

Russia, Ukraine and the African Mediators

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Local Russian and foreign media awash with the latest potential peace efforts, this time, from African leaders. Presumably this group of peace-makers, headed by South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, will demonstrate collective efforts at resolving the heightened political differences between Russia and its neighbouring Ukraine.

According official sources monitored by this author, the peace plan is backed by African leaders of the Comoro Islands (who now hold the rotating presidency of the African Union), Senegal, Uganda, Egypt, the Republic of the Congo and Zambia. Four of those six African countries – South Africa, Congo, Senegal and Uganda – abstained from a U.N. vote last year on condemning Russia's invasion. Zambia and Egypt voted in favour of the motion.

These countries are now trying to persuade UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres and other countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, to support the African initiative. The document includes a provision on immediate ceasefire and designates the United Nations as the main platform for the Ukrainian peace process. Ramaphosa expressed hope that the African initiative will be actively discussed by the parties involved.

Zambia has historical ties with Russia. Uganda is a U.S. ally on regional security in East Africa, but Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni has spoken of his country's friendship with Russia and its neutral position in the war in Ukraine. Previously, the African Union, regional economic organizations have officially called for the adoption of diplomacy mechanisms and negotiations through which to end the crisis between Russia and Ukraine.

Last year in March, Senegalese President Macky Sall and the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, held discussions on the main aspects of the special military operation and on the importance of humanitarian issues and suggested ending the conflict through diplomacy with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

In a phone conversation May 12, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa said Putin

supported his idea of several African leaders participating in the Ukrainian settlement. The South African leader pointed out that the Ukrainian crisis negatively impacts Africa because it triggered growing food and fuel prices. “A group of African heads of states took the view that Africa does need to put forward an initiative, a peace initiative, that could help to contribute to the solution of that conflict,” he added, according to report by Singapore’s CABC radio station.

Ramaphosa said he spoke with Putin and Zelenskyy by phone over the weekend and they each agreed to host “an African leaders peace mission” in Moscow and Kyiv, respectively. “Principal to our discussions are efforts to find a peaceful resolution to the devastating conflict in the Ukraine,” Ramaphosa was quoted in media reports.

According to Russian media, a group of African countries is in the process of coordinating the terms and timeframes of its visit to Moscow and Kiev in order to lay out their Ukrainian reconciliation initiative. It said further that “the modalities of the trip are being worked on with both countries. It’s a group of African Heads of State.”

It said the governments of Russia and Ukraine had agreed to receive an African delegation, whose goal is to find a peaceful solution to the Ukrainian conflict. Vladimir Putin and Vladimir Zelenskyy have given their consent to receive the African delegation in Moscow and Kiev.

Details of the plan have not been publicly released, although Ukraine’s stated position for any peace deal is that all Russian troops must withdraw from its territory. But Ramaphosa said the United States and Britain had expressed “cautious” support for the plan and the U.N. Secretary General had also been briefed about the initiative.

Considered one of Moscow’s closest allies on the continent, South Africa says it is impartial and has abstained from voting on U.N. resolutions on the war. Last week, it rejected claims by U.S. ambassador to South Africa that weapons were loaded onto a Russian vessel from a naval base in Cape Town in December. Reports said Ramaphosa had opened an inquiry into the allegation.

South Africa is preparing to attend the next Russia-Africa Summit in July 2023 in St. Petersburg. In August, it will host the next BRICS gathering in Durban. The BRICS group of nations are Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. With BRICS as an example, China has attempted playing a crucial role in the conflict resolution between Russia and Ukraine.

Russia is ready to examine proposals by African and Latin American countries on resolving the ongoing Ukraine crisis, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said at a press conference following talks with his Belarusian counterpart Sergey Aleinik.

Lavrov stated that there were other initiatives – a Brazilian initiative and an initiative of the South African president.

“In both cases we responded to initiatives from Latin American and African friends that we were ready to consider any of their proposals that were prompted by a sincere desire to help stabilize the world order. But so far, unlike our Chinese neighbors, we have not seen documents on the issue either from the Brazilians or the Africans,” he added.

“We have confirmed our readiness to maintain contacts whenever they are interested, because it is in our interests to deliver to as many as possible of our partners on all continents the logic that becomes clear to an independent observer,” Lavrov stated.

China has been, so far, offering to mediate possible peace talks, an offer clouded by its show of political support for Moscow. Beijing released a proposed peace plan in February, and a Chinese envoy is preparing to visit Russia and Ukraine. But there appeared to be little chance of an imminent breakthrough to end the war since Ukraine and its Western allies largely dismissed the Beijing’s proposal.

The Kremlin wants Kyiv to acknowledge Russia’s annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the Ukrainian provinces of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia, which most nations have denounced as illegal. Ukraine has rejected the demands and ruled out any talks with Russia until its troops pull back from all occupied territories. Ukraine is determined to recover all Russian-occupied areas.

Zelenskyy’s 10-point peace plan also includes a tribunal to prosecute crimes of aggression, which would enable Russia to be held accountable for its invasion. Zelenskyy had private talks with Pope Francis at the Vatican on May 14, later saying he sought support for Ukraine’s peace plan from the pontiff.

As a new world is awakening to the worsening situation, it is necessary that all countries must be guided by the principles of non-interference, respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Due to its ‘special military operation’ that it started in February 2022, Russia is currently experiencing 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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