

25 August 2022

Africa's Role in the War in Ukraine



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In a little reported development this month the Kremlin TV mouthpiece RT, the propaganda channel formerly known as Russia Today, opened its first Africa Bureau which will broadcast from a new base in Johannesburg.

Although RT has been banned from broadcasting in the UK and the European Union for what the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said was "spreading their lies to justify Putin's war and to sow division in our union", RT has now found a new home in South Africa to propagate President Putin's message that it is the West not Russia that is to blame for his invasion of Ukraine.

As predicted in Ambassador Partnership's AP Insights in February at the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Africa is now a key battleground in Putin's mission to win friends and open up a new front to out-manoeuvre the West.

In another development this week which has been barely reported in the Western media, the South African Defence Minister Thandi Modise has travelled to Moscow along with 35 other African, Asian and Latin American defence ministers to take part in a Russian-sponsored Security Conference.

Addressing the conference Minister Modise called on "warmongers to be dragged kicking and screaming to the table of peace and multilateralism". She failed to specify who she thought the "warmongers" were but her spokesperson Cornelius Monama confirmed that South Africa and Russia "enjoy cordial relations and both countries have signed a number of military-related bilateral agreements".

Just as the East-West Cold War conflict was often prosecuted as a "hot war" in Africa particularly in countries like Angola and Mozambique, there are fears that the African continent could again be a battleground for Russia and its authoritarian partners to undermine the continent's fragile democracies.

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You will recall that back in March at the start of the invasion of Ukraine some 25 African countries at the United Nations abstained from calling on Russia to end its invasion. Since then we've seen a robust Russian campaign to build on that diplomatic reticence to criticise Putin's aggression and there is mounting evidence that some African states are responding positively to Putin's message that the West is to blame for the war.

As one of President Cyril Ramaphosa's senior Ministers, Lindiwe Zulu, put it at the start of the war: "Russia is our friend through and through and we are not about to denounce that relationship".

In July potential Russian investors attended a closed-doors meeting with South African government ministers. It was organised by Russia's state-owned agency the Russian Export Centre Group and discussed a range of enterprises across agriculture, manufacturing, oil and gas and telecoms. News media were barred from attending.

Collaborations like these build on Russia's deepening presence in Africa with economic deals, arms sales and military and mercenary collaborations. Trade between Russia and Africa has doubled since 2015. It's now worth around \$20 billion a year.

Meanwhile thousands of Russian mercenaries from the so-called Wagner Group, controlled by Putin's associate Yevgeny Prigozhin, are operating in countries like Mozambique, Angola, Mali, Sudan and the Central African Republic – and through them Russia's influence and footprint in Africa is spreading.

This month Mali received military jets and a combat helicopter from Russia in what its Defence Minister Sadio Camara called a "win-win partnership with Russia". Local Russian sympathisers in Mali have organised pro-Kremlin rallies in support of the Kremlin-backed Wagner Group mercenaries at the expense of France's peacekeeping troops. Russia has managed to exploit anti-Western sentiment and regional instability to create new alliances in Africa.

In African countries like Burkina Faso and the Central African Republic pro-Russian films are screened spreading the Putin worldview that the West remains an imperialist and neo-colonial power and that Putin is Africa's anti-imperialist friend and bringer of stability. These messages are magnified through sponsored pro-Russian news stories and messaging from the bot factories in St Petersburg.

There are also Russian ambitions to reinvigorate the BRICS - Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa into a wider anti-Western political entity. Africa has long been a source of economic interest to a range of countries including Russia, China and the West. It is now also becoming a diplomatic battleground as well in a new Scramble for Africa.

The Russian diplomatic offensive prompted the US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken to visit South Africa, Rwanda and DR Congo this month to launch a new US strategy for relations with African states based on what he called an "equal partnership".

In a speech at the University of Pretoria he said: "Our strategy is rooted in the recognition that Sub-Saharan Africa is a major geopolitical force – one that shaped our past, is shaping our present, and will shape our future".

His visit followed Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's visit to Egypt, DR Congo, Uganda and Ethiopia. He constructed an alternative narrative of the invasion of Ukraine, blaming the West as the villain of the peace and responsible for the war-related food shortages which are a matter of life or death for millions of Africans.

Lavrov told African leaders that the grain shortages existed long before the war began and in echoes of the East-West Cold War urged Africa to resist a world "totally subordinated to the United States"

For his part, Anthony Blinken has described Lavrov's Africa mission as "a desperate game of defence to justify to the world the actions that Russia has taken".

It's fair to say that Africa was not a top US priority during the Trump Presidency and it is now racing to catch up with the inroads made into the continent during that time by Russia, China and other major players. Some ground has undoubtedly been lost. Last month a US-Africa business summit took place in Morocco to discuss infrastructure projects. Although some 450 American companies were present only five African government delegations – Morocco, Ghana, Nigeria, Botswana and Cameroon - were there to meet them.

Contrast that with Putin's last Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi pre-pandemic when deals were signed with 43 African leaders. It will be interesting to see whether Russia pushes ahead with its long planned 2nd Russia-Africa Summit in St Petersburg this October as that will be a public test of the depth of Putin's African charm offensive.

The battle for African resources has a long history, now the diplomatic battle for African hearts and minds is also being waged between East and West. Undoubtedly some African countries prefer to hedge their bets rather than fall out with Russia, and it is significant that no African countries have joined the Western sanctions against Russia. And equally significant that Russia's information warfare in Africa remains a potent tool which RT will undoubtedly seek to exploit.

The war in Ukraine has sharpened Russia's geopolitical attempts to repackage itself as an anti-imperialist force just as it tried to do in Africa during the Cold War.

The West has been late to wake up to this Russian "hearts and minds strategy" and it's clear that it would be a pyrrhic victory if the West eventually won the war in Ukraine only to lose it in Africa.

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