

Russia's "Return to Africa": "Strategic Decision" or "Post-Soviet Policy Slogan" by the Russian Establishment

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During the Africa Day celebrations on May 25th, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov reiterated that Moscow took the strategic decision to 'return to Africa' due to the current geopolitical changes and its return has become a popular post-Soviet slogan by the Russian establishment. The second Russia-Africa summit in St. Petersburg this late July is a strategic decision by Moscow in connection with its long-term goal of regaining presence on the continent,

According to Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov:

"This is not a one-time event. It is a strategic decision. It is our long-term policy and practice under the slogan of Russia's return to Africa. Of course, after the collapse of the Soviet Union some things were lost. There was stagnation in our relations. A number of embassies were closed. Now we are actively working to reopen and restore the work of our embassies," said Bogdanov. (TASS)

Extensively speaking on several questions with the media on the eve of Africa Day, the Russian diplomat noted that some African countries were more dependent on Western aid than others, but Russia was not imposing anything on anyone, because it proceeded from the sovereign equality of the UN member states. Moscow's role is to help African countries in the UN Security Council and other UN structures, as well as on a bilateral basis, Bogdanov explained.

"In principle we have equal, good relations with all countries. With some, of course, they are more advanced," he added, and wished African friends, especially on Africa Day, stronger sovereignty and further development, so that this sovereignty is supported by economic opportunities. This will let them strengthen political sovereignty in accordance with their genuine national interests and not to listen to some outside noise," Bogdanov said.

What is referred to as Africa Day is celebrated on May 25, the day on which the Organization of African Unity (now the African Union) was established in 1963. Until 2002, when the organization was transformed, it had been Africa Liberation Day. The African Union's headquarters is located in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

In practical terms, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov's critical assessment of Russia's return to Africa, the goals of signing several bilateral agreements which remain unimplemented, decades-old pledges and promises undelivered, anti-Western rhetoric and hyperbolic criticisms foreign players which form the main component of Russia's policy – these indicating the slogan of Russia's return to Africa. Beyond its traditional rhetoric of Soviet-era assistance rendered to sub-Saharan African countries, Russia has extremely little to show as post-Soviet achievements in contemporary Africa.

At least, Chinese President Xi Jinping and his Foreign Minister Qin Gang have indicated on their side that Africa is not the field for confrontation but rather the field for cooperation, to uplift its development to an appreciable level. China has heavily invested in developing infrastructure, in different economic sectors. Its slogan 'win-win' cooperation and 'share common future' have shown visible results across Africa.

During these past years, there have been several meetings of various bilateral intergovernmental commissions and conferences both in Moscow and in Africa. Official visits to and from proliferate, only end up with the display of eternal passion for signing documents called Memoranda of Understandings and bilateral agreements with African countries. From the highly-praised historic first summit held 2019, there are 92 agreements.

Currently, the signs for Russia-African relations are impressive – declarations of intentions have been made, a lot of important bilateral agreements signed; now it remains to be seen how these intentions and agreements entered into over these years will be implemented in practice, argued Professors Vladimir Shubin and Alexandra Arkhangelskaya from the Institute for African Studies.

"The most significant positive sign is that Russia has moved away from its low-key strategy to vigorous relations, and authorities are seriously showing readiness to compete with other foreign players. But, Russia needs to find a strategy that really reflects the practical interests of Russian business and African development needs," said Arkhangelskaya, who is also a Lecturer at the Moscow High School of Economics.

Several researched reports have criticised the Kremlin's policy in Africa. Those reports have been compiled by Professor Sergey Karaganov, Faculty Dean at Moscow's High School of Economics.

With its about 1.3 billion people, Africa is a potential market for all kinds of consumable goods and for services. In the coming decades, there will be an accelerated competition between or among the external players over access to the resources and for economic influence in Africa. Despite the growth of external players' influence and presence in Africa, says the report, Russia has to intensify and redefine its parameters as it has now transcended to the fifth stage. Russia's Africa policy is roughly divided into four periods, previously after Soviet's collapse in 1991.

Now in the fifth stage, still marking time to leverage to the next when it would begin to show

visible results. While the number of high-level meetings has increased, the share of substantive issues on the agenda remains small. There are little definitive results from such various meetings and conferences. Apart from the absence of a public strategy for the continent, there is shortage of qualified personnel, the lack of coordination among various state and para-state institutions working with Africa. The report lists insufficient and disorganized Russian-African lobbying, combined with the lack of “information hygiene” at all levels of public speaking among the main flaws of Russia’s current Africa policy.

Another policy report, titled ‘Ways to Increase the Efficiency of Russia’s African Strategy under the Crisis of the Existing World Order’ (ISSN 1019-3316, Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2022), co-authored by Professors Irina O. Abramova and Leonid L. Fituni castigated or reprimanded authorities who are squeezed between illusions and realities with policy ambitions in Africa. Against the backdrop of geopolitical changes and great power competition, Russian authorities really need to have an insight/understanding into the practical investment and economic possibilities on the continent.

The authors said that: “It is time for Russia, which over the past 30 years has unsuccessfully sought to become part of the West, to abandon illusions and reconsider its foreign economic and policy strategy, reorienting itself to states that are turning from outsiders into significant players in the international political and economic space and are willing to interact with our country on a mutually beneficial and equal basis.”

In addition, the report underlined the fact that Russia’s elite demonstrates a somewhat arrogant attitude toward Africa. High-ranking officials have often used the phrase ‘We (that is, Russia) are not Africa’ to oppose attempts at changing the status quo, to change the approach toward Africa. Despite the thoughtless imposition of the idea that Africa is the most backward and problematic region of the world in Russian public opinion, qualified Africanists – including Western experts, call Africa the continent of the 21st century: attributing this to the stable growth rates of the African economy over the past 20 years, and the colossal resource and human potential of the African region.

The report acknowledges the fact that African countries consider Russia as a reliable economic partner, and it is necessary to interact with African public and private businesses on a mutually beneficial basis. In this regard, Russian initiatives should be supported by real steps and not be limited to verbal declarations about the “return of Russia to Africa,” especially after the Sochi gathering, which was described as very symbolic.

The authors, however, warned that failure on Russia’s side to show financial commitment, African leaders and elites from the Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone nations will still be loyal and inseparably linked by nostalgic post-colonial master relationships. And this relates to furtherance of economic investment and development, education and training – all to be controlled by the former colonial powers as African leaders choose development partners with funds to invest in the economy.

South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) has its latest policy report on Russia-African relations. It shows the dimensions of Russian power projection in Africa, new frontiers of Russian influence and provides a roadmap towards understanding how Russia is perceived in Africa. It highlights narratives about anti-colonialism and describes how these sources of solidarity are transmitted by Russian elites to their African public. For seeking long-term influence, Russian elites have oftentimes used elements of anti-colonialism as

part of the current policy to control the perceptions of Africans and primarily as new tactics for power projection in Africa.

The reports delved into the historical fact that after the collapse of the Soviet era, already more than three decades, Russia is resurgent in Africa. While Russia has been struggling to make inroads into Africa these years, the only symbolic event was the first Russia-Africa summit held in Sochi, which fêted heads of state from 43 African countries and showcased Moscow's great power ambitions.

The authors further wrote that "Russia's growing assertiveness in Africa is a driver of instability and that its approach to governance encourages pernicious practices, such as kleptocracy and autocracy promotion, and the dearth of scholarship on Moscow's post-1991 activities in Africa is striking." Records further show that Russia indeed kept a low profile for two decades after the Soviet collapse. Russia's expanding influence in Africa are compelling, but a closer examination further reveals a murkier picture. Despite Putin's lofty trade targets, Russia's trade with Africa stands at just \$20 billion, which is lower than that of India or Turkey.

In the context of a multipolar geopolitical order, Russia's image of cooperation could be seen as highly enticing, but it is also based on illusions. Better still, Russia's posture is a clash between illusions and reality. "Russia, it appears, is a neo-colonial power dressed in anti-colonial clothes," says the report. Simply put, Moscow's strategic incapability, inconsistency and dominating opaque relations are adversely affecting sustainable developments in Africa. Thus far, Russia looks more like a 'virtual great power' than a genuine challenger to European, American and Chinese influence.

Of course, Russian-African relations have been based based on long-standing traditions of friendship and solidarity, created when the Soviet Union supported the struggle of African peoples against colonialism. Since Africans are struggling to transform their economy and take care of 1.3 billion population, the bulk still impoverished. African leaders have to remember their election campaign pledges made to the electorate while still holding political power.

Unlike Western countries, European Union members and Asian countries which focus particularly on what they want to achieve with Africa, Russia places the anti-colonial fight at the core of its policy. In short, Russia knows what it wants from the continent: access to markets, political support against Ukraine and general influence in the continent. Now it is time for African leaders to clarify what it wants concretely from Russia during the July 2023 Russia-Africa summit.

Kester Kenn Klomegah, who worked previously with Inter Press Service (IPS) and InDepthNews, is now a regular contributor to Global Research. As a versatile researcher, he believes that everyone deserves equal access to quality and trustworthy media reports.

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