

Video: Africa and the New Era of Great Power Rivalry

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Global Research, November 17, 2019

[South Front](#) 16 November 2019

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#)

The Second De-Colonialization

To an extent, this is a déjà -vu all over again. As the British and French colonial empires, crippled by the two world wars which not only bankrupted them but also plainly demonstrated “colored” soldiers could fight as well as “white” ones, collapsed, the two superpowers promptly filled the void. While in some cases the United States swiftly moved in as the French and the British were departing, leaving behind the elites their trained, those countries which experienced genuine national liberation movements nearly without exception opted for an alliance with the USSR.

Contrary to Western Cold War-era propaganda, the USSR was an attractive partner for international cooperation for several reasons, which included the demonstrated ability at defeating Western powers at war (a major consideration for developing post-colonial states), the economic development model which succeeded in industrializing the country in the space of only one decade, and the absence of legalized racial discrimination which, until the late 1960s, was the norm in the United States.

The ability to choose between two demonstrably different models of development offered by the two rival superpowers had both benefits and dangers for the developing countries of Africa, Asia, and even Latin America. The benefits lay in the fear of a “domino effect”, which forced the “First World” to offer considerably better terms to the “Third World” than they would have had the “Second World” not existed. The danger lay in the form of superpower “proxy wars” fought to prevent countries from drifting toward the USSR or to subvert the economic and political systems of those countries which did join the East Bloc.

The murder of Patrice Lumumba, the war in Vietnam, the military coups in various Latin American countries, the economic blockade of Cuba, and many other such campaigns were all part of the US effort to eliminate Soviet influence from the developing world.

The end of the Cold War meant a shift toward global unipolarity where there would be no competing economic models. Economic neoliberalism was now “the only game in town” on a global scale, and the politics of TINA (“there is no alternative”) ruled the roost.

But the shift toward a multipolar world that became evident in the 2010s means both opportunities and dangers for the developing countries similar to those experienced during the Cold War, though the greater number of global power centers means the game is considerably more complex than it was during the era of bipolarity.



[Watch the video here.](#)

Multipolarity in Action

While on the face of it might look as if the world is moving toward bipolarity once again, in practice there are four major actors: United States, European Union, China, and of course Russia. While US and EU collectively form “the West”, they also are perfectly capable of undercutting one another in order to protect own spheres of influence, be it Monroe Doctrine, the British Commonwealth, or Francophone Africa. Russia and China so far are not showing coordination in their respective efforts in Africa, though the absence of visible clashes of interests thus far suggests the existence of an informal division of responsibilities.

Russia’s renewed interest in Africa was prompted by the West’s efforts to isolate it politically and economically. Prior to 2014, previous provocations notwithstanding, Russia appeared to be steady on its course toward economic and political integration with the West and had that course not been rudely interrupted by NATO expansion, regime change in Ukraine, and the general campaign of demonization, Russia probably would not have felt compelled to lean into what the West viewed as its rightful sphere of influence if its own security interests along own borders were respected.

What does Russia have to offer?

It would appear, many things. If the Russia-Africa Economic Forum held in Sochi on October 23-24, 2019, where over 500 agreements estimated at \$12 billion were signed and which were attended by leaders from 50 African states and eight African international organizations is any indication, economic development and mutually favorable business ventures rank high on the list of contributions to Africa’s prosperity and political stability.

In a similar vein, Bloomberg network reported that Russian Railways were in negotiations over a contract potentially worth \$500 million to modernize the railroad network of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rosatom is negotiating with Ethiopia to construct a nuclear power plant. Russia’s forgiveness of \$20 billion of debts owed by various African states is likewise expected to result in new economic cooperation projects. Even though

these impressive numbers still pale in comparison with the Chinese investments in the region, they do suggest African countries are not averse to having more than one non-Western partner in the realm of economic development.

Where Russia does outpace China is in the realm of security cooperation with African states, and here there may indeed exist a tacit agreement with China over the delineation of responsibilities. The preference shown for Russia in the area of security cooperation is driven by several considerations. They include relationships established during the Cold War, the proven reliability and durability of Russian weapons on African battlefields, but also Russia's recently re-established prowess at waging a variety of types of warfare, combined with its ability to face down Western military threats. That latter quality is of interest to developing countries which fear finding themselves on the receiving end of some 21st century version of White Man's Burden.

While China's recent military developments are impressive, the country has not shown itself either willing or able to demonstrate an ability to defend distant allies through military force.

Should Chinese investments and assets in Africa be exposed to military or paramilitary threats emanating from the West, it does not appear likely Chinese military forces would be there to protect them. At the moment it's rather more likely China would rely on Russia for that protection. For that reason Russia and China can potentially form an extremely effective tandem that would be difficult for Western powers to counter.

The security dimension of Russia's involvement in Africa appears to be attractive to a number of African states concerned about US designs on the region, particularly in the wake of the failed US-sponsored "color revolutions" in the Middle East. Some African states, including Sudan and Central African Republic (the latter clearly in the French sphere of influence) have already openly expressed interest in hosting a Russian military base. Russia's long reach was furthermore demonstrated by the visit of two Tu-160 strategic bombers to the Republic of South Africa that received considerable positive attention in that country's social media. Combined with the growing presence of the Russian Navy in the world ocean made possible by the newly built modern guided-missile frigates, Africa is beginning to recognize the presence of Russia as an exporter of political stability.

The Dangers

The biggest danger of course is that the United States is unlikely to simply accept any challenge to its influence on the continent, after having accustomed to the idea of unipolarity. Sometimes that rejection of reality takes comic dimensions, for example, when Facebook bans pages allegedly "meddling" in African politics, a measure which speaks volumes about the US assumption of "ownership" of that entire continent.

But US policies are unlikely to stop at Facebook temper tantrums. We are once again likely to see death squads, paramilitaries, CIA-linked jihadists, and even US support for genocidal rulers who will serve as local proxies intended to roll back Russian and Chinese influence. The most frightening aspect of contemporary US policies is the willingness to despoil a country and plunge it into a civil war if it looks like it might slip out of the Western orbit and into Russian and Chinese one.

It is yet difficult to predict how the future proxy wars will play out. However, the US track record in other regions suggests that not only are its covert action instruments ineffective at achieving US foreign policy goals, US reputation as a trustworthy international actor is so

badly tarnished that it is likely to operate at a significant disadvantage when attempting to recruit proxy actors on the African continent. The alternative would be, as in the case of Syria, to directly deploy US forces into combat in order to stave off a political defeat, but it remains to be seen whether such a measure would find political support in Washington or among the US public.

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