

Russia Expanding Footprint in Africa



Putin with South Africa's President, Cyril Ramaphosa.

Source: Government of South Africa/Flickr, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/governmentza/48947173896/in/photolist-2hzi4vj-2hzfh2e-2hzkDc9-2hzjDKK-2hzjEb4-2hzkDX7-2hzHdT-2hzEqpD-2hzkHau-2hzUJLu-2hzjGJT-2hzkEQu-2hzkEsA-2hzgUGm-2hzjG1G-e7ZzHH-2hzkJ1C-2hzgWkm-2hzkKmJ-2hzkJPM-2hzjJHq-2hzjKgp-8UYytn-2kNgX79-2hczLX3-7FHVkj-22rMwT-2fx3xYf-5BLiYj-58JLko-2jbTAbZ-HA2GUX-2j27Zpa-XWCDSV-eMTGcQ-QKb5Vz-9NxpGY-GEosm9-2baSZFZ-FGdxX1-2Z54Uf-scT38q-2kKZF9Q-2iQjdgB-2ii9GtV-58JL9G-2kJjM8z-HA2J3t-2iw6Z2Y-FVJSEZ>
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By Robert Feldman
OE Watch Commentary

Prior to the early 1990s, especially during the Cold War, the Soviet Union was heavily involved in Africa. Then, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, foreign aid and other types of involvement generally came to an end. However, as the excerpted article from the South African news publication the *Daily Maverick* notes, beginning with Putin's 2006 visit to the continent, Russia began reengaging in Africa, including economic, diplomatic, and military cooperation with several countries. While Russia's involvement in Africa is still dwarfed by that of China, its uptick in activity has become progressively more

pronounced in recent years. Related to this, articles regarding Russia's activities are relatively rare in African news publications, especially when compared to those regarding China in Africa, which tend to be regular features.

Particularly noticeable with regards to Russia in Africa has been its defense-related sales. Between 2016 and 2020, Africa was the destination for 18 percent of Russian arms exports. Since 2014, Russia's state-owned Rosoboronexport, which provides military products and services, has signed bilateral agreements with Mali, Niger, Angola, and several other countries. Also involved, although the article does not mention them by name, is the Wagner Group, a private Russian paramilitary group with ties to the Kremlin. Wagner's mercenaries have been active in a handful of African nations, especially the Central African Republic, where they reportedly fought rebels seeking to overthrow the government. These Russian-led military initiatives are frequently tied to its business initiatives, such as an agreement to construct two nuclear power plants in Nigeria while also committing the Wagner Group to confront Boko Haram in the northeast part of the country.

Plans are now underway for the 2022 Russia-Africa summit. It is expected that hundreds of politicians and businesspeople will attend, reflecting Russia's growing presence on the continent. As Putin seeks to rebuild Russia's global stature and get past the sanctions the West placed on his country for the Ukrainian conflict, he is looking at Africa. However, the article questions whether he will adopt a new strategy for Africa at the summit or continue with the current one.

“Vladimir Putin has placed a high premium on rebuilding Russia's stature as a global power, and these efforts extend to Africa.”

Source: Cayley Clifford, “The Bear is back: Russian re-engagement with Africa is picking up with Putin in the driving seat,” *Daily Maverick* (a South African news publication), 7 July 2021. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-07-07-the-bear-is-back-russian-re-engagement-with-africa-is-picking-up-with-putin-in-the-driving-seat/>

Vladimir Putin has placed a high premium on rebuilding Russia's stature as a global power, and these efforts extend to Africa. He first visited the continent in 2006, promising \$1bn in investments and making a clear declaration of Russian interest.

Russia also has clear economic motives when it comes to natural resources. Although it boasts some of its own mineral wealth, Russia's natural resources are difficult to extract, making it easier to import them instead. Notable developments are taking place in Zimbabwe (platinum group metals), Angola (diamonds), and Namibia (uranium).

Conversely, while Putin has named Africa a foreign policy priority, it is not number one on the list. “In terms of overall economic ties, Russia still does much more trade with Europe and Asia than with Africa,” Alexandra Arkhangelskaya, researcher at the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute for African Studies, told SAIIA. This was due to its geographic location, she said.

And while much attention is paid to Russian movements on the continent, it's difficult to compare Russian engagement with Africa's traditional partners like the US, UK and France, or with emerging powers like China, whose involvement dwarfs that of Russia. Interest from Turkey, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and others also means African countries can now pick and choose who they would like to partner with. These decisions are informed by a complex web of priorities.