

## **ANALYSIS - Russia's return to Africa**

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President Putin views geopolitical relations as insurance for his country's stability, pursuit of Russia's assertive stance globally



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Russia's role and profile in Africa, including the factors underlying its activities, are rarely discussed. The underlying factors include the threat of Russia's diplomatic isolation from Europe and the U.S. over Moscow's policies in Syria and prior to this, the situation in Ukraine, leaving the Kremlin with no alternative but to seek new allies. As the competition for resources, political influence and access to markets continues to increase, Russia begins to look outside established power centers.

Africa has historically been a prominent field of influence for the U.S. and the then-Soviet Union (USSR). Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Russia has been trying to establish its place by setting formative policies to reassert itself on the world stage as a major international power. Bilateral relations between the USSR and African nations were frozen at the end of the Soviet period.

However, Russian President Vladimir Putin seems to have new aspirations in Africa to restore his country to a big power status, spurred on by concerns that China, India, Brazil, and especially the U.S. are intensifying their involvement in Africa. The past relations and partnership between African countries and Russia held an emphasis on political ideology, but now, it has shifted. Today, Moscow wants to deepen its understanding of the business climate and explore trade and partnership opportunities in the African continent.

State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin noted that the business component is growing in the development of relations between the Russian Federation and African countries. While, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov undertook a week-long tour of Africa, visiting Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, Ethiopia, and Zimbabwe. An increasing number of bilateral events were recently planned, in which foreign relations will culminate in the first Russia- Africa summit of more than 50 African leaders hosted by Russia in October 2019 in Sochi. Russia is returning to Africa and using all of its instruments of power, including diplomacy, energy investments, and military support to accumulate influence.

Putin views geopolitical relations as an insurance for Russia's stability and the pursuit of Russia's assertive stance globally. Shortage of minerals such as manganese, chrome, mercury, bauxite and chromium in Russia's industry markets mean that Russia is willing to develop its commercial-economic relations with the continent. This is being done through Russian firms which operate on the continent utilizing a pragmatic framework of economic cooperation. As opposed to historical investment in the African continent, motivated purely by Europe's greed for natural resources and even China's more recent investments which have been criticized as being exploitative. This increase in economic cooperation is the main determining factor especially in the fields of mining, transportation, infrastructure, construction, industry, agriculture and tourism, a sharp contrast to an approach of neo-colonialism.

Putin's visit to South Africa in 2006 was the first-ever visit by a Russian leader to sub-Saharan Africa, intensifying Moscow's desire to foster investment and involvement in the region by political initiatives, businessmen delegations, and securing access to natural resources. Ethiopia and Russia also seek to enhance engagement in the development of a nuclear energy facility in Ethiopia and resume daily flights from Addis Ababa to Moscow as part of speeding up the growing ties between the two countries. From a mining aspect, it is cooperating with Zimbabwe, where Russia is developing one of the world's largest reserves of platinum group metals.

Moreover, Russia's focus on Africa centered around energy, holding key investments in the oil, gas and nuclear power sector. State-run Russian companies such as Gazprom, Lukoil, Renova, the aluminum company Rusal, and the state company of diamond mining Alrosa, operate in several areas and have domains on the continent, by securing their power in industrial African markets. In the first half of 2018, the trade turnover amounted to approximately \$10.5 billion, and the

accumulated Russian investment in Africa from 2003 to 2017 amounted to 17 billion dollars.

Furthermore, an essential component of Russia-Africa relations is the domain of military-technical relations. Russia often uses development and military assistance to encourage African leaders to grant Russian companies easy access to their energy and mining sectors. Arms sales relations established in the Soviet Union years have always been a priority in order to purchase military equipment and weapons. Angola and Mozambique are actively cooperating with Russia in military-technical cooperation. Lavrov announced plans to establish a “logistics center” at a port in Eritrea. Further to this, Russia donated its own weapons to the Central African Republic (CAR) when they pleaded for help to fight marauding militias in countering France’s offers of old guns it had seized off Somalia.

Russian political aspirations in Africa include regaining the leverage once enjoyed by the Soviet Union by re-establishing presence as a non-colonial power which has been made prominent in media reporting and in official Kremlin statements on African relations. The question for African foreign policymakers now is how to play it cleverly from a position of relative strength and leverage. With keen interest from not only China, US, Japan, and now Russia, they have the potential to take advantage and use the new ties to make the economic gains it so desperately needs.

However, increasing economic influence by many foreign players in Africa can lead to potential clashes and escalating competition between Russia, China and Western countries. For now, Russia wants to support Africa to take it away from the U.S. and the EU influence and use it as the pivot of Russia’s future development as a global, economic and strategic power. However, its main goal is to decide what unique offer it can make, that has not already been made by Chinese investment or the Western ‘aid’.

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