

Russia in Africa: Connecting Continents with Soft Power

Rather than continental, Russian and Chinese-led infrastructural development in Africa should be seen as part of a grander project of Afro-Asiatic integration

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The oft-repeated western claim of Russia’s isolation as a pariah state is starting to wear thin.

While the Trans-Atlantic community may loyally follow the directive to cut ties with Russia – despite the economic backlash on their own citizens – other nations, including most of Asia and Africa, don’t appear to be taking this call very seriously.

On [19 July](#), Russian **President Vladimir Putin** conducted a successful trilateral meeting with his Iranian and Turkish counterparts in Tehran which demonstrated a degree of coherence in foreign policy agendas among the three strategic powers (including one relatively renegade NATO member).

Putin followed that tripartite meeting with an important [phone call](#) two days later with Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince, only days after Biden ended his fruitless mission to the kingdom.

Shortly after, Russian **Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov** kicked off a four day diplomatic tour of African nations, beginning with Egypt on [July 24](#), followed by visits to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, and Ethiopia. These trips set the stage for the upcoming [2nd Russian-African Summit](#) to be held later this year in Addis Ababa.

Beyond re-assuring African partners of guaranteed shipments of Russian and Ukrainian wheat and other goods so desperately needed by the continent, Lavrov’s tour laid out a broad grand strategy of African and Southwest Asian development that will see the creation of vast free trade zones to facilitate extensions of the [New Silk Road and North South Transportation Corridors](#) financed increasingly outside the bankrupt western order. It should be noted that [40 of 55 African states](#) (including the African Union) have signed memoranda

of understanding with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), joining [20 Arab states](#).

Lavrov and the Arab League

During the first phase of his trip, Lavrov [was warmly greeted](#) by permanent representatives of 23 nations at the Arab League HQ in Cairo where a wide array of issues tackling food, economic, diplomatic, and security matters were discussed. During his speech to the Arab League [which can here be listened to in full](#), Lavrov stated:

“We are at the beginning of a new era, which would be a movement towards real multilateralism, not to the multilateralism which the west tries to impose on the basis of the exceptional role of the western civilization in the modern world. The world is much richer than just western civilization. Who but not many of you representing the ancient civilizations should know this? And I think the movement is unstoppable. Trying to put it on breaks is going against objective process of history. This would only delay for some time the eventual formation of the true multipolar democratic world.”

SEZs and New Free Trade Zones

Egypt is seen by Russia as a [gateway to Africa](#) connecting West Asian, African and European worlds. In recent years, Moscow has worked tirelessly to ensure a strategic relationship with Cairo on a multitude of levels, which will play an increasingly important role in the battle going forward.

For one thing, Egypt has signed a number of agreements with Russia to build Special Economic Zones (SEZs), with the largest found in [Port Said](#) where automotive parts will be produced in a 7.23 square kilometer area on the tip of the Suez Canal. These SEZs (which Russia has also built up in Mozambique and Namibia) have several strategic and economic advantages.

First, they help to bypass European sanctions, which prevent European automobile companies from providing supplies to Russia, by sending them to African SEZs where they are assembled and sent as finished goods to Russia.

Second, they provide an increased incentive for reduced labor costs. And finally, they facilitate a broader stimulus for an African industrial boom which has long been handicapped by western financiers preferring to keep Africa poor, at war, and thus more easily exploitable.

De-dollarizing Africa

A major component to this strategy involves the successful implementation of the [African Continental Free Trade Agreement](#) (AfCFTA) which went into effect in January 2021. Up until recently, the lack of economic standards, combined with lack of viable infrastructure has kept Africa at war with itself.

All that has changed with the AfCFTA, which eliminated 95 percent of tariffs on inter-African trade. In addition, a unified passport for travel between African nations has also been established as part of the Africa Development Agenda 2063.

Dovetailing the alt-SWIFT payment systems set up by Russia and China, it is noteworthy that as of 13 January, 2022 a [Pan African Payments and Settlements System](#) was created which

empowers African nations to settle their trade balances in local currencies rather than the US dollar.

Returning to Egypt, the [Russia-Chinese sponsored](#) SEZ at Port Said will become the most concentrated point of unified sourcing for goods produced throughout Africa and destined for export to Russia – and also Russian goods (especially wheat) to Africa.

Egypt is in the final stages of negotiating an [Egyptian-Eurasian Economic Union Free Trade Agreement](#) (which has been seven years in the making, and has also made its intention to join the BRICS known (along with [Saudi Arabia and Turkey](#)) on 14 June this year. In 2021, Egypt became a [full member](#) of the BRICS Development Bank.

From the standpoint of physical economic development, Moscow has [made it widely known](#) to all African nations that accessing advanced nuclear energy produced by Rosatom (Russia's state nuclear giant) will be a high priority. This is especially significant since western powers have essentially banned nuclear technology from "dark" Africa for generations under a policy of technological apartheid.

An African railway renaissance advances

On the issue of transportation and connectivity, Egypt has begun constructing a [1000 km high speed railway](#) connecting the Mediterranean and Red Seas starting in Ain Sokhna on the Gulf of Suez in the east, moving through the new Administrative capital (being constructed with large assistance from China, located 45 km east of Cairo), and ending at the El Alamin Port on the Mediterranean.

Other legs of this development will see the main Red Sea Port connected with Alexandria and the Port of Matrouh Gargoub, followed by a connection between the cities of Hurghada and Safaga with Qena and Luxor. The last phase will see the connection of Six October City with Luxor and Aswan.

While this is one of the few rail projects on earth not being directly funded by China, Russia is supplying the rail cars while German and Egyptian rail companies build the rail lines. When completed, this system will cut travel time by half, and reduce the congested freight traffic of the Suez Canal by at least 15 percent.

An agreement to build the long awaited [570 km Egypt-Sudan Railway](#), first proposed in 2010, was finally signed in April 2021 and will be built by Egyptian and Kuwaiti companies.

This rail line will link Aswan in Egypt to Sudan's Wadi Halfa and accommodate both passenger and freight traffic boosting industrial growth in both nations. Although plans to build a much more expansive [6000 km Egypt-Sudan railway](#) was on the agenda in 2019, the coup which overthrew former president Omar al-Bashir froze that initiative. There is no reason that this bolder program cannot be revived if Chinese-modelled funding mechanisms were adopted by the African Union in the coming period ahead.

Despite the tensions caused over Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam (GERD) which both Sudanese and Egyptian governments irrationally fear will reduce their water availability, cooperation for East African integration is advancing speedily ahead.

Spearheading this positive dynamic of cooperation between Ethiopia and its northern

neighbors is a new [1522 km](#) standard gauge railway connecting Addis Ababa, Khartoum and the Port of Sudan on the Red Sea.

Since the coup, Sudan has seen the implementation of a [\\$640 million rail program](#) with a majority of the funding coming from China's State Construction Engineering firm, African Development Bank, and several Persian Gulf companies. This initiative will not only rehabilitate Sudan's 4725km rail network (half of which has fallen into complete disuse), but will connect the Port of Sudan to Darfur and thence into Chad in the west.

The case of Ethiopia

Below Sudan, Ethiopia has been the most active (and most sovereign) of all nations bordering on the Red Sea.

Having valiantly survived a [CIA-led color revolution via Tigray terrorist proxies](#) in the north, and having established an important peace deal with neighboring Eritrea, Ethiopia has shown the greatest capacity of self-direction of all African states in recent years.

Ethiopia has not only managed to reach the final stages of a self-financed 6200 MW Grand Renaissance Dam (GERD), but has also signed military and economic cooperation agreements with China which is the primary investor in the 480 km Addis Ababa-Djibouti standard gauge railway completed in 2017 [see map].



Railway lines in the African continent (Source: The Cradle)

Russia has been instrumental in helping to resolve the GERD dispute between Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia and on 12 July, 2021 an [agreement](#) was finalized guaranteeing Russian technology and training to Ethiopia's military.

In January 2022, Chinese **Foreign Minister Wang Yi** announced [Beijing's support](#) for a massive extension of Kenya's 578 km Mombasa-Nairobi railway to Uganda, South Sudan, and the DR Congo. Under this design which is estimated to cost \$5.2 billion, rail will be linked to the Addis Ababa line, and thence Djibouti and Eritrea.

There are many similar clusters of rail and energy corridors being built up across Africa and many critics still mistakenly treat these regional integration clusters as if they were simply piecemeal projects disconnected from any broader coherent vision.

Yet this myopic error is as foolish as it is wrong.

Although Russia, China and partner states across the Arab and African worlds must keep their cards close to their chests knowing that openly stating their aims will result in increased chances of sabotage by the west, a clear strategic vision for Africa's deep integration into the evolving New Silk Road becomes visible when approached from a top-down perspective. One of the most inspiring programs uniting these thousands of projects is the often-overlooked Trans-African Railway.

Complete continental integration

In [December 2018](#), the Russia-Sudan Intergovernmental Commission agreed on Russia's

participation in the construction of the Trans-African railway stretching 8600 km between Dakar, Port Sudan and Djibouti. When completed, this line will pass directly through ten African nations, most of which are landlocked (Senegal, Mali, Niger Chad, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Cameroon, Sudan, Ethiopia and Djibouti). China has [already begun](#) with a \$2.2 billion phase one of the program, with upgrades to 1228km of rail connecting Dakar in Senegal with Bamako in Mali.

The Trans-African Railway will provide a backbone for the much larger [African Integrated High Speed Railway Network \(AIHSRN\)](#) first outlined in the African Union's 2014 Development Agenda for 2063.

Within this program for total continental connectivity, nine rail links (some high speed and others standard gauge) would unite every nation in a coherent and efficient mode of transport, while stimulating the growth of new industries, parts suppliers, manufacturing sectors and training academies.

Hundreds of bridges, tunnels, ports, and new roads would also be built, including the 56,600 km [Trans-African Highway system](#) which has already seen tens of thousands of miles of paved roads and highways where only dirt roads or wilderness existed not long ago.

Already, China [has signed an agreement](#) to rehabilitate all former colonial railroads between Dakar and Djibouti, most of which have fallen into disrepair.

West Asia-East Africa connectivity

Within this broad vision, it isn't a stretch of the imagination to envision the extension of a Trans-African railway across the 29km Bab el-Mandeb Strait on the Red Sea, which currently sees the transit of 30 percent of all maritime cargo globally.

A rail/highway connecting Djibouti to Yemen would be an incredible driver for an economic renaissance and peaceful coexistence for both the African and Arab worlds.



Railway lines in the Arabian Peninsula (Source: The Cradle)

Revisiting the Horn of Africa bridge project

Over 14 years ago, studies for this project were carried out by Al Nour Investment Holdings and the project was approved by the governments of Djibouti, Saudi Arabia and Yemen with Djibouti's President Ismael Omar Guelleh granting 500 square kilometers of land for the construction of a modern city called "Al Nour" whose sister city (also named Al Nour) would be built in Yemen located on the other end of the bridge.

Under the [original 2010 design](#), the project was to involve a six-lane causeway, with four light rail tracks, gas pipeline and freshwater pipeline. These lines would cross a 5 km suspension bridge making it the longest in the world at a cost of \$20 billion for the first phase of construction, and \$200 billion once the entire project was completed in... 2020. Over 50,000 cars and 100,000 rail passengers were expected to flow across this route daily and by 2025, Yemen's Al Nour City was anticipated to host 4.5 million citizens while Djibouti's Al Nour would be home to 2.5 million.

Unfortunately, the Arab uprisings derailed the project and after the war with Yemen broke out in 2015, this megaproject fell to the wayside.

At the time of the inception of the 'Bridge of the Horn of Africa', the Belt and Road Initiative was still four years from being born and Russia was still not sufficiently strong enough to play any meaningful role in obstructing the Anglo-American regime change program that has lit the Arab world and Africa on fire for decades.

Today however, the BRI and broader integration of Iran into the Multipolar Alliance has changed the rules of the game dramatically and a renewal of this program with Iranian participation would be a welcomed development. Without real economic development of this nature, it were impossible that the wounds caused by years of bad blood and death between Yemen and her Gulf neighbors to be healed.

Persian Gulf-Red Sea High Speed Railway

Recent breakthroughs on the southern route of the Belt and Road Initiative have also provided a new impetus for the [Persian Gulf-Red Sea high speed rail line](#) first proposed in 2009. As of 2021, all six Gulf Cooperation Council members agreed to activate this 2100 km megaproject across the Arabian desert at a cost of \$200 billion which could easily extend into Yemen and thence into both Africa from the south and Egypt in the north where an agreement to build a bridge connecting the Saudi Kingdom to Egypt in the Red Sea was [signed in 2016](#) although international factors have stalled it thus far.

Today, a new epoch of development corridors has come alive driven by the growing Eurasian Partnership which has not only begun to bring a new viable financial system online, but has presented a vision to all of humanity which is entirely based upon the mutual interest of all cultures, religions and nations under a commitment for total development.

Historic enemies of Iran among Arab states have increasingly come to recognize that their self interest were best maintained by breaking away from their roles as puppet states of the west. States like UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Qatar have begun [re-building bridges](#) with Iran and other Arab partners which is a very good thing for both Eurasian integration and world peace more generally.

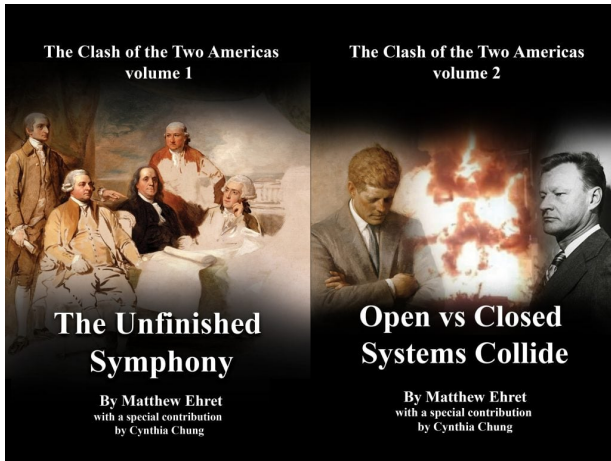
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