

The Geopolitics of Russia-Africa Relations: Critical Challenges, Refined Practices

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In the run-up to the forthcoming St. Petersburg African leaders' summit, the Valdai Discussion Club held a brain-storming session with policy experts from Russia and Africa. The latest analytical report titled "Russia and Africa: An Audit of Relations" was also presented there.

Now the main focus is within the geopolitical circumstances, there is global competition for Africa. Russia being one of the latecomers to the continent is currently making some efforts to re-assert its influence, but at the same, faces many challenges. In addition, Russia's geopolitical opponents are much more aggressively trying to create obstacles to cooperation with Africa than before.

Nevertheless, the second Russia-Africa summit scheduled for late July 2023 is largely expected to define the prospects for further cooperation between Russia and Africa. In light of the ongoing developments, some experts unreservedly suggested that Russia needs a smart and competitive African strategy and a complete workable roadmap to implement it.

Mikatekiso Kubayi, a research fellow at the Institute for Pan African Thought and Conversation at the University of Johannesburg and a doctoral candidate in political studies at its department of politics and international relations, was among the expert group who attended the July 18 Valdai Club discussions.

After the event, Kester Kenn Klomegah made this quick interview with Mikatekiso Kubayi who highlighted aspects of Russia's policy towards Africa. Here are the excerpts of the wide-ranging value-added interview discussion.

Kester Kenn Klomegah (KKK): Do you think the Soviet Union was more economically engaging, and of course it is well-understood; it was more ideological with Africa than present Russia?

Mikatekiso Kubayi (MK): I think relations should be seen in the context of the needs of their times, the material conditions, and the specific context of their periods. Africa was engaged in anti-colonial and liberation struggles in the period of the Soviet Union. Following the Second World War, The Cold War ensued, with it a historical lesson that it is better for Africa and, in fact, the globe that the world is in peace than at war. The cold war impacted the Soviet Union, Russia and Africa economically and politically.

The post-colonial period has allowed Africa to focus more on economic development and, for that purpose, the establishment of trade, financial and economic relations with partners. But Africa has been subject to devastating structural adjustment policies of Bretton Woods lenders. Illicit financial flows have made it impossible for Africa to retain much-needed resources for investment in infrastructure, research and development, and other developmental priorities. Underdevelopment has been slow to subside.

The Soviet Union also saw its end. With this demise, Russia rose but with challenges. The collapse of the Warsaw Pact, the expansion of NATO, The Cold War, the challenge of reorganizing the post- Soviet state, and social and economic challenges, among many that would face any country facing that significant level of change.

Today, the world has changed significantly. Regionalism, bilateral, plurilateral, trilateral and multilateral arrangements, and developments are reshaping geopolitical and geo-economic dynamics. There are bodies such as BRICS, the SCO and other collectives seeking a better world, a better trading environment, and better and faster development for their peoples. Increased or perceived increase in economic engagement between Russia and Africa is regular and in keeping with the context of the current time and its tides but with the advantage of historical relations.

KKK: How would you assess bilateral performance (two-sided), with joint declarations and bilateral agreements since the first summit, between Russia and Africa?

MK: You will recall that December 2019 is when the Covid-19 pandemic became the world's terror. Trade with most parties grounded to a halt due to travel and transport restrictions, restrictions on workplace processes, and other gatherings. Production and trade of most goods were suspended, leading to widespread and debilitating consequences for economies and livelihoods. Africa, as one of the lesser developed regions of the world, suffered significantly. It would be very challenging to give a fair assessment of the actual value of the first Russia-Africa summit. The world is still talking about the need for faster global recovery.

But faster global recovery is difficult under conditions where the United States initiated a trade war with China, impacting all regions of the world. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has also had a negative impact on the world, prompting peace initiatives such as those by African heads of state, China and Brazil. Today, agreements on grain exports through the black sea have ended and have not been renewed. The impact of this, when the conflict first started, has had a significant negative impact on Africa's food security. These developments collectively have been generally adverse to African development.

Potential still exists for improved trade and faster growth and development through this cooperation, which African leaders will at the Russia-Africa forum to discuss. Conditions must now be created to realize the commitments and intentions of the 2019 Summit.

KKK: What have been the policy challenges and roadblocks so far? Do you also think African leaders are not seriously addressing their internal development tasks across Africa?

MK: African states are not homogenous. Although they face similar historical challenges of underdevelopment and poverty, the material conditions of each African economy vary. This implies that policy needs and decisions will vary. However, what tends to be a common challenge in policy-making is decision-making. Decision-making and turnaround times for the implementation of projects or programs can be delayed extensively by challenges in the capacity to plan, short-term, medium-term, and most importantly, long-term.

Many factors can collectively account for this. Among the immediate ones are revenue collection, policy imposition, debt burden, and poor infrastructure. But Africa is not the dark continent that dominant non-African narratives used to corners of newspapers. Growth has been steady; the middle class is growing, and young people are increasingly getting educated and technology savvy and ready for new opportunities. The African population is expected to hit 2.5 billion by 2050. This constitutes a significant market currently and in the future.

KKK: With the second summit in St. Petersburg, what are your expert suggestions at Valdai Club? Generally, what are the expectations from Russia and Africa, especially in the emerging so-called multipolar world?

MK: Both Russia and Africa want development. Development is, in fact, an imperative for policy-makers the world over. The global financial architecture and its governance are among the several challenges identified.

Financial instruments for facilitating trade and investment promotion in the real economy need urgent resolution and development.

Technology transfer, education, skills training, joint research and development have significant catalytic potential for generating momentum for development and growth.

A framework for cooperation in targeted projects for industrialization with monitoring and evaluation systems to achieve agreed outcomes.

Agreements and intentions need to move from concept papers, plans, and intentions to actual projects and programs to be seen and felt and help generate confidence. With effective coordination and concrete focus, I think that much can be achieved.

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