

The Second Russia-Africa Summit: A Continent at the Crossroads

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From [27-28 July 2023](#), the second Russia-Africa Summit took place in Russia's St Petersburg. Initially, the summit was scheduled in [Addis Ababa in October 2022](#). However, the summit got postponed, most likely due to complications emerging from Russia's war against Ukraine. Despite the presence of 49 out of 54 African nations, there were Ministers from only 27 countries: [17 Heads of State and 10 Prime Ministers](#). This is in high contrast with the 2019 summit, where [43 African Heads of State and two Vice Presidents were in attendance](#), along with 109 ministers and the Heads of the African Union (AU) Commission, the African Export-Import Bank and several regional economic communities.

Similar to the last summit, the agenda of this year's summit included technology transfer and development of industry and critical infrastructure in Africa, developing power engineering, agriculture and mineral extraction, and ensuring food and energy security. As the 2023 edition expanded to include a humanitarian element, a Russia-Africa Economic and Humanitarian Forum also took place in parallel. Additionally, there were exhibitions and a platform for holding business meetings.

At the end of the summit, both parties agreed upon a [74-point joint Declaration](#) for collaboration on security, trade, and the environment. However, with the [frequent use of words](#) such as neo-colonialism, neo-Nazism, neo-fascism, Russophobia, illegal sanctions, import substitution, and traditional values, the document appears to be an implicit African endorsement of Russia's justification for its war against Ukraine. Indeed, the 4,000-plus words document contains multiple statements subtly used to encourage Africa to back Moscow's position in the war.

In the wake of the summit, ever-deteriorating food security was the key concern for African policymakers. On 17 July, nearly one year after it was signed in Istanbul, Russian **President Vladimir Putin** decided to [withdraw from the Black Sea Grain Initiative \(BSGI\)](#). The BSGI was intended to ease the Russian blockade, thus allowing Ukraine to export grain to Africa.

During the summit, Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa, **Abdel Fattah el-Sisi** of Egypt, and five other leaders who were part of the African Peace initiative urged President Putin to change his mind. But their request was firmly rejected. Instead, the declaration attributed the entire blame for the food shortages to Western sanctions.

Definitely, the pledge from President Putin to deliver [25,000 to 50,000 tons of free grains to six countries](#), namely Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe, Mali, Somalia, Central African Republic and Eritrea, is encouraging for these poor nations. However, it will not be done immediately but within three or four months- too little for a continent of 54 countries.

Decoding the Summit's Achievement: Advantage Russia

Africa presently imports five times as much as it exports to Russia, resulting in a [\\$12 billion trade imbalance](#). Following the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit, President Putin planned to increase Russia's trade with Africa [from roughly \\$16.8 billion to \\$40 billion annually within five years](#). Instead, it is now stuck at approximately [\\$18 billion annually](#) or about 2% of all trade on the continent. Moreover, 70 per cent of the total trade is restricted to only [four countries: Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and South Africa](#). During the first summit, the organisers subsequently boasted of dozens of agreements that were signed, worth an [estimated \\$15 billion](#), but according to some reports, most of those were memorandums of understanding (MOU) and not legally binding. Further, Russia's direct investment in Africa is currently about [1 per cent of the total inflow](#).

Indeed, **Russia has waived off a large part of its debt to different African nations worth \$23 billion. This is almost 90% of the total African debt.** According to President Putin, this leaves Africa with no more "direct" debts for Russia but some financial obligations. However, given Russian loan to Africa is only a tiny part, this will have minimal impact on this highly indebted continent. Putin added that his government would also provide over \$90 million for development purposes at the request of African countries. Last but not least, Russia announced that it will spend about [US\\$13 million on "large-scale assistance" to healthcare systems in Africa](#).

Indeed, Russia lacks the resources to compete with the US, France, Germany and Japan or China as a bilateral development donor. However, it does have some cards to play. Last year it was Africa's largest source of fertiliser, supplying [500,000 tonnes](#). It is also a significant power in oil, gas and mining. Another significant effort by Russia to strengthen ties with Africa is its commitment to education. In 2023, Russia offered a record [4,700 scholarships to African students](#), a considerable increase from the 1,900 scholarships awarded in 2019. Currently, there are about [35,000 African students in Russia, and about 6,000 of them](#) are on different government scholarships.

Arms trade consists the most successful pillar of Russia's conventional trade with Africa, which is mostly managed by state-controlled [Rosoboronexport](#). Currently, [Russia accounts for 44 percent of major arms imports](#) to the continent between 2017 and 2021, surpassing other major players like the US (17 per cent), China (10 per cent), and France (6.1 per cent). [Alrosa](#), which manages diamond projects in Angola and is exploring possibilities in Zimbabwe; [Rusal](#), which mines bauxite in Guinea; and Rosatom, which is constructing a [nuclear power station in Egypt](#), are some other Russian companies with substantial interests in Africa. During the latest summit, [Ethiopia and Zimbabwe](#) signed nuclear development contracts with Rosatom.

In addition to importing weapons, many African nations have hired Russian mercenaries. These Russian mercenaries in Africa work under the Wagner Group, a company connected to Yevgeny Prigozhin, a personal friend of Vladimir Putin. About the future of the Wagner group in Africa, particularly in the backdrop of mutiny by the Wagner group, both **Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov** and Wagner chief **Yevgeny Prigozhin**, in separate statements, have clarified that the group will continue to operate in parts of Africa. And the [cameo appearance of Prigozhin](#) during the summit and [his celebratory in Niger](#) make it clear that Wagner will continue to expand in Africa.

An Evaluation in Lieu of a Conclusion

Russia has shown a remarkable commitment to engaging with Africa, with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov making [three visits](#) to the continent this year. These diplomatic efforts underscore the increasing importance Moscow places on support from African countries. Clearly, Russia wanted to demonstrate its strong support base of many old and loyal allies from Africa in its fight against Western hegemony. And from that perspective, the gathering served the Russian purpose. And for Africa, except for some of these garden-variety announcements, African leaders have very little concrete to take home from the event.

However, it was also crucial for African leaders to demonstrate to other foreign powers that they were open to hearing various points of view. African leaders are used to foreign leaders making bold promises but falling short of keeping them. The low attendance at the summit may also suggest that African leaders are readjusting their place in the multipolar world.

And they realised that in the new age of multilateralism, jeopardising their relationships with either the West or Russia is not the best diplomacy. Almost all African nations are nonaligned, eschewing global power blocs and resenting Western pressure. This is also probably why the Heads of State and Ministers stayed away but sent their representatives. Africa's representation in the summit can be hailed as a statement from Africa: blind loyalty to one state is no longer the norm. Therefore, Africa had gained nothing from the conference mirrors Macbeth's half-truth instrument of darkness: it is neither a simple fact nor a deliberate lie.

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