Russia in Africa: From Minority to Majority

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DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2026-24-2-142-153

Abstract
This article analyzes the current stage of Russia–Africa relations in the run-up to the 3rd Russia–Africa Summit, focusing on the main achievements of recent years, the risks that may limit further progress, and the opportunities for building a more sustainable partnership. It argues that—although Russia has expanded political dialogue with African states, strengthened diplomatic and institutional engagement, and increased trade—Russia's practical interaction with Africa remains vulnerable because of weak institutionalization, uneven project implementation, and lack of clearly defined strategic priorities. The article calls for a more selective approach to African partners and deeper engagement with states that possess greater regional influence, political stability, and economic capacity. It also argues that a pragmatic and durable Russian strategy in Africa should prioritize cooperation in certain sectors: agriculture; food, energy, digital, and information security; and education and knowledge-sharing.

Keywords: Russia-Africa relations; sovereignty; sectoral cooperation; trade and investment; institutional mechanisms; strategic prioritization.

This year will see the third Russia-Africa Summit. This platform, which brings together Russia, 54 African countries, the African Union, and regional integration associations, has been recognized as successful: efforts have been taken to maintain regularity and ensure continuous communication between the events. Since the first October 2019 Summit, Russia-Africa dialogue has been expanded with additional mechanisms: preparations are underway for a second Russia-Africa Foreign Ministers' Meeting, and sectoral tracks on digitalization, food sovereignty, energy, and medicine are being devised or running. But the platform's role has changed, from promoting bilateral relations and explaining Africa's importance to Russia in 2019 and 2023 to reporting on progress and discussing risks in 2026.

Russia's objectives and strategy in Africa were widely discussed by experts and scholars in 2018-2021, but mainly with a focus on the extent to which Africa is important for Russia's foreign policy. Several dedicated reports (Maslov et al., 2021) and publications facilitated the adoption, at the 2023 Summit, of the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum Action Plan, as a roadmap for cooperation in 2023-2026. These discussions were also summarized in a fundamental article by Alexei Drobinin (2025), Director of the Foreign Ministry's Foreign Policy Planning Department, which underscored Russia's interest in "African civilization's internal consolidation and prosperous sovereignty-based development."

The changes in Russia's external environment since 2022 have dispelled any doubts about Africa's relevance for Russia. The continent offers the Russian government new foreign partners and opportunities, and offers business new markets and partners, investment opportunities. Russia is strengthening engagement by setting up embassies, specialized financial mechanisms, expert councils, and civic and research organizations (Maslov and Sviridov, 2023). Trade volume grew from $18 billion in 2021 to $28 billion in 2024.

Yet Russia's key achievement in recent years has been most African countries' friendly neutrality regarding the Ukraine crisis, as displayed in UNGA voting and top-level communication. Russia's Africa policy has several official vectors, including opposition to neo-colonialism and support for African countries' sovereignty. This approach is

particularly seen in Russia's growing military-political influence in the Sahel region (Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso), where it has partially filled the vacuum that emerged after France, other EU countries, and the U.S. reduced their presence, partly due to events in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Asia-Pacific.

This might seem to suggest that discussions about Russia's Africa policy are no longer necessary. Despite Russia's habit of "avoiding clear goal-setting when the future is uncertain" (Bordachev, 2024, p. 7) and shortage of resources, Moscow has established itself as an influential actor in Africa, alongside the U.S., the former colonial powers, Türkiye, the UAE, India, China, South Korea, and Japan. Russia's practical approach—centered on expanding trade and enhancing its position in areas where opportunities emerge—has yielded tangible results.

However, several questions remain. How can mutual political understanding be translated into practical cooperation, and how should the Russian government and businesses support it? What are Russia's objectives in expanding engagement in regions such as the Sahel? To what extent do Russian and African approaches to 'sovereignty" and 'multipolarity' correlate? Although Russia has made notable success in Africa, further work is needed to develop the conditions and mechanisms to achieve sustainable progress.

BETWEEN OLD AND NEW

The success of Russia's return to Africa, in the late 2010s, cannot be detached from the broader global context.

Firstly, Russia re-entered Africa belatedly, after China (early 2000s) and India (late 2000s to early 2010s), when enthusiasm around the continent had already begun to wane. By this time, the commodities crash had triggered a recession in most leading regional economies, and many Africans saw risks in growing debts to China.

Secondly, Africa's consumption, international role, and decision-making independence were growing, and African countries were seeking new partners.

Thirdly, Western countries had downscaled their involvement in Africa for various reasons. Cooperation with Russia was seen as an alternative.

Moscow trumpeted its return and achieved some success, as mentioned above. But African countries' interest should not be overstated. While the 2019 Summit was better-attended (with more than 40 heads of state), similar to the forums hosted by China and the U.S., the 2023 Summit and 2024 Ministerial Conference were much less authoritative: 20 heads of state and 36 foreign ministers, respectively.

Closer examination reveals that many of Russia's achievements were due less to systemic efforts than to favorable circumstances and emerging opportunities. For example, growth in trade in food, fertilizers, fuel, and arms was a result not only of Russian investments in supply chains and personnel training, but also of price fluctuations, Russia's forced reorientation towards new markets, and short-term procurement initiatives by individual countries. These ties may remain sensitive to changes in the economic and political environment and, in some areas, to the lack of a solid institutional foundation.

African states' voting in the UN General Assembly is commonly cited in support of claims about Russia's success in Africa. However, in general, UNGA voting is becoming an increasingly limited indicator of states' political orientation, as states often separate their declarative positions in multilateral forums from their practical foreign, economic, and security policies. Moreover, many African countries tend to abstain on issues that they do not see as directly affecting their core interests, while Russia interprets such abstentions as politically significant (Panin, 2023). The states that consistently actually align with Moscow at the UNGA tend to have limited economic resources and greater dependence on external assistance. By contrast, some less economically vulnerable states that have declared strategic partnerships with Russia, such as Egypt (a BRICS member) and Nigeria (a BRICS partner country), have not always supported Russia on key resolutions (Safranchuk et al., 2023).

There remains a gap between demonstrative activity (forums, visits, and public statements) and the implementation of concrete projects. Investment agreements announced at summits, intergovernmental commissions, and bilateral meetings have not progressed beyond declarations. Since 2019, few major new investment projects have

taken shape. This reflects, above all, the constraints facing private Russian businesses (which often operate autonomously from the state in the absence of institutional support) that lack local knowledge and experience in African markets. Private businesses struggle to secure financing, including from Russian, partner-countries', and African banks. Lack of significant progress is less due to external political factors and more due to weaknesses in projects' planning and commercial feasibility. This explains why losses are mainly borne not by state-owned companies but by private firms such as RUSAL, Norilsk Nickel, and Lukoil.

BETWEEN MINORITY AND MAJORITY

For all the claims of a unified communication space, pan-African institutions, shared historical experience, and civilizational closeness (Maslov, 2023), Africa is a heterogeneous region with 54 countries, and prioritization is necessary. Russia would not develop relations with Asia, the Persian Gulf, or the Caucasus as a whole, except perhaps in certain supplemental areas, such as the humanitarian or educational spheres. Russia's growing involvement in Africa necessitates taking positions on crises where friendly countries clash: for instance, Ethiopia and Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, the DRC and Rwanda in the Lake Kivu region, and Algeria and Mali over the Tuareg issue. Russia's generally constructive relations with different parties to regional conflicts can provide a basis for a more effective mediating role. However, to translate this potential into a solid political resource, it is important to clearly define key partner states that could lend greater coherence and systemic character to Russia's network of partnerships in Africa.

Prioritizing one region over another (e.g., East Africa over the Sahel, or vice versa) is inappropriate. Regions, like the entire African continent, are not coherent. The prioritization of regions by certain countries (East Africa by China, India, and Japan; North Africa by the EU and Türkiye) is driven by those countries' geographic locations. Russia's approach should be functional, rather than territorial, as it seeks the same things—logistics, payment infrastructure, trading

partners—everywhere. Priorities should be dictated by the degree to which countries offer opportunities that align with Russia's economic-development objectives.

While emphasizing support from the World Majority, Russia's policy in Africa has at times focused disproportionately on actors with limited political weight and economic potential. This may reduce the overall effectiveness of engagement, especially where resources and institutional attention could instead be directed towards relationships capable of generating broader and more sustainable returns. In this sense, political sympathy is less important than strategic selectivity and clearly-defined priorities.

Russia's Africa policy includes a search for partners receptive to cooperation, hence its engagement with non-systemic political actors, public commentators, and civic organizations. While this approach finds an eager response from Africans seeking electoral and military-political support, its long-term benefits appear bleak. These actors can offer short-term political openness but not a durable, stable partnership. In contrast, many ruling parties and well-established state institutions across Africa have no explicitly anti-Russian positions, suggesting that closer engagement with systemic actors may offer more practical and sustainable ties.

Systemic parties—such as Chama cha Mapinduzi in Tanzania, the African National Congress in South Africa, SWAPO in Namibia, and ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe—owe their longevity precisely to balanced 'network-centric' (Maslov, 2023) communications, including with Moscow. Even pro-Western and pro-Ukrainian forces balance their rhetoric and remain open to dialogue, prioritizing public opinion and economic benefit. This is illustrated by the dynamic growth of trade with Morocco (now around $2 billion annually), Kenya (around $500 million), and others. Trade with the CAR, meanwhile, amounts to about $5 million.

Thus far, Russia has acted as if trying to mimic the USSR's role in Africa as an ally of impoverished, civil-war-ridden states, to whom it provided nonrepayable grants for building socialism. But such a perception is actually a myth; the USSR cooperated with socialist-

oriented countries (Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia) and capitalist states (Nigeria, Morocco, Côte d'Ivoire). Soviet financial aid, compared to Western aid, was limited and came with stricter conditions. In the 1980s, COMECON provided only about 3% of global aid to Africa (compared to 23% from the U.S. and 10% from West Germany), and Soviet loans mainly financed the purchase of Soviet equipment and construction of industrial facilities by Soviet organizations, its output then served as payment-in-kind for the African states' resources. This fit into the Socialist Bloc's broader system of economic cooperation: the USSR strengthened the African countries' industrial potential, securing necessary resources for itself (Sviridov, 2025).

Until recently, Russia often engaged with politically and economically fragile states not out of a clear preference for them, but rather out of reluctance to disengage from any partners interested in cooperation. In 2024–2025, however, there were signs of reorientation towards more stable and institutionally significant partners, such as Tanzania and Ethiopia, and a more balanced approach to regional conflicts, such as that between Algeria and Mali. Yet some partners, whose practical political and economic potential remains limited, are still ascribed a political weight disproportionate to their strategic importance.

This logic is understandable: politically fragile states can at times offer external partners quicker access, greater diplomatic visibility, and opportunities to establish a presence where the competitive environment is less consolidated. Yet these advantages are often accompanied by heightened risks. Cooperation in such settings tends to unfold under conditions of continuing political uncertainty, limited institutional capacity, and a high degree of personalization of power. As a result, agreements may depend heavily on particular leadership configurations. In such circumstances, external support can strengthen the position of incumbent actors, but shifts in authority—whether through political realignment, internal fragmentation, or abrupt transfers of power—may significantly reduce the durability of earlier understandings.

More broadly, excessive focus on a narrow group of politically fragile partners may sit uneasily with the broader logic of multipolarity

that Russia itself emphasizes in its foreign policy discourse. If multipolarity is understood as the strengthening of non-Western centers of influence, then particular importance belongs to regionally-significant African actors—such as Abuja, Addis Ababa, Algiers, Dakar, Dodoma, Cairo, Kigali, Kinshasa, and Pretoria—above all within their regions. African states may welcome the reduced dominance of older external powers (France, the UK, the U.S.), while remaining cautious about simply replacing one outside influence with another. A more sustainable strategy would not substitute for regional actors but rather build partnerships with them in ways that reinforce their own agency and regional roles.

Decades of Russia-Africa engagement suggest that periods of intensified political contacts and ambitious joint initiatives—sometimes associated with large-scale projects such as a Russian military facility or a nuclear power plant—are often followed by periods of slower implementation and reduced momentum. Greater systematization of cooperation and a stronger role of the state may help mitigate this pattern, but alone they are unlikely to eliminate its structural causes. Over the longer term, more sustainable results are likely to come from deeper relations with politically and economically more stable regional heavyweights—such as Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Tanzania, and South Africa—which maintain ties with multiple centers of power and pursue their own strategic agendas.

This, in turn, points to ***the importance of aligning Russian engagement with those parts of the continent where demand for external partnership and the capacity to absorb large-scale projects are greatest.*** States with stronger infrastructure, more diversified economies, and greater purchasing power are often the most competitive. Yet this should not be seen as an obstacle: in such environments, long-term projects have the best chance of gaining scale and durability. This suggests the need for a more selective distribution of resources and attention to areas where cooperation can generate broader and more sustainable returns.

However, commercial profitability alone cannot determine priorities. Historically, Russia's engagement in Africa has largely been shaped

by the state, while private businesses—including some of the most commercially successful actors—have not always been willing or able to associate themselves too closely with Russia's broader foreign policy objectives. Therefore, priority areas of cooperation may require more targeted official instruments, including preferential financing of exports and investment projects, insurance mechanisms, offset arrangements, and long-term contracts in strategically important sectors.

Smaller states, for their part, should not be excluded from this framework. They may remain important partners where they are directly relevant to Russia's development interests or where investment costs and risks can be shared with third parties. In such cases, engagement can be both practical and politically meaningful, provided it is embedded in a broader and more differentiated partnership strategy.

Within this broader framework, the pan-African track should retain its importance as a platform for humanitarian, educational, and cultural cooperation. These dimensions are essential for shaping a positive image of Russia and sustaining its long-term ties across the continent. But they are unlikely to substitute for clearer prioritization of states and sub-regions. In practical terms, a more focused strategy would place greater emphasis on sub-regional frameworks and on cooperation with a limited number of 'anchor' partners capable of giving broader coherence and continuity to Russia's presence in Africa.

WHAT CAN RUSSIAN STRATEGY BE BUILT ON?

Strategy—objectives, available resources, and how to use them—should determine a country's priorities.

Across various administrations over a quarter-century, the U.S. maintained continuity in Africa in key areas: healthcare (PEPFAR), trade preferences (AGOA), security (consolidated since 2008 under AFRICOM), humanitarian aid, and energy since 2013 (Power Africa). Different administrations assigned these things varying significance, but the overall logic remained unchanged: developing the American economy and ensuring security. After Donald Trump came to power, approaches have been reconsidered, but formats are more likely to be adjusted—e.g., with greater support for U.S. exports and greater

emphasis on access to critical minerals—rather than be cast aside. There has already been a shift in aid delivery towards bilateral compacts built around co-financing, measurable benchmarks, stricter timelines, and recipient-side commitments to assume a larger share of costs over time. The reformulation of health cooperation with Kenya illustrates this logic well. In late 2025, Washington did not end aid, but replaced older forms of it with a five-year framework under which the U.S. committed over $1.6 billion, Kenya pledged roughly $850 million of additional domestic spending, and funding was redirected away from NGOs towards the Kenyan state, which is to become more self-reliant. This is not so much a rejection of humanitarian assistance per se but more an effort to make such assistance more conditional, performance-based, and closely-aligned with broader U.S. strategic and economic interests.

Russia's instruments are not so institutionalized, although the groundwork is now being laid. Russia awards 5,000 scholarships annually to African students (thereby preserving educational and human ties); it exports critical commodities like grain, fertilizers, and petroleum products (so-called 'humanitarian exports'); and it has established an E-Governance Knowledge Sharing Program aimed at exchanging Russian and African experience of developing and implementing e-governance. But all this requires further development and optimization.

Having tools at hand facilitates targeted goal-setting and helps avoid empty slogans and wishful thinking. Promising areas of cooperation include the agricultural sector (seeds, fertilizers, machinery, storage); energy (small hydropower plants, pipeline construction); digitalization and information security; education and workforce training. For each sector, a set of tools should be created, including preferential (not only financial) support, project expertise, and training.

Russia also has a special offering for export to Africa: 'sovereignty tools.' These are specific measures that an African country can take to strengthen its negotiating position with Western or Eastern countries. In food security: food storage systems, digital prediction of extreme climate events, GIS, etc. In mineral extraction: regulatory and other measures that promote the development of domestic markets,

rather than exports to the Asia-Pacific or Europe. In digitalization: requirements for data localization, development of fiber-optic networks, and satellite communications. Sovereignty tools become an extension of sectoral priorities and help create a favorable environment for Russian investors and exporters.

However different their political priorities and development levels may be, African states' key task is attracting investment. Russia, while declaring its willingness to support African countries' sovereignty and expand mutual trade, currently does not match its competitors in ability to invest in the continent.

However, these limitations may not be permanent. The size of Russia's frozen assets in the EU (about $300 billion), its significant military expenditures, and its continued export surplus suggest that it does—or at least will—have access to resources that could support external economic development and, with proper planning, generate income.

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Like a great river, Africa's development will proceed independently of external intervention. The influence of individual players, including Russia, is often overstated: African countries move along their own economic, political, and social trajectories, determined more by internal factors and regional dynamics. Africa will maintain friendly relations with Russia if Moscow avoids serious mistakes that could disappoint its partners and the new generation of African leaders—mistakes that are more likely if excessive foreign policy ambitions ignore economic and political realities.

Russia's role should be more supportive than directive. Without imposing its development models, Russia should act as a stabilizer—like a plaster cast—helping Africa properly heal the wounds of historical shocks and maintain the resilience of its institutions. Such a position would allow for genuine, long-term assistance, fostering trust and respect for Russian presence. As a result, by the mid-21st century, Africans will perceive Russia as a partner that contributed to their development and independence—as they still remember the USSR.

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