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Russia-Africa 2024 in Review: Opportunities, Drivers and Limits for Moscow's Continental Expansion

Ivan U. Klyszcz takes stock of the year in Russia-Africa relations, pointing to the internal and external factors that led to an expansion in Moscow's presence in the continent



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Last year, doubts circulated about how far Russia could go in its African international relations. The enduring aggression against Ukraine, persistent low trade figures, the death of Evgeny

Prigozhin and the smaller turnout at the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit created the expectation that Moscow would eventually choose to reduce its African engagements to concentrate on its war against Ukraine.

Yet, the year 2024 demonstrated that some of these doubts were premature. The Russian government has acted to assert a presence across the continent, exploiting the non-alignment of African governments towards the Russo-Ukrainian war and benefitting from critical missteps and relative disengagement from Western governments. While there are serious questions about the sustainability of Moscow's presence, the Kremlin has demonstrated resolve in its Africa expansion.

The numbers speak for themselves: 2 new embassies, with 3 more announced; 6 new franchises of the Russia House cultural centres, with several more announced as well; a reported trade record of 24 billion USD by the end of 2024, with dozens of Memorandums of Understanding signed between African and Russian companies; fewer diplomatic tours, but just as many high-level gatherings, including the First Russia-Africa Ministerial Summit; 2 new Wagner/Afrika Corps deployments (Niger and Equatorial Guinea), and an overall larger military presence in the continent. (The highest estimate available puts the total figure of Russian military personnel in the continent at approximately 6000.) What factors enabled this expansion? What might cull the growth in Russia's ties with the continent?

The stated goal of this push is to present Russia as a viable partner across spheres (culture, defence, diplomacy, science, trade). Playing on its supposed lack of colonial history and on the notion that Moscow helped the countries of Africa to become independent (it did not), Russia makes its pitch in opposition to the West as well. As Maxime Audinet found, the term 'neocolonialism' has become a fixture in Russian diplomatic and political speech since 2022. Meant to create sympathy for Moscow's foreign policy, this 'neo (anti)colonial' narrative conflates present-day African grievances on international affairs (e.g., access to international finance, low climate and development financing) with Russia's claims about Ukraine and the West.

External factors and internal drivers

The European Union has been on its back foot in Africa for a few years. First, the French-led Sahel stabilisation complex ended in an outright strategic failure when three coups d'etat led to the end of the European and US missions in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger (with more closures looming). Second, the EU Global Gateway has been struggling to transform the bloc's large economic footprint — Africa's top trade partner at 288 billion USD — into additional influence. Third, and related, Europe has a public image problem in many parts of Africa, as the widespread anti-French sentiment impacts the bloc more broadly. In turn, Russia is consistently seen better in Africa than in other regions of the world.

Meanwhile, the US remains fairly popular in the continent, being either the most liked foreign country, or the second, to China. The Democratic administration of President Joe Biden increased Washington's engagements with Africa, hosting 49 high-level delegations in 2022 for the US-Africa Leaders Summit. At the same time, Biden visited Africa as president only once and Trump's musings on the continent include the infamous 'shithole countries' remark. So, expectations are that Washington will remain disengaged or even be confrontational against African non-alignment.

China is seen as a beneficiary of Western limitations in Africa, but its role in the continent is also changing. For many years seen as the rising power — even a potential hegemon — in Africa,

China is also shifting from 'check book diplomacy' to growing military involvement. Indeed, for years, Chinese financing and investment in Africa have been diminishing, with loans dropping from a peak of 30 bn USD in 2016 to 4.6 bn USD in 2023. In turn, China has risen as an arms exporter to the continent, a defence cooperation partner, and there are an increasing number of Chinese security companies operating in the continent.

With the West and China recalibrating their engagements, many new actors are stepping in, including Turkey and India, including on issues like defence and security. As evidenced by these engagements, Africa is open for business. Indeed, with few exceptions, the countries of Africa have adopted what may be termed a form of what Jorge Heine calls 'active non-alignment' as their foreign policies. Faced with the economic fallout from the COVID19 pandemic, the Russo-Ukrainian war, the Hamas-Israel war and the looming resumption of the China-US trade war, many countries of the 'global South' are choosing not to entangle themselves in larger conflicts. More than neutrality, this policy is pro-active and security-seeking. In this context, engaging Moscow is to them less about loyalty to Russia or the Soviet Union and more about opportunities.

In Russia, many actors see those opportunities. For the Kremlin, its African engagements are a way to avoid diplomatic isolation and maintain a claim to major-power status. In addition, these engagements with the continent are part of a broader narrative I have labelled 'messianic multipolarity', or the idea that Russia has a special mission in the world, namely, to create a multipolar global order. This theme remained a fixture of the Kremlin's narrative in events such as the 2024 BRICS Summit and the First Ministerial Conference of the Russia-Africa Summit. For the Kremlin, Africa is a would-be power pole, defined by its distinct 'civilisation' and resentment over European colonialism and Western neocolonialism. Defence cooperation, arms sales, Wagner and Afrika Corps deployments are partly meant to implement this doctrine, under the guise of 'diversifying' the security partnerships of African states.

In that sense, the consolidation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES in French) has advanced the Kremlin's multipolarity agenda in Africa and demonstrated Russia's expeditionary capabilities on the continent. Symbolically, in April 2024, the Russian military personnel in Niger began using the US installations evacuated by Washington just weeks before. In that sense, military cooperation with the AES validates — at least on a rhetorical level — Russia's claims to major power status and to building a multipolar world order (at the expense of the West). The AES also adds to Moscow's regional clout. By the end of 2024, other countries in West Africa began to see Moscow as an unavoidable factor in regional politics, with even some governments (e.g., Togo) courting Russia in part for that reason.

Beyond major-power aspirations, Russia pursues gains in Africa at the expense of the West and Ukraine. So, Russian disinformation continued to be active in Africa in 2024, targeting the West and advancing the Kremlin's war agenda. On the latter point, Russian media and diplomacy have attempted to amplify the blowback from Ukraine's role in Mali (which Kyiv denies) with an unproven Ukrainian hand in terrorism across Africa. In addition, the Kremlin has expanded its media operations in Africa, with the disinformation outfits *African Initiative* and *African Stream* enlarging their operations, and state-controlled media *RT* bringing its 'RT Academy' to the continent.

Ever hungry for military personnel, and with a tight labour market, the Russian military has misled if not coerced African students in Russia into 'volunteering' to fight in the war against Ukraine. In addition, individuals from across Africa and Asia — especially young women, *sometimes even taken from orphanages* — have been tricked into working in 'slave'-like conditions in the Russo-Iranian drone factory in Alabuga.

For Russia's state-connected and state-controlled companies, African customers have many times saved the day, including in the lean times of the 1990s. Today, boosted by the Kremlin's African diplomatic push, Russian companies are pushing into Africa again. In 2024, for example, Lukoil signed a new MoU with Republic of Congo, the Niger junta approached Russia to operate the country's uranium mining, and negotiations began with Sierra Leone to develop bauxite mining. The year 2024 also witnessed Russian company participation at continent-wide business conferences, such as the African Energy Week, NewSpace Africa, Food Africa 2024, as well as regional events, including in Ethiopia and Tanzania. Reportedly, Russian agricultural products have outright displaced several European exports in the Middle East and North Africa, with European wheat exports to those regions dropping a whopping 30% year-on-year. In addition, the Russian state budget reportedly allocates 500 million RUB (under 50 million EUR) to African projects, though this does not count investment from Russian state-owned companies.

What are the limits?

Of course, the challenge for Russia in Africa remains matching rhetoric with means. Africa's share of Russia's total trade remains at about 5%, most of it concentrated in North Africa, with Egypt representing the bulk of it. Moreover, since 1991, Russia has not been a large investor in Africa, with development aid never reaching a fraction of Cold War-era assistance. These factors render Russia into what Samuel Ramani calls a 'virtual great power' in Africa, a state Moscow has struggled to overcome.

In 2024, many limits to growth were visible, including in the defence sector. As of writing, at the top of the agenda is the potential loss of the Russian bases in Syria, the naval base in Tartus and the air force base in Hmeimim. The two bases served as essential logistical stops for air and maritime cargo transporting personnel and material to all African deployments of Wagner and Afrika Corps. Since the fall of its erstwhile 'ally' Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, Moscow has been scrambling its diplomacy to reach a deal on the bases, with Russian state-controlled media publishing materials critical of Assad. Alternative base sites are scarce, with Libya and Sudan as uncertain replacements.

The July Tinzawaten battle — where Russian and Malian personnel were routed by Tuareg rebels — undermined the image of Russian forces as undefeatable in Africa. The following months also featured enduring difficulties with the junta unable to regain the initiative in north Mali so far. Russia's role as an arms provider to the continent continued its downwards trajectory in 2024, too, with Moscow required to lean on its junta partners in the central Sahel and Sudan to keep its African exports afloat.

The economic picture is also more nuanced. Mounting economic strain in Russia will inevitably limit any investment agenda in the Kremlin and among state-controlled companies. As usual, all Russian trade and investment events lacked a participation from African blue-chip companies, and trade, though growing, remains heavily skewed to Russia's favour. Moreover, the threat of secondary sanctions has thwarted several deals. For example, Gazprombank's role in refurbishing South Africa's Mossel Bay refinery could end for that reason. Similarly, in 2024, the diamond-mining giant Alrosa sold its stakes in Angolan mining because of sanctions. Alrosa was one of the few remaining commercial assets Russia had in its partnership with Luanda.

Part of the strain is also a consequence of its war against Ukraine. While Russia was found to be relatively popular at the 2024 African Youth Survey, fewer people considered the US a negative influence on the continent (19% of respondents) than those who considered Russia to be a negative influence (30%). Of the latter group, 46% considered Russia's 'engagements in conflicts' (including in Ukraine) to be deleterious for Africa. Similarly, a 2023 IPSOS poll found

majorities of respondents across Africa to favour Ukraine in the war, with more respondents (over 50%) expressing active support for Kyiv than for Moscow (over 20%). A 2024 expert poll found a single-digit minority of South African experts willing to support Russia in its aggression against Ukraine, with the majority advocating for neutrality.

Conclusion

At the end of 2024, Russia remains a virtual great power in Africa, capable to appeal to each country of the continent. But low trade figures and uneven popularity render Moscow unable to create an influential pro-Russian coalition of African governments outside of the AES and other clients. Moreover, across Africa, the multipolarity narrative is interpreted through the lens of active non-alignment rather than through Moscow's messianic interpretation.

If maintaining the current trajectory in the war, the picture will remain the same in 2025, with difficulties mounting due to Russia's growing economic strain and the fall of the Assad regime. (Indeed, many of Russia's African missions depended on the logistics provided by the Hmeimim air force base and the Tartus naval base.) For Western and Ukrainian diplomacy, preventing further Russian gains must be integrated into the strategy to support Ukraine's war of self-defence as, indeed, Moscow sees the European front as connected to Africa and Ukraine.

