

Africa-Russia Relations: Moscow's Intent of Regaining Part of Its Soviet-era Influence

Sergey Lavrov's Working Visit to Africa

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On the eve of his four-nation African tour from July 24 to 28, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, shared reflections on the prospects for Russia-African relations within the context of the current geopolitical and economic changes. He makes official working visits, fearing an isolation with tough sanctions after Russia's Feb. 24 special military operation in Ukraine, to Egypt, Ethiopia, Uganda and the Republic of the Congo. Before taking off from Moscow, he gave an interview to Russia Today television, Sputnik news agency and Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency.

According to Lavrov, Russia has long-standing good relations with Africa since the days of the Soviet Union which pioneered and led a movement that culminated in decolonization. Russia provided assistance to the national liberation movement and then to the restoration of independent states and the rise of their economies. Hundreds of enterprises were built, which now form the basis of many African economies. At the United Nations, Russia led the movement to have decolonization formalized as an integral part of international law and everyday life.

“We have been rebuilding our positions for many years now. The Africans are reciprocating. They are interested in having us. We never engaged in teaching them anything, but helped them overcome their problems so that they could live in their country the way they wanted to,” he told the news agencies during the interview.

According to the transcript, Lavrov explained that his ministry has been trying to cover as many countries as possible. That his current visit includes Egypt, Ethiopia, Uganda and the Republic of the Congo. Before the first Russia-Africa summit, he went to North Africa, and also in March 2018, he visited Angola, Namibia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia. Our monitoring shows West Africa is still missing on his “working” travel agenda.

Egypt has significant strategic and economic ties with Russia. And our monitoring and research show that Egypt is number one trade and economic partner in Africa with trade just under \$5 billion. Russia's Industry and Trade Ministry and with Egyptian authorities have been discussing steps to create an industrial zone since 2015.

The Russian industrial zone, described as a highly important project that will characterize the development and strengthen economic relations, is located at the Suez Canal's East Port Said. The construction of a Russian industrial area on the banks of the Suez Canal is nearing completion only this year after these several years.

After the long delay due to administrative and technical reasons, the first nuclear power plant is being built. El-Dabaa will be the first nuclear power plant in Egypt and the first major project of Rosatom in Africa. El Dabaa NPP will comprise four units, with each of them having a capacity of 1200 MW, equipped with a Generation III+ VVER-1200 reactor, considered to be the latest technology for nuclear power plants, which has already been successfully implemented in other countries.

Russia and Egypt signed an intergovernmental agreement on the construction of the country's first nuclear power plant in Cairo in November 2015. The total cost of construction is \$30 billion. The parties also signed an agreement to provide Egypt with a state export loan of \$25 billion for the construction of the nuclear power plant, which will cover 85% of the work.

The remaining expenses should be covered by the Egyptian side by attracting private investors. Under the agreement Egypt is to start payments on the loan, which was provided at 3% per annum, in October 2029.

Lavrov expressed optimism that relations with Africa have brighter prospects now that the African Union decided last year to establish the African Continental Free Trade Area. Specific criteria and tariffs for this area are being agreed upon, which will take some time. This will benefit Russia as Africa's rising partner in terms of boosting trade and investment which are quite modest compared to the United States, China and the European Union.

Records show that Africa has a population over 1.3 billion people, which is comparable to China and India. This is a great portion of the modern world and probably the most promising market. That is why companies and external countries with good vision are building long-term strategies with regard to Africa, which is the continent of the future.

"We have an excellent political foundation underlying our relations and a good mutual understanding based on the fact that thousands of Africans who hold positions in their respective governments have studied in Russia and continue to do so. We need to use this human and political capital to achieve economic advancement," Lavrov explained.

Russia will deliver the contractually promised food, fertilizer, energy and other commodities to its African friends, despite the difficulties created by Western sanctions, Lavrov assured the continent in an op-ed published across major African news outlets. Western and Ukrainian propaganda accusing Moscow of trying to starve Africa is unfounded and seeks to deflect their own blame, he said.

"We are well aware of the importance of Russian supplies of socially important commodities, including food, to many countries around the world. We are mindful that

these supplies play an important role in preserving social stability,” Lavrov said.

“It is essential that all our African friends understand that Russia will continue to fulfill in good faith its obligations under international contracts with regard to exports of food, fertilizers, energy and other goods vital for Africa,” the Russian foreign minister wrote, adding that Moscow is “taking all measures to this end.”

Lavrov reminded Africans that Russia is not “stained with the bloody crimes of colonialism” on the continent, but has instead “sincerely supported Africans in their struggle for liberation from colonial oppression,” over the years, including economic, military and educational assistance.

“Russia does not impose anything on anyone or tell others how to live,” Lavrov argued. “We treat with great respect the sovereignty of the States of Africa, and their inalienable right to determine the path of their development for themselves.”

Moscow’s principle of “African solutions to African problems” is in stark contrast to the “master – slave” logic of the former colonial powers, the Russian diplomat noted. Relations between Russia and African nations are “of an intrinsic value and do not depend on fluctuations in the international environment,” Lavrov pointed out in closing: “It is good to see that our African friends have a similar understanding with Russia.”

It is, however expected that a wide range of important international and regional issues will be discussed, with special emphasis on forming a new international and regional agenda and building a new polycentric architecture of interstate relations.

General expectations are that Lavrov’s meetings and talks in the African capitals will allow for more detailed analysis of the current and future prospects of trade, economic, investment, scientific, technological and humanitarian ties. Russia has thousands of decade-old undelivered pledges and several bilateral agreements signed with individual countries in the continent, while previous years there have been unprecedented huge number of “working visits” to Africa.

Russia aims at restoring and regaining part of its Soviet-era influence, but has problems with planning, lack of confidence in fulfilling its policy targets. But the most important key aspect here is how to make these strategic efforts more practical, more consistent and more effective, considering the existing experience of constructive partnership and bilateral cooperation in Egypt, Uganda, Ethiopia, Republic of the Congo, and of course, with the rest of African countries.

With Russian government’s preparedness to provide adequate funding, President Vladimir Putin has appointed his aide Yury Ushakov as chairman of the organizing committee for the preparation and holding of the second Russia-Africa summit in Russia and now re-scheduled for 2023, according to a presidential decree published on the government website.

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Kester Kenn Klomegah, who worked previously with Inter Press Service (IPS), is now a

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Featured image: A file photo shows Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov attends a meeting with President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Peter Maurer in Moscow, Russia March 24, 2022. (Russian Foreign Ministry/Handout via Reuters)

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