

“Multipolarity and Equality”, Russia-Africa Collaboration and the St Petersburg Summit: Time to Act on Multidimensional Economic Initiatives

By [Prof. Maurice Okoli](#)

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*Russian **President Vladimir Putin** invited African leaders and ‘non-Western friends’ to his hometown, St. Petersburg which hosted the second Russia-Africa summit from July 27-28. In the past three years, Russia’s **Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov** has visited several African countries. Lavrov has used the shuttle diplomacy in African capitals to build support and strengthen further political contacts in preparation for the Russia-Africa summit.*

According to the Kremlin report, **the current geopolitical period is “extremely difficult” and consequently only 17 heads of state out of 55 African countries were at the summit.** There were, of course, a total of 49 African delegations noted in the report on the official website. That compared to the first held in October 2019, representatives from all 54 African states, including 43 heads of state attended the summit. Kremlin said the United States, France and other Western countries had exerted unprecedented pressure on African leaders ahead of the Russia-Africa summit to keep them from participating.

Putin delivered a keynote speech at the summit, talking about a “new world order” founded on “multipolarity and equality” among all nations. Ahead of that, Putin’s article on Russia-African relations was possibly an effort to mitigate the damage to both Russia’s standing and its reputation in Africa, caused by Russia’s withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which allowed export of Ukrainian grains to alleviate food security risks in a number of African countries.

Understandably speaking of the two-day Russia-Africa gathering, Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov also explained that the United States, France and other European countries through their diplomatic missions in African countries attempted to put pressure on the leadership of these countries. Peskov branded this meddling as “a completely outrageous fact” but

stressed that it “in no way hinders the successful holding of the summit.”

In fact, experts have been discussing and interpreting this particular geopolitical political situation and its implications. “Russia has turned sharply towards Africa to circumvent Western isolation following its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The St. Petersburg gathering presented another chance to show that Moscow has not been isolated and has alternative partners willing to deepen their cooperation with the Kremlin,” said Priyal Singh, a senior researcher at Institute of Security Studies.

Nevertheless, it has already become a historical landmark in this new chapter of Russia-African relations, especially this period of global political tensions and fierce economic competition, with Africa being the centre of focus. Today, Africa is the most promising, and at same time, the fastest growing region in the world. Investing in Africa is a popular trend and offers obvious advantages. Investing in Africa is a popular trend and offers obvious advantages as leading global powers seek diverse cooperation across the continent, considered the last frontier. In practical terms, African leaders are also setting comprehensive targets for improving performance and making strategic choices based on their development paradigms.

Of course, there are many distinctive problems – ranging from governance system through economic to socio-cultural – in the region. The major difficulties are seemingly connected with deficiencies in infrastructure, logistics, and energy. But economic growth continues, which indicates the possibility of pushing further economic development from its current levels. The attractiveness of Africa as a place for business is expected to grow, for instance with the introduction of African Union’s project: African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

It is home to over 1.3 billion inhabitants, comprising 55 states, 37 cities with over a million residents, over 30 million square kilometres of territory, and 60% of its land is fertile. Africa is the highest concentration of natural and human resources. According to various estimates, 12% of the world’s oil and 18% of its gas reserves are concentrated there.

Scanning through official reports, we can underscore the significance of the late July summit as joining collective efforts for maintaining sustainable peace, development progress and working towards a successful and prosperous future. The ‘Africa We Want’ is to create and prepare better living conditions for the next generations. Based on the past, Russia had consistently supported African peoples in their struggle for liberation from colonial oppression. After half a century, Russia has to show its support for Africa’s development and for its 1.3 billion population.

It is increasingly becoming visible that most African countries are showing signs of pragmatism, forward-looking for economic collaborating and partnership from external players. Africa is working to find its worthy place and assert its influence in the new multipolar world. In supporting this argue we can quote President Vladimir Putin who wrote in his pre-summit article that “The strategic areas of interaction are set by the decisions of the first Russia-Africa summit held in Sochi in late October 2019.”

In stark reality there were brilliant speeches and unique deliberations which underline multi-dimensional initiatives. As it is well-known, Russia aims at fostering long-term and deeper multi-dimensional collaboration between African countries and to accelerate and support the

continent's development. Russia is building on its Soviet-era legacy, using the huge reservoir of good will with Africa. Its primary position is based respect for sovereign and raising Africa into global stage, for instance at G-20 and the United Nations.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has severally noted that the states of Africa are constantly increasing their weight and their role in world affairs, asserting themselves more and more confidently in politics and the economy. "We are convinced that Africa will become one of the leaders of the emerging new multipolar world order," according to Putin.

In terms of strategic economic directions, during the pre-summit sessions at Valdai Discussion Club, many questions were hypothetically raised. Valdai was established in 2004, with a goal is to promote dialogue between Russian and international intellectual elite, and to make an independent, unbiased scientific analysis of political, economic and social events in Russia and the rest of the world.

More than 60 people from 12 countries were invited to participate in the preliminary discussions, to make the final synchronisation of watches at the expert level in the run-up to the summit. In the new geopolitical conditions, Africa is becoming one of priorities of the Russian foreign policy.

Significant to note that both Russian and African experts concluded that in the near future, Russian initiatives will always be a priority. One session focused on Economic Relations: Three Years' Audit After the First Russia-Africa Summit. Possible questions raised were: So what should Russia's strategy be in Africa today? What are the results of implementation of the agreements achieved at the first Russia-Africa summit, including at the bilateral level? What are the reasons for the shortcomings? What needs to be done to improve the effectiveness of Russian-African economic cooperation? What makes economic cooperation with Russia attractive for African countries? What are Russia's comparative advantages in the context of parallel tracks of cooperation, such as China-Africa, Turkey-Africa, USA-Africa, and others?

We should be passionate about the new stage of developments. Which is why I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the history of cooperation between Russia and Africa has deep historical roots. We are on the verge of a new economic miracle - the African miracle. Therefore, Africa is the best environment for building long-term partnerships.

We always make a long list including renewable energy, infrastructure and logistics, industry and high technology production, innovative technologies and communications, security and cybersecurity, the digital economy, ecology and agriculture, education and training, and tourism and recreational resources.

The struggle of foreign powers in Africa is not only for the control of raw materials, but also for political influence over the continent. The arrival of new players in Africa provides an opportunity for the continent to choose the best partners, while taking their own interests into account.

There should be some shifts in narratives. And so for Russia, popular opinions are that it establishes equal conditions for cooperation, mutually beneficial cooperation. That it makes the game on the African continent fair and open, so as to balance the presence of other powers.

After deliberations in St. Petersburg, both Russia and Africa adopted a comprehensive Declaration, a number of Joint Statements and approved the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum Action Plan 2023 to 2026. Reports said an impressive package of intergovernmental and inter-agency agreements and memoranda with individual states as well as regional associations of the continent were also signed.

In total, five documents are planned for signing: this is a general political declaration, a joint action plan for 2023-2026, and three sectoral documents that relate to the fight against terrorism, non-deployment of weapons in outer space and international information security. It is however hoped that these documents would become a serious platform for joint actions to create a new configuration of international relations based on equal cooperation, the idea of a multipolar world.

Acknowledging the fundamental fact that the multipolar world has practically evolving and gaining momentum. Western countries are noticeably losing their grounds across Africa. The point is to change the global balance of power on the world stage. The West is no longer a unique technological, political and military center that has the ability to exert a decisive influence on other centers of influence, but these are Russia, China, India, the BRICS countries in general, which many states, including African ones, are striving to get into.

African countries are looking to strike a balance. Building up relations with Russia, they do not make a choice: Russia or the West. They develop relations with us in the same way as with China, India, Turkey, the European Union. Their main task is to meet their national interests and development needs. Regardless of unipolar, bipolar or multipolar, the most relevant factor needed is to have a common platform and strengthen each other in terms of economic development and in all other respects, and thereby move forward towards solving the problems of an integrated continental development.

In conclusion, Russia is ready to help strengthen African countries' sovereignty and contribute to Africa becoming a key partner in the new system of the multipolar world order. It signals practical decisions on building up cooperation. We are reminded that Africa has adopted a plan of action until 2063. Key points: integration, prosperity and peace. Despite security and economic challenges, there are good opportunities for future mutual cooperation, and a lot more substantial challenges and tasks were refixed and renewed at the second Russia-Africa Summit.

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Professor Maurice Okoli is a fellow at the Institute for African Studies and the Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Russian Academy of Sciences. He is also a fellow at the North-Eastern Federal University of Russia. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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