGA resolutions in 2022. In the last two years alone, a Russian state-owned aerospace and defense company, Rosoboronexport, has signed contracts worth more than \$3 billion with African states.⁴³ Arms purchases from Russia are attractive to many African countries not only because they are cheaper than Western weapons but also because they come with no governance or human rights preconditions attached. When former U.S. president Barack Obama’s administration and successive U.S. governments refused to sell fighter jets and attack helicopters to Nigeria on the basis of human rights concerns, Russia stepped in to actively market its defense capabilities.⁴⁴

It's not just the hardware. Russia's military presence on the continent extends to maintenance, training, and, most prominently, private military support. The most notorious provider of these services is the Wagner Group.⁴⁵ While Moscow denies any ties to the group, Wagner is used as a proxy to extend Russia's influence on the continent and extract minerals and resources.⁴⁶

The deployment of state-linked Wagner paramilitaries (which for Africa started in Libya) is opportunistic and preys on fragile governments (of which there are several) and political instability to create dependencies on Russian military assets.⁴⁷ The paramilitaries' presence has extended to Angola, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Sudan, and Zimbabwe.⁴⁸ The Wagner Group has also exploited legitimate grievances in some African states toward Europe (most notably France), particularly in West African countries like Burkina Faso and Mali. Many of the grievances have historical roots, but more recently, they center on the failure of supposed Western allies to help quell instability in the region, leading these governments to turn to Wagner for support. In return for propping up shaky regimes, the Wagner Group, and by association Russia, receives mining and mineral concessions (such as for oil, gold, diamonds, bauxite, lithium, and chromium), allowing the country to extract wealth from the continent.⁴⁹

To be sure, Russia can and does offer valuable and mutually beneficial trade and technological capabilities across several key African industries, but it is the more nefarious and unwritten cooperation agreements that attract the most attention. There are high-profile cases in which Russia has also employed a method of courting and capturing pliant political elites who are sympathetic to Russia, have strong historical ties to the country, or have grievances against other external powers. It is a low-risk strategy with a high degree of deniability that delivers outsized returns when successful.⁵⁰ Additionally, many of these elites actively reach out to Russia to push their own domestic agenda. Former South African president Jacob Zuma,⁵¹ who found both refuge and military training in Russia during apartheid,⁵² pushed through an unaffordable, \$76-billion nuclear-power deal with Rosatom, Russia's atomic energy company. The deal was ultimately foiled by South Africa's robust checks and balances, a vociferous public, and several incorruptible policymakers at the South African National Treasury, a process that marked the beginning of the end for Zuma's presidency.⁵³ South Africa's pushback was the exception, however, and several other African states have embraced Russia's nuclear promises.

Egypt, where Rosatom has already commenced work on a \$29 billion nuclear plant, borrowed 85 percent of the construction cost from Russia to finance the deal. Energy diplomacy has been an effective tool for Russia in African states where electricity supply is insufficient or unstable. Through an African push by Rosatom,⁵⁴ Russia has signed nuclear cooperation agreements with eighteen countries (a third of the continent), such as Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sudan, and Zambia, some of which are considered beacons of democracy in the West.⁵⁵ Africa's dire need for greater generation capacity and Russia's technological capabilities should not be diminished, but these deals are sometimes pursued through Russian co-optation of top officials and even presidents.

Central African Republic President Faustin-Archange Touadéra has Russian bodyguards, and former Russian Federal Security Service member Valery Zakharov acts as his national security adviser.⁵⁶ Mozambique's President Filipe Nyusi signed several energy deals with Russia in 2019 and invited Wagner mercenaries to help quell Islamic State insurgencies in the north of the country. Many heads of state have been willing allies to Russia's advances, including President Denis Sassou Nguesso of the Republic of the Congo, President Ali Bongo Ondimba of Gabon, President Andry Rajoelina of Madagascar, President Emmerson Mnangagwa of Zimbabwe, President Salva Kiir of South Sudan, and President Alpha Condé of Guinea.⁵⁷

To supplement their more overt approaches, Russia also extensively employs disinformation campaigns peddled through social media (such as Facebook and Twitter) to stir instability in countries, often also through the Wagner Group. When South Africa didn't vote in line with Russia at the UNGA, Twitter bots began using the hashtags *#iStandWithRussia* and *#iStandWithPutin*, which started trending on the social media platform. Not all the pushback was from automated bots, however, as many prominent and legitimate accounts lamented the racist treatment of Africans in Ukraine. Other countries like India, Nigeria, and the United States have experienced similar social media barrages in the past from Russian misinformation campaigns.⁵⁸

The Shape of Things to Come: Implications for Africa

At the very least, Russia offers Africa perceived relevance and a voice for a continent relegated to the sidelines of the global geopolitical stage. The West is seemingly becoming more insular and more consumed by great power competition with China. China itself is increasingly focusing its investments and financial engagements on both the domestic economy and its immediate neighborhood in Asia.⁵⁹ Within this shifting geopolitical landscape, Russia is not inattentive to Africa, even if the continent is not its top priority. Russia has seized on Africa's genuine feelings of disenfranchisement in the global economy and global governance, leveraging its own sense of marginalization from the global stage to exaggerate the tangible benefits it can offer to the continent. Africa is not a passive recipient of Russia's attention. Quite the opposite: African states and leaders have actively courted Russian involvement as much as Russia has sought to deepen its ties and presence in Africa. This is often a response to a perceived Western vacuum or lack of interest.

This agency is highlighted by the recent joint naval exercises South Africa hosted with Russia and China.⁶⁰ The drills came at a particularly sensitive geopolitical time after South Africa faced Western backlash for having abstained from voting on all five resolutions at

the UNGA on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The South African government, asserting its independence and sovereignty, rejected criticism of its hosting and participation in the naval exercises and insisted that it remains neutral on Ukraine. South Africa's firm stance was a public relations coup for Russia, which deployed for the joint naval exercises a frigate armed with its new hypersonic cruise missiles.⁶¹ For South Africa, this was a clear message to the West that the country will not be dictated to—a message likely designed to generate greater engagement from Western powers, not the opposite (as many fear).

A key threat for Russia that could undermine the country's continued relevance and usefulness to Africa is that nostalgia for the old Soviet Union is fading with the generation of African leaders that benefited from it. Younger generations of Africans (who make up a large portion of the population, as the continent's median age is below twenty) grew up at a time when Russia had only a shell of its Soviet Union gravitas. The invasions of Crimea and Ukraine have done little to earn Russia goodwill among countries and citizens that sacrificed so much for sovereignty and independence, especially on a continent that is slowly moving toward democracy and development.

Even for Africa's strongmen, Russia's struggle to assert dominance in Ukraine, where it has so far been repelled by a far smaller army, will be of concern. These leaders have essentially put all their eggs in the Russian basket, so trade and arms sanctions placed on the country could see their gambles backfire. That Russia's "special military operation" to Ukraine has dragged into a year-long war with no end in sight has laid bare Russia's military and arms deficiencies. The country's military has been weakened by decades of underinvestment, strategic missteps, and seemingly little will by its fatigued forces to fight a wholly unnecessary war. Russia's military partners in Africa will be acutely aware that Russia has lost its military edge and that, being spread so thin at home, it may be forced to concentrate resources (financial, military, and personnel) on the war in Ukraine, leaving it unable to honor its commitments to African states.

Indeed, in the event of a loss to Ukraine, Russia may ultimately be forced to retreat, regroup, consolidate its assets, and pull back from Africa. This would leave many authoritarian regimes on the continent deeply exposed to challenges from their rivals and would ultimately be more destabilizing for citizens in these countries.

The West should recall that African countries will not accept being told with whom they can and can't engage. Western governments will need to take Africa into their confidence regarding geopolitical matters rather than berate the sovereign stances of countries that feel unseen and neglected by them.

As such, an abstention in the UNGA, even if peddled as a stance of nonalignment, may have been the most pragmatic course of action for many African countries. An abstention can be defended as neither tacit acceptance nor rejection of a resolution in the event of a Russian retreat or loss. It is also an expression of agency and a statement that these countries will not be cowed into toeing the Western line.

The likeliest outcome for Africa from any eventuality of the war in Ukraine is that Russia's capabilities, influence, and presence on the continent will be blunted by Russia's financial, military, and personnel-related overstretch in Ukraine. It is important not to overstate Russia's role in Africa and instead acknowledge that its presence on the continent is driven by opportunism as much as by invitation. Russia is not heavily invested in Africa, and the continent is less a strategic and geopolitical priority than Russian leaders want African officials to believe. Once the risks outweigh the rewards, Russia may leave a vacuum that could be more destabilizing than its presence.

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