

Geopolitical Shifts, Evolving Russia-Africa Relations

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Russia would need to go beyond its traditional rhetoric of Soviet assistance rendered to Africa.

Are there concrete success stories and policy achievements, at least, during the past decade in Africa. The young generation and the middle class, aged between 25 to 45 that make the bulk of the 1.3 billion population, hardly see the broad positive impact of Russia’s economic cooperation with Africa.

Russia plans to hold the second Russia-Africa summit later this year. Sergey Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, indicated in mid-June message that “in these difficult and crucial times the strategic partnership with Africa has become a priority of Russia’s foreign policy. Russia highly appreciates the readiness of Africans to further step up economic cooperation.”

Lavrov said:

“It is in the interests of our peoples to work together to preserve and expand mutually beneficial trade and investment ties under these new conditions. It is important to facilitate the mutual access of Russian and African economic operators to each other’s markets and encourage their participation in large-scale infrastructure projects. The signed agreements and the results will be consolidated at the forthcoming second Russia-Africa summit.”

The above statement arguably offers some implications especially discussing this question of relationship-building. Nevertheless, Lavrov has aptly asserted that within the “emerging and sustainable polycentric architecture of the world order” relations with Africa is still a priority, but Russians always close their eyes on the fact that Russia’s foreign policy in Africa has largely failed to pronounce itself, in practical terms, as evidenced by the countable forays into Africa by Russian officials.

The Soviet Union was quite extensively engaged with Africa, comparatively. Russians have

only been criticizing other foreign players during the past two decades without showing any model of building relationship. Its foreign policy goals are directed simply at sustaining the passion for signing several MoUs and bilateral agreements with African countries.

During the past years there have been several symbolic meetings of bilateral intergovernmental commissions both in Moscow and in Africa.

The first historic summit discussed broadly the priorities and further identified opportunities for collaboration. It, however, requires understanding the tasks and the emerging challenges. The current tasks should concretely focus on actionable strategies towards enhancing the effective implementation of existing bilateral agreements, taking practical collaborated actions leading to goal-driven results. Nevertheless, Lavrov hopes “the signed agreements and the results will be consolidated at the forthcoming second Russia-Africa summit.”

Still, Russia plays very little role in Africa’s infrastructure, agriculture and industry, and similarly making tiny efforts to leverage unto the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). While, given its global status, it ought to be active in Africa as Western Europe, the European Union, America and China are, it is all but absent, playing a negligible role, according to Professor Gerrit Olivier at the Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria, and former South African Ambassador to the Russian Federation.

Researchers have been making tangible contributions to the development of African studies in Russia. This Moscow-based Africa Institute has a huge pack of research materials useful for designing an African agenda. In an interview, Professor Vladimir Shubin at the Institute for African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences reiterated that Russia is not doing enough to communicate to the broad sectors of the public, particularly in Africa, true information about its domestic and foreign policies as well as the accomplishments of Russia’s economy, science and technology to form a positive perception of Russia within the context of the current global changes of the 21st century.

As to Russia’s involvement, it has undoubtedly a vast experience in development of projects in Africa accumulated during Soviet times, building of powerstations and dams or creating of technological training institutes. What is lacking nowadays is its ability to provide large investments, according to Shubin, “but Russian expertise and technology can still be used while carrying out internationally-financed projects in Africa.”

As to the failures, perhaps, we have to point to the lack of deep knowledge of African conditions, especially at the initial stage of the involvement which sometimes resulted in suggesting (or agreeing to) unrealistic projects, But there are good prospects for reactivating diversified cooperation, he explained.

Chronological analysis shows that Russia’s politics toward Africa under President Boris Yeltsin (1991-2001) was described as a lost decade, both in internal and external affairs, including relations with Africa. Historical documents further show that after the Soviet collapse there were approximately 380 projects throughout Africa. In the early 1990s, Russia swiftly exited, closed a number of diplomatic offices and abandoned all these, and hardly no sign of Soviet-era infrastructure projects there.

Policy statements have indicated strong optimism for raising relations. That however, at least during the past decade, official reports including sparkling speeches at high-level

conferences, summits and meetings indicated there are projects being implemented in Africa by such leading Russian businesses as Rosneft, Lukoil, Rosgeo, Gazprom, Alrosa, Vi Holding, GPB Global Resources and Renova.

Nevertheless, it is so common reiterating that Russia has always been on Africa's side in the fight against colonialism and now neo-colonialism. The frequency of reminding again and again about Soviet assistance, that was offered more than 60 years ago, will definitely not facilitate the expected beneficial trade and investment ties under these new conditions. The United Nations declared Africa fully independent in 1960, and Organization of African Unity (OAU) was formed on 25 May 1963 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Afreximbank President and Chairman of the Board of Directors, Dr. Benedict Okey Oramah, says Russian officials "keep reminding us about Soviet era" but the emotional link has simply not been used in transforming relations. Oramah said one of Russia's major advantages was the goodwill. He remarked that even young people in Africa knew how Russia helped African people fight for independence. "So an emotional link is there," he told Inter-Tass News Agency.

The biggest thing that happened in Africa was the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). That is a huge game-changer, and steps have been made lately in the African countries for creating better conditions for business development and shaping attractive investment climate. "Sometimes, it is difficult to understand why the Russians are not taking advantage of it? We have the Chinese, we have the Americans, we have the Germans who are operating projects...That is a very, very promising area," Oramah said in his interview last year.

Ahead of Sochi summit 2019, Oramah presented a report to a special business conference that ran from 18 to 22 June, the same year, and listed spheres for possible cooperation such as finances, energy, mining, railway infrastructure, digital technologies, cybersecurity, healthcare, education, food security in Africa.

That conference saw several agreements signed including between the African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank) and Sinara-Transport Machines JSC (STM), Transmash Holding JSC, Russian Export Center JSC, Avelar Solar Technology LLC, Chelyabinsk Pipe Plant PJSC, Kolon World Investment, and Opaia SA and the Roscongress Foundation. As far back in 2017, the Russian Export Center became Afreximbank's third largest non-African shareholding financial organization shareholder, and expected to contribute to the acceleration of investment, trade, and economic relations between Russia and African countries.

Interesting to note here that Russian business community hardly pays attention to the significance of African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) which provides a unique and valuable platform for businesses to access an integrated African market of over 1.3 billion people. The growing middle class, among other factors, constitutes a huge market potential in Africa. The African continent currently has enormous potential as a market, and some experts say it is the last business frontier.

Many African countries are enacting economic reforms, demand is growing for high-quality, competitive products. Russian businesses are interested in this niche, but Russians are extremely slow. The snail-pace approach reflects their inability to determine financial instruments for supporting trade with and investment in Africa.

Accentuating the importance of multilateral cooperation between Russia and Africa, Advisor to the President of the Russian Federation, Anton Kobyakov, said: “The current situation in the world is such that we are witnesses to the formation of new centers of economic growth in Africa. Competition for African markets is growing accordingly. There is no doubt that Russia’s non-commodity exporters will benefit from cooperating with Africa on manufacturing, technologies, finances, trade, and investment.”

Kobyakov further pointed to modern Russia, which already has experience of successful cooperation with African countries under its belt, is ready to make an offer to the African continent that will secure mutually beneficial partnership and the joint realization of decades of painstaking work carried out by several generations of Soviet and Russian people.

With its impressive relations, Russia has not pledged publicly concrete funds toward implementing its policy objectives in Africa. Moreover, Russian officials have ignored the fact that Russia’s overall economic engagement is largely staggering, various business agreements signed are still not fulfilled with many African countries.

Agreements and business negotiations resulted into 92 agreements, contracts and memoranda of understanding. Summit documents say a total of RUB 1.004 trillion ((US\$12.5 bn) worth of agreements were signed at that highly-praised historic summit in October 2019.

Large Russian companies have been unsuccessful with their projects, negatively reflecting the real motives for bilateral economic cooperation. There are several examples such as Rosatom in South Africa, Norrick Nickel in Botswana, Ajeokuta Steel Plant in Nigeria, Mining projects in Uganda and Zimbabwe, Lukoil in Cameroon, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Currently, Russia is invisible in spheres providing infrastructures in Africa.

Undoubtedly, a number of Russian companies have largely underperformed in Africa, experts described was primarily due to multiple reasons. Most often, Russian investors strike important investment niches that still require long-term strategies and adequate country study. Grappling with reality, there are many investment challenges including official bureaucracy in Africa.

In order to ensure business safety and consequently taking steps to realize the primary goals, it is necessary to attain some level of understanding the priorities of the country, investment legislations, comply with terms of agreement and a careful study of policy changes, particularly when there is a sudden change in government.

What is abundantly clear is how to stimulate African governments into exploring investment opportunities in Russia and also Russian investors into Africa within some framework of mutual cooperation. In order to facilitate both Russian and African economic operators to have access to each other’s markets and encourage their participation in large-scale infrastructure projects must necessarily involve taking progressive practical steps toward resolving existing obstacles.

That said, preparations for the second Russia-Africa summit are currently underway. “The Russian side aims to continue preparing the second, as well as subsequent Russian-Africa summits and aims to make them as efficient as possible. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other ministries are taking steps to build a full and mutually beneficial

cooperation between Russia and the African countries, including the formation of a reliable social and economic infrastructure, food and energy security on the continent,” said Oleg Ozerov, Ambassador-at-Large and Head of the Secretariat of the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum.

Worth saying here that African leaders are waiting to cut white ribbons marking the successful completion of Russian-managed something. Really it is time to shift from rhetoric and move on towards implementing the package of bilateral agreements especially those involving infrastructure investments, determine financing concrete projects and deliver on decade-old pledges to the people of Africa.

While Russian and African leaders strike their common positions on the global platform, there is also the need to recognize and appreciate the welfare of 1.3 billion population, majority impoverished, in Africa. Significant to suggest that with new horizons of the polycentric world order emerging and steadily unfolding, active engagement of the African youth, civil society leaders, women entrepreneurs and active changemakers in the middle-class into policy efforts becomes definitely necessary.

With the youth’s education, some experts are still critical. Gordey Yastrebov, a Postdoctoral Researcher and Lecturer at the Institute for Sociology and Social Psychology at the University of Cologne (Germany), argues in an email interview discussion that “education can be a tool for geopolitical influence in general, and for changing perceptions specifically, and Russia (just like any other country) could use it for that same purpose. However, Russia isn’t doing anything substantial on this front, at least there is no consistent effort with obvious outcomes that would make me think so. There are no large-scale investment programs in education focusing on this.”

He explains that Russian education can become appealing these days, but given that Russia can no longer boast any significant scientific and technological achievements. Western educational and scientific paradigm embraces cooperation and critical independent thinking, whereas this is not the case with the Russian paradigm, which is becoming more isolationist and authoritarian. Obviously by now, Africa should look up to more successful examples elsewhere, perhaps in the United States and Europe.

As the official Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs website indicated – it is evident that the significant potential of the economic cooperation is far from being exhausted, much remains to be done in creating conditions necessary for interaction between Russia and Africa. At a meeting of the Ministry’s Collegium, Lavrov unreservedly suggested taking a chapter on the approach and methods adopted by China in Africa, and that was back in 2019.

Now at the crossroad, it could be meandering and longer than expected to make the mark. Russia’s return journey could take another generation to reach destination Africa. With the current changing geopolitical world, Russia has been stripped of as a member of many international organizations. As a direct result of Russia’s “special military operation” aims at “demilitarization and denazification” since late February, Russia has come under a raft of sanctions imposed by the United States and Canada, European Union, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and a host of other countries.

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