

# “Africa is A Busy Political Arena” With Numerous Players: Assessing Russia’s “Policy Impact”

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*Last November, an expert group headed by Sergei A. Karaganov, the Honorary Chairman of the Presidium, Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, presented its final 150 paged assessment policy report with some recommendations intended to improve and scale up the existing Russia’s influence in Africa. The report, put together by 25 academic researchers and experts, further indicated concrete pitfalls and setbacks in the policy implementation in Africa.*

**This latest policy report unreservedly criticized Russia’s policy towards Africa.** It claimed that there have been inconsistencies in the policy implementation. It said that the policy strategy regarding Africa has to spell out and incorporate the development needs of African countries.

While the number of top-most and high-level meetings have increased, the share of substantive issues on the agenda often remains intangible and negligibly small. There are little definitive results from such meetings, which were to demonstrate, a large extent, the “demand for Russia” by Africa and its leaders. **In addition, disorganized Russian-African lobbying combined with lack of “information hygiene” at all levels of public speaking were listed among the main flaws of Russia’s current Africa policy.**

“In many cases and situations, ideas and intentions are often passed for results, and unapproved projects are announced as going ahead. Russia’s possibilities are overestimated both publicly and in closed negotiations. Worse is many projects announced at the top and high political levels have not been implemented,” according to the report presented in November.

Long before the historic Russia-Africa summit, at least during the past decade, several bilateral agreements between Russia and individual African countries were signed. Besides, memoranda of understanding, declaration of interests, pledges and promises dominated official speeches. On the other side, Russia is simply invisible in economic sectors in Africa,

despite boasting of decades-old solid relations with the continent.

It has however attempting to transform the much boasted political relations into a more comprehensive and broad economic cooperation. Its economic footprints are not growing as expected. Interestingly, Russian authorities always acknowledge the enormous potentials and advantages Russia has, and at the same are puzzled by the comparatively high level of economic influence by other foreign players in Africa.

Russia has intensified efforts to strengthen political dialogue, including the exchange of visits at the top levels. Interaction between foreign ministries is expanding. During the year prior to the first Russia-African summit, 21 African foreign ministers visited Russia. According to the calculation with information made available officially at the website, Sergey Lavrov and his deputy Minister, Mikhail Bogdanov, have held talks with nearly 100 African politicians including ministers, deputies between January and September 2019. Bogdanov interacted with all African ambassadors in the Russian Federation. Russian ambassadors and staff are also at their posts inside Africa.

Russians like historical references. As always expected, they have nostalgic interest towards Africa, relying on the traditions of friendship and cooperation established back to the days of the political liberation struggle for freedom and independence and eager to use that as unifying factor. Soviet Union, in many respects, supported most of the countries during the decolonization of Africa.

The question being asked three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union: What has noticeably changed between Russia and Africa? In answering this basic question, Lavrov acknowledged talking to students and staff at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO): "Africa is one of our priorities. Our political ties in particular are developing dynamically. But economic cooperation is not as far advanced as our political ties."

According to Lavrov, the process of Russia returning to Africa is taking the form of intensifying political dialogue, which has always been at a strategic and friendly level, and now moving towards a vigorous economic cooperation. It is necessary to consolidate these trends and draw up plans for expanding consolidated partnerships with the African countries.

That however, just as the coronavirus pandemic subsided leading to the opening of air space and borders, a lined-up of African foreign ministers including Algeria, Chad, Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Guinea-Bissau, Libya, Mali, Nigeria, Sudan, Sierra Leone and Togo came, as always, for political consultations and dialogue.

The significance of diplomatic meetings and most possibly those to follow preceding the next Russia-Africa summit slated for 2022, Lavrov has always indicated in his introductory speeches -these visits are to review the status of the bilateral relations and prospects for their further development.

Russian and African experts have expressed their concern about official visits proliferating both ways, with little impact on the sustainable development currently needed by the majority of African countries. While some see official visits simply as diplomatic tourism, a number of the African leaders keep in mind how bilateral policies would help tackle key questions such as rising unemployment, healthcare problems, poor infrastructure and

industrial development – how to turn Russia’s focus towards realizing the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#).

Russia has shown interests in niche sectors such as nuclear power development, launching African satellites, and energy and mining projects. It has been seeking to exploit conventional gas and oil fields in Africa; part of its long-term energy strategy is to use Russian companies to create new streams of energy supply.

In terms of a strategic outlook and action on economic engagement, it is seriously lagging behind. Russia has long ago cut the “red-ribbon” marking the completion of an infrastructure project in Africa. With regard to other economic areas, it may have to identify wide range of sectors as with members of the European Union, China, the United States, India, the Gulf States and others.

Nevertheless, within the framework of the African Continental Free Trade (AfCFTA) that promises creating a single borderless market, it offers opportunities for localization, production and marketing of consumables throughout Africa. This should perhaps, be the strongest dimension of Russia’s dealings in Africa.

Currently, Russian trade is heavily concentrated in North Africa, especially with Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco. Noticeably, in 2019 bilateral trade information from Russian Export Centre shows (trade statistics) that Russia’s relationship with North Africa is the most significant, US\$17 billion of the aggregate total US\$20 billion for the whole of Africa. President Vladimir Putin has asked that this trade figure be doubled, up to US\$40 billion before the next summit planned for 2022.

In an interview with Steven Gruzd, Head of the African Governance and Diplomacy Programme at the [South African Institute of International Affairs \(SAIIA\)](#), he similarly noted that Africa is a busy geopolitical arena, with many players, both old and new, operating. Apart from EU countries, China and the US. There are players such as Iran, Turkey, Israel, the UAE, Japan and others. Russia has to compete against them, and distinctively remain focused its efforts. On the other side, Russia uses the rhetoric of anti-colonialism in its engagement with Africa, and that it is fighting neo-colonialism from the West, especially in relations with their former colonies. It sees France as a threat to its interests especially in Francophone West Africa, the Maghreb and the Sahel.

“I would largely agree that there is a divide between what has been pledged and promised at high-level meetings and summits, compared to what has actually materialized on the ground. There is more talk than action, and in most cases intentions and ideas have been officially presented as initiatives already in progress. There needs to be a lot of tangible progress on the ground for the second summit to show impact. It will be interesting to see what has been concretely achieved in reports at the second Russia-Africa summit scheduled for late 2022,” he said.

Steven Gruzd also heads the Russia-Africa Research Programme initiated this year at SAIIA, South Africa’s premier research institute on international issues. It is an independent, non-government think tank, with a long and proud history of providing thought leadership in Africa.

In another interview, George Nyongesa, a Senior Associate at the Africa Policy Institute in Nairobi (Kenya) reminded that Africa is heading for its defining moments. By 2050, a quarter

of the world's population especially its young people and thus the largest labor force will be in Africa.

Human capital is definitely an important feature of Africa's global profile besides its natural resources. Thus, it is no wonder that global players like the United States, Europeans and Asians are competing for influence, simultaneously investing and focusing on the youth, on the African continent. The competition for the control of the continent by global players is a geopolitical reality and by nature multidimensional: economic, education and training, and social; and brings to memory the rivalry of the Cold War era when the United States often treated African states as pawns or prizes rather than partners, according to Nyongesa.

However, 21st century Africa is different in the sense that African leaders seem aware of their windfall potential in human capital and resources and are no longer interested in patrons or protector and this new attitude has opened wide a range of partners necessary for the achievement of security and prosperity they seek.

In the interview, he further underlined that "the continent is enjoying enviable attention as key global players from the United States, Europe and Asia continue to outfox each other. This can be seen from the fact that US retreat from its fight against violent extremism in Africa, allows Russia to fill in security gaps; hence the growing Russian military influence on the continent. At the same time, the United States expansion of trade and business in the continent is proving a constructive counter Chinese ever-increasing economic influence."

There are still some challenges and persistent problems with perceptions. With economic engagement, Russia often interprets the influence of foreign players as neo-colonizers. In order to make successful economic inroads into Africa, Russia is signing agreements exchanging military weapons for mining concessions. It finds it expedient to militarize and deal with its competitor, as exemplified in Central African Republic, Guinea and Mali and in the Sahel-5 region.

Lipton Matthews, an American researcher and business analyst in recent discussions with this research writer about foreign players and the "scramble" for resources, he explained that the weak governance structures in Africa, the perception that China is colonizing Africa is a consequence of Africa's history of defective governance. Though China through its infrastructural projects is presiding over the modernization of Africa, similar to what Europeans and Americans did in the developing world years ago.

On the other hand, he argued: "We must disabuse ourselves of the notion that colonialism is inherently exploitative. Most people would prefer sovereignty to colonial rule, but the truth is that colonial status does not impede economic growth and some colonies in Africa experienced faster growth during the colonial era. We should give greater priority to good governance than national sovereignty. It is better to be under the rule of benevolent colonizers than to be the subject of a dictator."

In order to aid Africa, Russia should assist Africa in transitioning to a knowledge-based economy by promoting technology transfer agreements. Russians must also invest in more R&D collaborations with their African partners. This agreement will revolutionize Africa's economy and a richer Africa is a positive for Russian investors. If Africa is properly managed, the continent should succeed with sustainable development and, to a considerable extent, attain an appreciable economic independence.

In October 2018, before the start of the first Russia-SADC business forum, Stergomena Lawrence Tax, then Executive Secretary of SADC, explained an exclusive interview that Russia has a long history of bilateral engagements with the Southern African countries, which constitute the Southern African Development Community.

On the other hand, for the past several years, it has not been that visible in the region as compared to China, India or Brazil. It is encouraging that, of late, Russia has positioned itself to be a major partner with Southern Africa and being part of the BRICS promotes engagement with the region. It has to move with concrete steps into such areas like agriculture, industrial production, high technology and transport.

In the interview, Stergomena shortlisted some of the southern Africa priorities that are also in line with SADC as indicated below:

- Prospecting, mining, oil, construction and mining, purchasing gas, oil, uranium, and bauxite assets (Angola, Namibia and South Africa);
- Construction of power facilities—hydroelectric power plants on the River Congo (Angola, Namibia and Zambia,) and nuclear power plants (South Africa);
- Creating a floating nuclear power plant, and South African participation in the international project to build a nuclear enrichment centre in Russia;
- Railway Construction (Angola);
- Creation of Russian trade houses for the promotion and maintenance of Russian engineering products (South Africa).
- Participation of Russian companies in the privatization of industrial assets, including those created with technical assistance from the former Soviet Union (Angola).

Stergomena further discussed questions relating to public diplomacy. Russia has all but overlooked or underestimated many aspects of it. These include cultural exchanges, scholarly visitors' programmes, and of course, the use of media to cover and project issues on Africa from a Russian perspective.

These are instruments and aspects of public diplomacy, which would have the effect of reaching audiences on our continent and beyond and impacting positively on what Russia has to offer the world. In the same vein, this can be seen as a form of "soft power" as its aim is to appeal and attract partners rather than coerce them into a relationship of one form or the other, she in an emailed interview in October 2018.

There are the Intergovernmental Commissions on Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation and Trade fixed with African countries. There is the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Trade, the Moscow Chamber of Commerce and Trade. The Coordinating Committee for Economic Cooperation with African States established back in 2009.

According to historical documents, the Coordinating Committee for Economic Cooperation with African States was created at the initiative of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Russian Federation and Vnesheconombank with the support of the Federation Council and the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. It has the support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Economy and Trade, the Ministry of Natural Resources, as well as the Ministry of Higher Education and Science.

Within the framework of the joint declaration adopted at the first Russia-Africa Summit, the

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation established the Secretariat of the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum. The Secretariat of the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum also moved to create an Association of Economic Cooperation with African States (AECAS). Alexander Saltanov, former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, is the Chairman of AECAS and feverishly stepping forward to advance significant issues of business cooperation between Russia and Africa.

The Secretariat of the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum has a useful structure, and its primary task is to find real opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation and joint implementation of projects between Russian and African entrepreneurs. There are coordination, public and scientific councils operating under its roof. The Secretariat seems to coordinate and support some kind of public outreach initiatives from the civil society.

As most contemporary researchers do, they have offered additional strategic proposals and authorities have to bite on them to make the long-expected progress. It is a well-known and irreversible fact that Russia's economic presence in Africa is significantly inferior in comparison to the top-ten key global players. It is time to overcome this yawning gap, use the existing structures to expeditiously operationalize the set goals and accelerate the economic return the continent.

Indeed, judging from the above discussions about the changing geopolitical relations, there are well-functioning structures and mechanisms to reap the benefits of a fully-fledged economic partnership and to achieve a more practical and comprehensive results expected from the new multifaceted relations between Russia and Africa.

By all purposes, the relationship requires a new approach, broad levels of interaction including the civil society to forge a new positive image and change public perceptions, and work consistently with the private sector for diversified corporate partnerships. Strategically speaking, Russia needs to adopt an agenda - rather than running on *ad hoc basis*- and it further needs an effective Action Plan, both the agenda and plan have to conform to African Union's Agenda 2063 and the UN Development Goals 2030.

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***Kester Kenn Klomegah***, who worked previously with Inter Press Service (IPS), is now a frequent contributor to Global Research. As a versatile researcher, he believes that everyone deserves equal access to quality and trustworthy media reports.

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