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# RUSSIA-AFRICA RELATIONS: COOPERATION PROSPECTS AND PARTNERSHIP CHALLENGES

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## Abstract

The African continent has increasingly emerged as a major arena of competition among international powers and actors, driven by economic, geopolitical and military considerations. This growing rivalry is closely linked to Africa's vast natural resources and strategic potential, which have become central to long-term plans for expanding global influence. Against this backdrop, the study analyzes the trajectory of Russia-Africa relations and partnership from the launch of the Russia-Africa Summit to the Ministerial Conference held in Cairo in November 2025. It further evaluates the development of this partnership amid the successive regional and international transformations and challenges that have shaped the period under examination.

The study concludes that Russia's role and influence across the African continent have grown considerably despite the mounting challenges confronting policymakers in the Kremlin and the broader political and strategic environment that has evolved within African states over the past decade.

*Keywords:* Russia, Africa, Sochi Summit, Russia-Africa Partnership.

## **Introduction**

Throughout successive historical eras, the international system has undergone profound structural transformations that have reshaped the nature of global political interactions and power relations. In the aftermath of the Cold War and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, substantial academic literature emerged seeking to define Russia's evolving regional and international role. This literature focused in particular on Moscow's efforts to restore equilibrium within the global balance of power and to reassert its strategic influence, both within its traditional spheres of influence and across emerging geostrategic regions of growing international importance.

Within this context, the African continent has increasingly become a major arena of geopolitical competition and strategic engagement among global powers seeking to expand their economic, political and military influence. Over the past decade, Africa has occupied a central position in Russian foreign policy calculations, with Moscow adopting diversified mechanisms of engagement aimed at deepening influence, consolidating partnerships and capitalizing on the continent's ongoing geopolitical transformation.

Against this backdrop, the paper examines the evolution of the Russia-Africa partnership by tracing its principal institutional and political milestones, beginning with the Sochi Summit in 2019 and extending to the Ministerial Conference held in Cairo in December 2025. The paper seeks to identify the defining characteristics of this partnership, assess its strategic dimensions and evaluate the prospects for future cooperation and influence in both the short and long term.

Accordingly, the paper addresses several central research questions: What are the principal determinants shaping Russian foreign policy toward African countries? What are the primary areas of mutual interest underpinning the Russia-Africa partnership? And what are the future prospects for cooperation between Russia and African countries amid ongoing regional and international transformations?

To address these questions, the paper proceeds from the central premise that Russia seeks to institutionalize and consolidate long-term structural relations with African partners while simultaneously capitalizing on the relative decline of European and US influence across the continent in ways that advance the broader economic and security interests of the Russian Federation.

The paper adopts a multidimensional theoretical framework grounded primarily in the assumptions of structural realism, employing this approach to interpret Moscow's efforts to fill the strategic vacuum left by traditional external actors in Africa and to position itself as a provider of more reliable political, economic and security solutions for African countries.

In methodological terms, the paper also employs a comparative analytical approach to examine the principal developments and transformations that have shaped Russia-Africa relations from the convening of the Sochi Summit in 2019 through to the second Ministerial Conference held in Cairo in December 2025.

Through this framework, the paper further seeks to formulate forward-looking assessments regarding the future trajectory and strategic nature of the Russia-Africa partnership.

### **Africa in Russia's Foreign Policy Calculus**

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has sought to reclaim the Soviet Union's former political and strategic stature while expanding its geopolitical role across broader regional and international arenas in a manner commensurate with the Russian Federation's growing military and economic capabilities. Within this context, Keir Giles attempts to relativize Russia's ambitions by drawing on the well-known observation made by former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson two decades after the Second World War, when he remarked that Great Britain had "lost an empire and has not yet found a role."<sup>(1)</sup> Giles applies this analogy to the Russian case, despite the significant differences separating the two historical experiences, particularly given Moscow's explicit efforts to reconstruct and expand its global influence rather than merely redefine its international position. In this regard, the African continent has emerged as one of the principal strategic arenas through which Russia seeks to restore and consolidate its international influence. This dynamic unfolds amid intensifying competition with other major powers seeking to expand and reinforce their political, economic and security presence across Africa, thereby transforming the continent into a central theater of contemporary geopolitical rivalry.

Historically, scholars generally divide Russia-Africa relations into three principal phases preceding the contemporary era of what is now described as "strategic partnership." The first phase extends to the period prior to the Russian Revolution of 1917.<sup>(2)</sup> During this stage, academic attention is often directed toward the initiatives of Peter the Great, particularly his efforts to dispatch exploratory missions to Madagascar beginning in 1723, alongside attempts to expand religious missionary activity through Orthodox missions in Ethiopia and Coptic-linked missionary networks in the Holy Land.

In parallel, Russian scholarly narratives concerning Africa frequently reflect a distinct symbolic and ideological framing designed to emphasize the exceptional character of Russia-Africa relations and to differentiate them from the historical experience of Western colonial powers. Within this context, Alexander Mezyaev argues that although the Russian Empire participated in the Berlin Conference of 1855 — which effectively provided the legal and political framework for European colonial expansion across Africa<sup>(3)</sup> — it was not, in his assessment, a direct actor in the territorial partition of the continent.

Mezyaev further highlights Russia's early diplomatic engagement with Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia in 1898, including Russian support aimed at countering Italian expansionist ambitions in the Horn of Africa.<sup>(4)</sup> The same year also witnessed the establishment of a Russian general consulate in the Moroccan city of Tangier.<sup>(5)</sup> Moreover, Russia adopted a strong oppositional stance toward

the project to establish a German colonial sphere in Morocco in 1911, reinforcing Moscow's effort to portray itself as distinct from the dominant colonial practices pursued by European powers during that period.

During the Soviet era, Moscow's foreign policy orientations toward African countries evolved in response to successive geopolitical transformations unfolding across both Africa and Europe. Within this broader context, several distinct Soviet approaches to engagement with African political actors and liberation movements can be identified.

In the immediate aftermath of the Russian Revolution, the Soviet leadership under Vladimir Lenin viewed European colonial spheres as strategic arenas through which Western imperial influence could be challenged and weakened. Soviet strategy during this period relied on exploiting the rise of anti-colonial nationalist sentiments in Africa while simultaneously strengthening communist movements and leftist political currents in Europe. This approach gained additional momentum amid the economic and political disruptions associated with the Great Depression, particularly after the Soviet leadership had launched the "United Front from Below" campaign aimed at mobilizing anti-imperialist and leftist forces across both Africa and Europe.<sup>(6)</sup>

Subsequently, during the phase of Soviet strategic retrenchment and the reconstruction of its regional and international outlook — extending from World War II until the mid-1950s — Moscow sought to recalibrate its relations with major Western powers, particularly France and the UK, while continuing to endorse and support anti-colonial liberation movements across Africa. This orientation became more pronounced following the Bandung Conference of 1955, especially as the rise of fascism and Nazism in Europe had earlier been perceived by Soviet leaders as an existential threat to communist ideology and the broader socialist project.<sup>(7)</sup>

During the 1960s and 1970s, Soviet policy increasingly concentrated on the broad spectrum of newly independent African countries, as this period witnessed the liberation of more than 30 African countries from European colonial domination.<sup>(8)</sup> Within this rapidly changing geopolitical environment, decision-makers in the Kremlin sought to enhance economic engagement with African partners by prioritizing tangible commercial and strategic gains over rigid ideological considerations.<sup>(9)</sup> At the same time, Moscow worked to preserve and deepen its global influence amid the intensifying dynamics of the Cold War, viewing Africa as a critical arena for consolidating political alliances, expanding economic cooperation and reinforcing Soviet international standing. These efforts continued until the eventual collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia-Africa relations entered a prolonged phase of stagnation and marked decline, particularly amid the fragmentation of communist and leftist ideological currents across Africa and the parallel rise of liberal capitalist orientations throughout the continent. At

the same time, the profound political and economic challenges associated with rebuilding the Russian Federation as the successor state to the dissolved Soviet Union compelled the Kremlin to prioritize domestic restructuring and state consolidation over expansive external engagement.

During this period, Russian policy was largely centered on reinforcing the principle of national sovereignty and strengthening the political and economic foundations of the internal state apparatus.<sup>(10)</sup> As a result, Moscow's engagement with Africa remained limited for nearly a decade and a half.

However, by 2014, the Russian leadership began adopting more assertive and strategically oriented policies toward the African continent, laying the foundations for what Moscow increasingly described as a phase of "partnership" with African countries. This shift coincided with the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and the subsequent deterioration of relations between Russia and Western powers.

### **Seeking Influence and Laying the Foundations of a New Strategic Partnership**

For Russian foreign policy and decision-making circles, efforts to expand and consolidate the Kremlin's influence across the African continent over the long term are driven by a range of interconnected determinants and motivations. These motivations extend beyond the purely economic and commercial dimension, although economic engagement itself constitutes one of the principal instruments through which Moscow seeks to strengthen its position amid intensifying competition with other major powers active in Africa.

In this context, questions continue to surround the credibility and effectiveness of many economic indicators related to African economies, whose overall performance remains below their available potential despite the continent accounting for nearly 17% of the world's population. Africa contributes only around 2% of global manufacturing output and no more than 4% of global trade.<sup>(11)</sup> This is in addition to the growing burden of external debt, which reached approximately \$685 billion in 2023, thereby affecting the prospects for economic cooperation and partnership with African countries.<sup>(12)</sup> At the continental level, projections issued by the African Union (AU) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development anticipated that Africa's annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate would reach 3.5% in 2024 before rising to 4% by the end of 2025,<sup>(13)</sup> reflecting what remains a relatively slow and insufficient pace of economic expansion. Nevertheless, despite these structural challenges, the African continent continues to represent a major arena for the expansion and diversification of international influence due to the wide range of opportunities it offers for cooperation and partnership across multiple strategic sectors.

Many scholars examining Russia-Africa relations argue that the Kremlin, after decades of adhering to approaches resembling the Chinese model — particularly through policies emphasizing distance and non-interference in the internal

affairs of states within the post-Soviet international order — has, over the past two decades, adopted more open and flexible strategic perceptions increasingly detached from the ideological legacy of the Soviet era.<sup>(14)</sup>

Within this context, Agnieszka Paczyńska argues that Moscow has sought to promote a model positioning itself as a “savior alternative” for fragile and unstable countries, particularly in Africa. According to her assessment, Russian involvement in African electoral processes, alongside policies aimed at ending the international isolation of military-led governments that had overthrown existing political authorities and providing such regimes with diplomatic and political cover,<sup>(15)</sup> created new entry points for expanding Russian influence and establishing unprecedented forms of what Moscow describes as “strategic” cooperation and partnership with African countries.

These policies have enabled Russia to present itself as an alternative partner to competing international actors, particularly European powers and the broader Western bloc, within a geopolitical environment increasingly characterized by renewed competition over spheres of influence reminiscent of the rivalries that once defined relations between the Eastern and Western blocs during the Cold War.

There is no doubt that Africa is increasingly emerging as a theater for proxy wars among the great powers. In this struggle, Russia relies heavily on private military security companies. These companies, foremost among them the Wagner Group, provide Moscow with a wide range of services, including intelligence gathering, military training, logistical support, protection of allied governments and assistance to rebel groups. The influence of these groups, particularly Wagner, has been strikingly evident in the Sahel region — notably in Mali, the Central African Republic, Niger, Chad and Libya — as well as in Sudan’s civil conflict. By depending on such companies, Russia is able to distance itself from controversial actions while maintaining a foothold in these strategically vital areas. In addition to military influence, Russia derives substantial gains from these activities, including the strengthening of its security footprint, access to vital natural resources and the ability to offer African countries an alternative to diminishing Western assistance.

After decades of fluctuating Russian policy toward Africa, discussions surrounding the establishment of a Russia-Africa “partnership” and the search for a sustained strategic foothold on the continent have steadily gained momentum, particularly amid intensifying international competition in Africa. Within this context, any examination of the transformation in the nature of the Russia-Africa partnership necessarily begins with the Russia-Africa Summit held in Sochi from October 23 – October 24, 2019, which remains one of the most prominent milestones in the evolution of relations between the two sides.

Organized under the slogan “For Peace, Security and Development,” the summit witnessed unprecedented African participation, including the attendance of 43 African heads of state, while 11 additional African countries were represented

by vice presidents, foreign ministers and ambassadors. The event also brought together representatives of major continental and regional organizations and institutions. The summit resulted in the signing of numerous memoranda of understanding whose combined value exceeded \$12.5 billion.<sup>(16)</sup> Its significance stemmed not only from the scale of participation, but also from the timing of its convening, the agenda it adopted and the outcomes it produced, all of which collectively positioned Russia-Africa relations at the threshold of what was widely viewed as a major strategic turning point.

Russia's motivations for deepening its partnership with the African continent were not confined to the pursuit of economic and commercial opportunities, despite studies at the time indicating that Africa had accumulated nearly \$46 trillion in total wealth between 2010 and 2019. Rather, Moscow's approach also reflected an effort to mitigate the diplomatic isolation and Western sanctions imposed on Russia following the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014.

Within this context, the Kremlin sought to break its international isolation by strengthening relations with African states and securing the support of an influential voting bloc within international institutions. This calculation was particularly significant given that the African continent comprises 54 internationally recognized countries within the UN, collectively representing nearly one-third of the votes in the UN General Assembly.<sup>(17)</sup> Over the past two decades, Moscow has increasingly benefited from this strategy through the steady expansion of its relations with African countries and, more importantly, through the growing acceptance of Russia's new political, economic and security roles and interventions across the continent.

It is important to note that the summit sought from the outset to establish periodic and institutionalized mechanisms designed primarily to enhance and deepen bilateral cooperation across multiple sectors. Within this framework, the two sides agreed to launch the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum in Saint Petersburg as a multidimensional platform intended to facilitate the implementation of the recommendations and outcomes of bilateral summits and to formulate a practical roadmap capable of advancing cooperation beyond the traditional scope of Russian economic engagement on the continent. This orientation was reflected in the outcomes of the first Russia-Africa Economic Forum held in September 2020,<sup>(18)</sup> during which nearly 92 agreements, contracts and memoranda of understanding were signed. These arrangements covered a broad range of sectors, including exports, economic activity, international cooperation, advanced technology, transport and logistics, mining and exploration, as well as investment and banking services.

The initial institutional meetings that laid the foundations of the Russia-Africa Partnership were followed by the second Russia-Africa Summit held in Saint Petersburg from July 27– July 28, 2023. Owing to the timing of its convening, the summit addressed a new set of issues on the bilateral agenda, particularly those

shaped by the repercussions of the Russia-Ukraine war, most notably in the energy and food sectors, whose consequences extended directly to the African continent.

Before and during the summit, Russia sought to reassure African countries by pledging to compensate for disruptions in Ukrainian grain supplies following Moscow's withdrawal from the UN-backed agreement governing Ukrainian grain exports. At the same time, the summit represented an attempt by Moscow to challenge Western influence and constrain Western strategic options in the context of the Ukrainian conflict.<sup>(19)</sup>

Although the second summit witnessed lower momentum compared to the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi, trade between Russia and African countries nevertheless reached approximately \$18 billion during the 2022-2023 period.<sup>(20)</sup> Russian officials viewed this figure as a significant achievement given the relatively short timeframe and the difficult circumstances facing Moscow as a result of the war in Ukraine, escalating sanctions and mounting Western political and economic pressure.

In addition to the bilateral partnership forums, the Russia-Africa Summit established an important institutional coordination mechanism through periodic ministerial meetings and conferences. These gatherings were designed to address current issues of mutual concern, monitor the implementation of summit resolutions and forum outcomes and prepare the principal agenda items for subsequent summits in accordance with the agreed timetable.

Within this framework, the cooperative process witnessed the convening of two ministerial conferences following 2019: the first in Sochi from November 9 – November 10, 2024, and the second in Cairo from December 19 – December 20, 2025. The Cairo conference coincided with major regional and international developments, particularly the repercussions of the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip<sup>(21)</sup> and the escalating military and diplomatic tensions surrounding the Russia-Ukraine conflict. These developments provided Russia with broader room for political maneuvering and opportunities to ease mounting international pressure. At the same time, the conference coincided with growing internal political movements across parts of the African continent aimed at addressing instability and political imbalances in several states. This environment, in turn, created additional opportunities for Moscow to strengthen and expand its influence and strategic presence in Africa.

Furthermore, the recent Ministerial Conference in Cairo sought to build upon the outcomes of both the first Russia-Africa Summit and the second Russia-Africa Summit, the latter of which witnessed the adoption of a joint partnership action plan covering the 2023-2026 period. The conference also aimed to advance the outcomes of the first ministerial meeting held in 2024 by presenting the Egyptian vision for stability and development in Africa and by promoting stronger international efforts toward establishing what was described as a more equitable international order for the African continent.

In parallel, the conference emphasized the importance of expanding long-term Russian-African security cooperation and advancing bilateral and regional coordination toward broader and more institutionalized levels of engagement. It also highlighted the continued upward trajectory of cooperation and trade between the two sides, which reached approximately \$24 billion in 2025.<sup>(22)</sup> Finally, the conference approved the formulation of a comprehensive action plan designed to guide Russian-African cooperation through the end of 2029.

### **Russia's Global Power Rivals in Africa**

Any accurate analysis and assessment of the trajectory of the Russia-Africa partnership must take into account the diverse repercussions of the current regional and international environment. The relatively short period since the launch of the bilateral framework through the Russia-Africa Summit has witnessed major geopolitical transformations carrying significant implications at both the international and African levels. These developments have, in turn, directly influenced the behavior and interactions of major powers, including Russia, which has sought to strengthen and expand its influence across the African continent. Within this context, Stephen J. Blank<sup>(23)</sup> argues that Moscow lacks a clear and comprehensive strategic vision toward its African partners when compared with other international powers active on the continent. At the same time, a number of studies and reports suggest that the economic gains and improvements in trade relations achieved since 2019<sup>(24)</sup> primarily reflect the broader military and security dimensions of the Kremlin's ambitions in Africa, particularly given Russia's success in concluding more than 30 security and military agreements with several African countries during this period. Accordingly, the trajectory of Russian-African rapprochement remains subject to a range of intersecting factors and variables that may either reinforce or constrain its momentum. These variables include dynamics directly related to both parties themselves, in addition to broader transformations linked to the changing nature of international interactions and geopolitical competition more generally.

To begin with, the intensifying struggle and expanding international competition for influence across the African continent constitute a major factor shaping the trajectory of Russian-African cooperation and partnership during the current period. At the same time, this competition represents one of the principal challenges confronting Moscow's efforts to expand its interests and strategic presence in Africa.

Despite the growing role of Russia on the continent in general, and in West Africa in particular, Africa is witnessing increasing engagement by multiple international actors pursuing diverse objectives and strategies, including Türkiye, Iran and the Gulf states.<sup>(25)</sup> This competition is further compounded by the rapid expansion of Chinese commercial and economic influence, as Chinese exports to African countries were estimated at approximately \$171 billion in 2024 and had

already exceeded \$100 billion during the first half of 2025, reflecting an increase of around 21.6%.<sup>(26)</sup>

Moreover, China frequently structures its engagement with African countries around the principles of what is commonly described as “aid diplomacy.” For decades, Beijing has ranked among the world’s largest providers of international assistance, while its aid and financing policies have generally been characterized by the absence of explicit political conditionality. Chinese loans have also typically carried lower interest rates than those offered by many Western institutions, alongside more flexible repayment arrangements for recipient states. In addition, Chinese-backed projects have often included elements related to knowledge transfer and technological cooperation through ventures managed and supervised by Chinese companies<sup>(27)</sup> in beneficiary countries, among other features that have distinguished the Chinese approach to engagement in Africa.

Furthermore, the succession of coups and broader political transitions in several African countries, particularly in West Africa, has been interpreted by some analysts as reflecting a growing sociopolitical sentiment within African societies opposing continued “European and Western dependency and hegemony” over domestic governance structures. At the same time, these developments have also been understood as an inevitable outcome of intensifying international competition for spheres of influence across African regions and countries, reflecting a broader reconfiguration of external engagement on the continent.

In both interpretations, the interests — and in some cases the standing — of European actors have been affected by these shifts, particularly those countries with a longstanding historical presence in the region, such as France. For instance, France’s trade with Mali has reportedly declined by approximately 6.7% since 2023.<sup>(28)</sup> Within this context, Kimberley Marten,<sup>(29)</sup> in her analysis of Franco-Russian competition in West Africa, argues that Russia has played a significant role in these dynamics, both through providing military, security and political support to countries confronting France’s longstanding influence in the region and by leveraging the evolving orientations of African governments to increase pressure aimed at reducing France’s historical presence and strategic role on the continent.

Despite the relative decline of French influence in comparison with Russia’s expanding presence, Moscow continues to operate in an environment shaped by a cohesive European bloc that remains one of the most significant external actors on the African continent. In this regard, the outcomes of the EU–Africa Partnership Conference held in Luanda, Angola, in November 2025 illustrate the continuing strategic engagement of the European Union (EU) in Africa and the competitive dynamics underpinning its relations with other external powers.

The joint declaration adopted at the conference emphasized the strengthening of strategic cooperation across several key sectors, including energy, particularly through the Green Energy Initiative, which aims to provide access to clean electricity for at least 100 million people in Africa by 2030. It also highlighted

cooperation in energy infrastructure and mineral transport, in alignment with the African Infrastructure Development Programme and the shared objectives of Agenda 2063.<sup>(30)</sup>

In addition, the declaration underscored continued European support for peace and stability on the continent, including financial packages and grants amounting to €600 million for the period 2022–2025, representing approximately 70% of the European bloc's global contributions under the European Peace Mechanism.<sup>(31)</sup>

While this sustained European engagement constitutes a direct point of competition with Russia's expanding ambitions in Africa, it nevertheless appears insufficient to fully match the pace of ongoing geopolitical and structural transformations on the continent. This is further complicated by accelerating political changes within Africa itself, alongside persistent structural imbalances and practical challenges affecting the effectiveness of the Africa–Europe partnership.

It is also important to note the persistent development gap affecting the African continent, which has been shaped by a range of contributing factors, including a notable decline in the scale of US aid and development assistance since the first term of President Donald Trump. These sharp reductions in US development financing have had adverse effects on a number of African countries,<sup>(32)</sup> creating additional pressures on policymakers in the Russian Federation, which is not in a position to offset such shortfalls.

As a result, the possibility of Moscow filling the strategic vacuum historically associated with Western engagement in Africa remains constrained, particularly in light of the significant financial and material costs associated with the ongoing war in Ukraine. Within this context, Russia is likely to face intensified competition, as China continues to leverage its substantial economic capacity to position itself as a credible alternative partner across the continent.

Although European officials acknowledge that they are unable to fully close this development gap, European assistance continues to play an important and influential role in sustaining its presence in Africa. Official development assistance from EU member states and institutions reached €95.9 billion in 2023, an increase of €24.3 billion compared to 2021. However, the war in Ukraine, the financial burden of hosting refugees in donor countries and the broader repercussions of multiple global crises have significantly affected the flow of official development assistance from the EU to Africa, and this downward pressure is expected to persist in the medium term.<sup>(33)</sup>

### **The Challenges Facing the Russo-African Partnership**

Research on Russia-Africa relations often begins with a set of fundamental questions, foremost among them how African decision-makers perceive Russia as a partner and external actor. While Russia has assumed an increasingly visible role across various regions of the continent, it is important to emphasize that African perceptions of Moscow are neither uniform nor consistent, and vary significantly according to national interests and historical experience.

Within this diverse landscape, some African countries are traditionally regarded as strategic partners of Moscow. In this context, Egypt and Algeria are frequently cited, although cooperation with Russia in these cases is largely concentrated in the military sphere. For instance, arms agreements with Algeria — estimated at approximately \$7 billion in 2021 — position Russia as the country's principal arms supplier, accounting for roughly 72.63% of its procurement in this sector.<sup>(34)</sup>

At the same time, another group of African countries tends to view the Russian role primarily as a political and security alternative to traditional European powers, particularly in relation to France. This divergence in African perceptions, and the absence of a unified continental stance toward Moscow, contributes to a partnership dynamic that appears uneven and fragmented when compared with the more structured engagement strategies of other major international actors.

In line with this argument, a further dilemma emerges that may shape the future trajectory of Russian-African cooperation. In this context, Mohamed Hamchi highlights the absence of the notion of a “true ally” and the emergence of what he terms a “false alliance” in characterizing aspects of Russian-African interactions.<sup>(35)</sup>

For example, a significant number of African countries continue to be classified as longstanding strategic partners of the United States; cases often cited in this regard include Algeria, Egypt and Ethiopia. This dilemma is further reinforced by the relatively limited material gains that many African countries may derive from engagement with Russia when compared with the offers and instruments provided by other major international actors. China, for instance, has developed within its Belt and Road Initiative a wide range of large-scale infrastructure and development projects across numerous African states in both West and East Africa, producing tangible on-the-ground outcomes. Similarly, the EU has launched the Global Gateway Initiative (GGI), an ambitious framework aimed at mobilizing up to €300 billion globally, including approximately €150 billion directed toward Africa, with a focus on grants rather than loans, thereby potentially offering an advantage by mitigating debt accumulation concerns in several African countries.<sup>(36)</sup> In contrast, Russia's constraints are closely linked to the limited diversification of its economic structure, which remains heavily dependent on the energy and military-industrial sectors.

On the other hand, the practical reality of the Russia-Africa partnership is characterized by a noticeable imbalance and an uneven distribution of gains and benefits between the two sides. Amid intensifying competition to advance and entrench Russian interests across Africa in the face of alternative and often more comprehensive international strategies, one of the key challenges confronting both parties — particularly policymakers in Moscow — remains the need to achieve a greater degree of balance and reciprocity across different dimensions of engagement, including trade, economic exchange and military-security cooperation with African partners.

Available economic data over the years since the establishment of the bilateral partnership framework reveal significant disparities in Russia's economic priorities and patterns of engagement across the continent. In this context, Egypt and Ethiopia are often identified as among the principal beneficiaries of structured cooperation mechanisms with Russia, while trade linkages with other African countries remain comparatively limited.

Recent statistics indicate that bilateral trade with Egypt reached approximately \$9 billion in 2024,<sup>(37)</sup> while trade with Ethiopia stood at around \$435 million in 2025.<sup>(38)</sup>

The nature of the Russian military presence in Africa — predominantly driven by private military companies like the Wagner Group — poses a distinct challenge to Moscow's formal diplomatic cooperation. Wagner's operations have exacerbated regional violence and militarization, implicating the group in severe violations against civilians. Furthermore, this presence has fragmented local security structures, deeply compounding regional instability. By exploiting domestic vulnerabilities to secure vital resources, the group has inadvertently triggered dangerous ramifications for the stability of Russia's own zones of influence. Consequently, geopolitical rivals have seized upon these systemic failures to undermine Moscow's partnerships and broader cooperation across the African continent.

It is worth noting that sustaining the upward trajectory of Russia-Africa relations requires additional efforts to strengthen mutual trust between the two sides. Persistent doubts remain in parts of African public opinion regarding Russia's role as a strategic partner and the underlying intentions guiding its engagement with the continent. In some cases, this has contributed to narratives that reject external involvement framed as renewed "international competition," which is at times interpreted as a form of "neo-colonialism."

Against this backdrop, Moscow faces the challenge of undertaking deliberate steps to build trust both bilaterally — through direct, state-to-state partnerships with African countries — and multilaterally, by aligning its actions more closely with continental development frameworks such as the AU's Agenda 2063.<sup>(39)</sup>

At the same time, Russia must also address perceptions that it contributes to the spread of instability on the continent. Such perceptions are partly linked to the increasing focus of Russian policy on politically unstable or "fragile" African countries, as previously noted. In this regard, Maria Perrotta<sup>(40)</sup> highlights a broader pattern in Russian diplomatic activity, characterized by an increased frequency of high-level visits and sustained engagement with countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Sudan, in contrast to relatively lower levels of diplomatic engagement with more stable African countries.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, assessing the dynamics of Russia-Africa relations requires a multilayered analytical approach due to a set of diverse considerations and driving factors. These include, first and foremost, the relatively recent nature of the current phase of the partnership, particularly when viewed through the prism of the Russia–Africa Summit, which marked the effective launch of a comprehensive institutional framework between both sides. In addition, the evolving momentum of regional, continental and broader international developments continues to play a significant role in shaping the trajectory of this relationship. Nevertheless, it remains important to underscore Russia’s limited yet non-negligible capacity to contribute to certain geopolitical shifts across various African countries and regions — shifts that have, to varying degrees, influenced the broader reconfiguration of patterns of international influence and competition on the continent. In this context, and in light of the prospective frameworks outlined at both the Sochi and Saint Petersburg summits, as well as the resolutions adopted at the recent Ministerial Conference in Cairo, there are indications of gradual institutional development in bilateral cooperation. However, this progress remains relatively slow and largely characterized by short-term, tactical phases, as reflected in the bilateral action plan covering the period 2026–2029.

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