

Africa's Contradictory Peace Initiative on Russia-Ukraine Crisis

Ramaphosa Draws Media Criticism In South Africa

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South African President Cyril Ramaphosa may underestimate the widespread media attacks inside his domain about the last round-trip intended to broker peace between two warring former Soviet republics, Russia and Ukraine. Both shared geographical borders and down the years since Soviet's collapse have unreservedly claimed to be observing the international laws relating to their territorial integrity and political sovereignty as recognized by the United Nations.

Russia declared a 'special military operation' on Ukraine on February 24, 2022. It was approved by the State Duma and Federation Council, the House of Representatives and the Senate respectively. But was it approved by the Security Council of the United Nations? Did Russia commit crimes by breaking into Ukraine's territory with its armed forces?

With threats of resorting to the use of nuclear weapons, it becomes absolutely necessary to find suitable solutions. It has created global economic instability and wide-spread social discontent among the population due to rising commodity prices. The situation has adversely affected most countries around the world. African countries are not excluded as they largely depend on imports of fertilizers and grains from Russia and Ukraine.

The disruption in supplies forced a group headed by South African President Cyril Ramaphosa who went on June 16 to Kyiv and June 17 to St. Petersburg to present the ten-point peace plan to share the continent's perspectives with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

In Saint. Petersburg, Putin interrupted the discussions to reiterate aspects of the situation

with Ukraine and categorically indicated to African leaders his logic of war is flawless and consistent with the United Nations Charter. As expected, Russian officials have reacted differently after the high-profile meetings, some expressed signs of pessimism. For instance, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said, after the three-hour meeting that the Africans' peace plan consisted of ten (10) elements, "was not formulated on paper."

"The main conclusion, in my opinion, from today's conversation is that our partners from the African Union have shown an understanding of the true causes of the crisis that was created by the West, and have shown an understanding that it is necessary to get out of this situation on the basis of addressing the underlying causes," Lavrov said, but the African delegation had not brought the Russian leader any message from Zelenskyy.

"The peace initiative proposed by African countries is very difficult to implement, difficult to compare positions," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. Under the headline – Kremlin's decision to demilitarize Ukraine has largely been achieved – the *Ukrainskaya Pravda* reported that Kremlin's Press Secretary, Dmitry Peskov, had said the task of the aggressor country on the so-called demilitarization of Ukraine has largely been fulfilled.

During the two meetings in Kyiv and Saint. Petersburg, Ramaphosa was joined by the presidents of Comoros, Senegal, and Zambia, as well as Egypt's prime minister and envoys from the Republic of Congo and Uganda. The key aim of the African peace mission primarily to propose "confidence-building measures" in order to facilitate peace between the two countries. It was to seek a peaceful settlement of the conflict which began late February 2022. In between, the African peace officers were particularly concerned with issues related to food insecurity, including African access to grain and fertilizer affected by the war.

Long before the peace- brokering trip, Ramaphosa's administration faced condemnation over its "neutrality" in foreign policy, and especially South Africa's relations, the friendly partnership, with Russia and China. That has added to mountains of internal problems, including energy deficits, youth unemployment and sky-rocketing cost of living inside South Africa.

Now Ramaphosa, who led the delegation, was criticized upon his final return home. But right from the start, it appeared unlikely to achieve peace in that part of Europe. In a spiky final chess-game, Ramaphosa imported the incredible Russia-Ukraine commodity (conflict or crisis) back to South Africa.

South African media gravitates between the narrating causes of the developments between the two former Soviet republics and its implications particularly for Africa. For Africa, it is the question of food supply, or appropriately how to sustain or preserve addiction for food import-dependency. For these African countries, there is no other alternative than to reconnect to regular supplies from Russia and Ukraine.

Diverse accusations ceaselessly awash the media landscape. The opposition Democratic Alliance called for Ramaphosa to account for the use of public funds in what it called a "failed PR stunt." Its leader, John Steenhuisen, said Ramaphosa disgraced South Africa in the "so-called peace mission". And others unreservedly referred to its failure to provide a path to peace. Ultimately, it was a missed opportunity for South Africa to reposition itself on the world stage.

Worse still, most of the leading South African media questioned why Ramaphosa had embarked on that sure-to-fail peace mission. The mainstream reports focused on characterization of the president. For instance, the Business Day's editorial is typical: "It's not clear whether Ramaphosa was so naive as to expect that peace could be brokered or was simply cynically making the gesture in an attempt to demonstrate SA's nonaligned credentials."

Business Day's reporter Steven Grootes frankly asked: Do Ramaphosa and his foreign minister Naledi Pandor, as both have consistently acknowledged that Russia is a "friend" to South Africa, still believe Russia is a friend, even after informing them of their arrival in Kyiv? This is almost certainly the first time in the history of South Africa as a nation-state that its leader has been in a city against which missiles have been launched by a "friendly" nation which knew they were there. The criticism will be appropriately crisp: if your friend launches missiles at you, can you name any enemies who have done the same?

Dr. Tristen Taylor's report in Businesslive media underlined the fact that the president's diplomatic efforts were wasted on the wrong conflict on the wrong continent. So the president went to Kyiv and St Petersburg on a forlorn peace mission. Both Volodymyr Zelensky and Vladimir Putin declined to implement a ceasefire, and no-one was particularly surprised.

According to the report, the mission was an absolute farce, and not because President Cyril Ramaphosa's excessively large and exceptionally well-armed security detail and a bunch of journalists ended up getting stuck on a Polish runway. That was actually a surprise. The mission was a tragic farce for three reasons: the composition of the delegation, the diplomatic effort being focused on the wrong war, and because Ramaphosa should have gone to a different country. The report written by Dr. Tristen Taylor, a freelance journalist and photographer. He is also a research fellow in environmental ethics at Stellenbosch University.

In addition, another local media reported that Ramaphosa had hardly finished his peace pitch before Putin interrupted. He offered nothing in response to their pleas to unblock urgent grain exports and end a war which has affected the African continent particularly hard. He rejected their appeals to seek a ceasefire "through negotiations and diplomatic means" reportedly challenging their plan, which is predicated on internationally accepted borders.

It's not clear whether Ramaphosa was so naive as to expect that peace could be brokered or was simply cynically making the gesture in an attempt to demonstrate South Africa's nonaligned credentials. Either way, one hopes there was much learnt as a result of his mission – because the bill was steep and the reputational damage deep.

One of the consistent features of the reporting on the South African plane that was stranded in Poland is that it was carrying a large number of weapons. As the Sunday Times reported, "Highly placed South African government insiders said the arms included long-range sniper rifles and weapons normally used in serious conflict."

At this stage, it is difficult to know what these weapons were for. While snipers are a common feature of presidential security in South Africa (they can often be seen around events like the State of the Nation Address, for example) it seems unlikely that either Ukrainian or Russian officials would grant permission for South African snipers to operate on

their soil.

The Sunday Times wrote it was also difficult to believe that these weapons would be necessary (in the event, it turns out that much more important for the safety of Ramaphosa was a bomb shelter in a nearby hotel). This may well lead to more questions being asked about the South African National Defence Force and what is really happening inside it. It is obvious that the debate around Russia and Ukraine in our society is about to enter a new phase with Ramaphosa likely to face criticism of even greater intensity.

Mia Swart is Senior Lecturer in International Human Rights Law at Edge Hill University and Visiting Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand. Mia Swart wrote in an opinion article that underscoring the fact “one of the reasons South Africa remains tied to Russia is that Russia has helped provide a financial lifeline to the African National Congress (ANC).” Earlier this year, it was reported that the ANC had received R15-million from a company tied to a sanctioned Russian oligarch. But then the South African government cannot continue to be blind to the illegality and inhumanity of Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. It cannot continue to be blind to the pre-2022 human rights violations committed during Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea.

South Africa’s ties to Russia appear to be not only ideological, but also material. Yet our government wants to convince us that it is not about the money. (In the run-up to next year’s election the ANC knows it needs all the financial help it can get.) Members of the government are not only deaf to the sound of missiles in Kyiv, but they are also tone deaf to the demands of a world order which foregrounds humanitarian concerns and human rights.

If the ANC continues to not honour the human rights commitments on which our constitutional democracy is built, it will lead to economic and reputational ruin. By continuing to support Russia, Pandor and others in the government are committing “kamikaze diplomacy”. This means they are willing to destroy South Africa’s reputation for the sake of supporting Russia, concluded Senior Lecturer Swart.

The first is that African governments, especially in South Africa, can’t do right for doing wrong in the racist imaginary. The second is that the pope and the Japanese prime minister appear to side with Ukraine, but want a peaceful settlement. Ramaphosa and Pandor appear to side with Russia, and (also) prefer a peaceful settlement. It is difficult to ignore or dismiss the racist undertones and Afro-pessimism at the base of intellectual responses to South Africa’s peace mission to Russia and Ukraine. The African Peace Mission had “failed to spark enthusiasm from either Moscow or Kyiv” according the report in the Daily Maverick.

News24, another South Africa’s media added Ivor Ichikowitz in its report. The arms dealer who was ‘supporting’ Ramaphosa’s Ukraine peace mission says he never sold to Russia. Ichikowitz has denied supporting Russia and has been outspoken in support of a peaceful resolution to the conflict. The founder of arms manufacturer Paramount, Ivor Ichikowitz, says there is no conflict of interest in his involvement in helping to coordinate African leaders’ peace mission to Ukraine and Russia. The presidency refused to answer questions about the involvement of Ichikowitz and the Brazzaville Foundation’s Jean-Yves Ollivier in the peace mission.

The South African Presidency’s statement did not mention Ollivier, Ichikowitz or the Brazzaville Foundation’s participation. “Participants included the president of the Comoros Islands and current president of the African Union, HE Othman Ghazali, president of Egypt,

HE Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, president of Senegal HE Macky Sall, president of Uganda HE Yoweri Museveni, and president of Zambia HE Hakainde Hichilema,” read the statement.

None of the Presidency’s statements on the mission mentioned the involvement of the Brazzaville Foundation. That, however, on May 19, Newsweek quoted Ollivier as saying most of the African leaders were his “personal friends” and he started negotiating with Kyiv and Moscow about a peace mission with African leaders.

Asked about the involvement of Ollivier and Ichikowitz in the peace mission, Ramaphosa’s spokesperson, Vincent Magwenya, told News24 that he would not answer any questions in that regard. A spokesperson for the Brazzaville Foundation informed News24 Ollivier would not be granting further interviews and referred News24 to a statement from June 12, which read: “We are delighted that the meetings between the African heads of state and the leaderships of Russia and Ukraine have been confirmed. The ongoing arrangements are being handled through the official and diplomatic channels of the respective countries.”

Inside South Africa, the Africa Peace Initiative headed by President Cyril Ramaphosa has sparked a week-long giggling and grinning, debates and discussions in the media. The controversies and complexities surrounding the last peace trip will, to a large extent, influence both the future internal politics and foreign policy. It has become an important matter for the middle-class, the business community and politicians alike in South Africa. Besides that, the Russia-Ukraine crisis indeed threatens Africa’s unity. Majority of the countries in theoretical terms claim neutrality, but the Russia-Ukraine crisis has already visibly divided Africa.

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