

A Review of Russia-Africa Relations. New Challenges & New Opportunities

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MOSCOW, October 23, 2011 (TRCW) - This is an abridged version of a paper presented by an eminent Nigerian, O. Igho Natufe, an alumnus of Russia's People's Friendship University, who is currently the president & CEO of Canada-based Stratapol Consultants Inc.

Russian-African relations in today's changing world

It is a pleasure to be back here again today at my Alma Mater, where I began my academic career in 1964. It is an interesting coincidence that this address is taking place in the first anniversary of the International Parliamentary Conference and Business Forum, "Russia-Africa Horizons of Cooperation", held in Moscow on June 15-16, 2010. The intent of this address is to borrow a positive leaf from that historic gathering of Russian and African political and business leaders by underlining the imperative of crafting a new dawn in Russia-Africa relations.

The 20th century gave the world three different Russias: the Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Russia and the Russian Federation. With little variations in territory, the core Russia remains intact, and irrespectively of the nomenclature — Tsarist, Soviet, or post-Soviet — it has always been a major player in global politics.

Like with most other states and regions, the Russia-Africa relations entered a new era, when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, and the Russian Federation, one of the Soviet's 15 republics, became its successor. The formative years of Russia's foreign policy were troubling for the leadership as they grappled with the quest for a non-Soviet identity and niche on the global arena.

However, due to the severe domestic crisis that accompanied the demise of the Soviet Union, Russian foreign policies were shaky and conciliatory on the global arena, especially toward the West. However, as the country became more confident in managing its domestic economy and governance issues, it started to demonstrate its readiness to reassume its traditional leadership role in global politics.

Post-Soviet Russia and contemporary Africa

While the first decade of post-Soviet Russia's emergence was characterized by a withdrawal from Africa, it has since returned to Africa to assume the role played by its predecessor on the continent, albeit without the trappings of Marxism-Leninism. Its hope is to maximize the Soviet Union's robust relationship with Africa, as the continent's independence movements and several African states gained tremendously from the Soviet diplomatic and military support.

“The Russia-Africa relations’ future is bright; but to reach there both parties need committed partners — statesmen and business leaders — to make this new reengagement more successful than the first one.”

However, at the beginning, the succeeding post-Soviet government was not only unable to craft any meaningful African policy following the collapse of the Soviet Union, but even worsened it, by electing to close nine embassies, three consulates and several cultural centers on a continent with substantial Soviet presence. To further compound the situation, President Boris Yeltsin abrogated Russia’s foreign aid programs and requested indebted African governments to repay all their outstanding debts to the former Soviet Union. The plea for a cancelation or reduction of the debts failed to yield any tangible results. This had a negative effect on Africa’s perception of post-Soviet Russia as an unfriendly country.

The negative impacts of such policies became visible soon after that. Thus, if Soviet-African trade totaled about \$1.3bln at the end of the Soviet era, Russia’s trade with Africa has declined to \$740mln by 1994. For comparison, Russia’s trade with Africa “constitutes just 2%” of its foreign trade turnover, a figure that pales in comparison to China’s trade with Africa, which is 10 times more, according to experts’ data.

Therefore, a major challenge for the Kremlin today is how to safeguard the enviable reputation of the Soviet Union in Africa within the context of a new Russia, but without the ideological trappings of its predecessor. Speaking on this issue, Andrei Klimov, the State Duma Foreign Affairs Committee deputy chairman, noted that the ‘deep crisis’ in Russia in the 1990s made it impossible for Moscow to render the same amount of assistance to Africa as did in the Soviet era.

Unlike Western countries that habitually export their “variants of democracy,” forgetting, sometimes, that they are dealing with sovereign countries with their own cultures and traditions,” Russia would follow a different path in its return to Africa, he added. “Russia will take all the positive experiences, but, unlike the USSR, its goal does not presuppose any ideological obligations, but a coherent, fair and equal rights partnership with Africa.”

As ideology was downplayed by post-Soviet Kremlin as a determinant of policy in Russia, the concepts of “economism,” “universalism” and “pragmatism” began to emerge as the guiding principles of Russia’s foreign policy. In fact, the notion of “economization of politics” has acquired a prominent place in the analysis of Russia’s foreign policy. “The consideration now,” according to Yuri Gavrillov, an expert on Russian-African relations, “is the danger of losing grounds to other countries’ increased economic presence in Africa.”

The quest for a new policy platform, different from that of the Soviet era, has been a major challenge for Russian leaders and policy analysts. In his paper evaluation, “Is Africa Necessary for us?,” Sergei Rogov, the director of the Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and a leading Russia foreign policy expert, cautioned against the adoption of a “big brother” posture of the Soviet period in Russia’s approach to today’s Africa, while Vasily Solodovnikov, an eminent Russian Africanist, suggested that Russia’s Africa policy be anchored on “intelligent pragmatism.”

Russia’s return to Africa: Opportunities and challenges

The imperatives of global economics necessitated a strategic reversal in Russia's assessment of Africa in the early part of the 21st century vis-a-vis its withdrawal from the continent in the immediate post-Soviet period. Beginning in the mid-1990s, Africa began to feature prominently in speeches by leading Russian foreign policy makers and analysts.

Speaking in Moscow in 1999 at an event celebrating the Africa Day, Ivanov referred to Africa as "a time-tested and reliable ally," while Mikhail Margelov, the chairman of Russian Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, responding to a question whether Africa was important to Russia or not, unequivocally declared that Russia has "a good reason to return to the continent."

Today, Russia, relying on the enviable position of the Soviet Union in Africa, hopes to regain much of the lost grounds by investing in strategic sectors of Africa's economy, where its core competencies are glaringly visible. Klimov, however, acknowledged Russia's inability to emulate the economic and political influence of the Soviet Union in Africa today.

As a way of encouraging African countries to accommodate Russia's return to the continent, Russia canceled the debts of some African states' Soviet debts estimated at \$20bln in 2009 (see Russia's top priority countries in Africa). If Russia's return to Africa will be successful, the choice of these countries as its primary focus on the continent is not accidental, as these are key countries with substantial Soviet presence, economic and military assistance that played crucial role in the development of most of these countries prior to 1991.

Sharing his views on the status of Russia-Africa Relations, Peter Fradko, the deputy chairman of Vnesheconombank and deputy chairman of the African Coordinating Committee for Economic Cooperation with African Countries, noted the favorable reputation and perception of the Soviet Union in Africa that had been “damaged by negligence” in the 1990s. “However, that time has passed and it would not be an exaggeration to say that Russia is now back for good in Africa.”

Today, Russia is very clear about its foreign policy objective in Africa, which is to ensure the success of Russian business on the continent. Alexei Vasiliev, the director of the Institute of African and Arab Studies, underlining the economic benefits that Russia stands to gain, noted that “Russia needs Africa more than Africa’s need for Russia.”

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In an age dominated by increasing energy demand, Russia enjoys another competitive advantage over other major foreign players in Africa, being the only oil and gas exporter in this group. Thus, unlike the other countries, Russia’s interest in Africa is not being driven by a desire to gain access to Africa’s crude oil. Indeed, unlike other countries, the investments by Russian oil companies in Africa are primarily to provide technological assistance to Africa’s energy infrastructure. For example, Russia’s Gazprom and the Nigerian National Petroleum Company joint \$2.5bln investment agreement to construct a gas pipeline from Nigeria to Algeria, Kremlin’s

first major investment in Africa's largest country since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Addressing the International Parliamentary Conference and Business Forum, "Russia-Africa Horizons of Cooperation," Vagit Alekperov, the president of LUKoil, Russia's leading oil company actively engaged in Africa, observed that an increasing number of international companies are aiming to get access to extensive deposits in Africa. "In this context, Russia-Africa cooperation could help in meeting the goals of Russia's Energy Strategy for the year 2030."

Today, Russia's trade with Africa is now measured in billions of dollars, a significant increase from the \$740mIn in 1994 and the \$1.3bln at the end of the Soviet era. This increase followed the visits of several African leaders to Russia and Russian leaders to the continent, the last by President Dmitry Medvedev in 2009, which he highlighted as "a new dynamism" in "Russia-Africa traditional friendly relations." This visit produced several bilateral agreements with respective African states.

Russia's unique competitive advantages in Africa

If at the height of the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States were the only real major foreign actors in Africa, but the Africa that Russia now has to return to in the post-Cold War era had welcomed other global powers such as China, Brazil, and India as the new major foreign investors and actors with significant footholds in the African economy.

The competing investments in Africa's natural resources by the foreign countries indicated a new scramble for Africa and its natural resources, with the potentials of the contending parties declaring different countries their respective spheres of influence in a manner suggestive of the colonial partition of the continent in the 19th century. In a critique of this policy, U.S. State Secretary Hillary Clinton warned against "neocolonialism" in Africa. "We saw that during colonial times, it was easy to come in, take out the natural resources and go away without leaving much behind. We don't want to see a new colonialism in Africa."

The future for Russia-Africa relations is bright; but both parties need credible and committed statesmen and leaders to make this new reengagement more successful than the first one. In this context, the main challenge for Russia, therefore, is to demonstrate a material difference between its policies and those of other competing global powers in Africa, without any traces of neocolonial tendencies.

Thus, speaking on the new challenges facing Russia's return to Africa in 2001, Russia's Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov noted the ruthless struggle among global powers strengthening their presence in Africa. "Our country played the vanguard role in the de-colonization of Africa and helped several countries in their independence struggles. Today's African leaders remember that very well."

Beside, being a country with a non-colonial presence in Africa is a major advantage, which Russia enjoys over Britain and France, two countries whose colonial policies have left

permanent historical scars in African consciousness. While their knowledge of Africa derives essentially from their colonial past on the continent, Russia can rely on the enviable anti-colonial policies of its predecessor in Africa and its readiness to adopt a policy of equal rights partnership. The way Russia chooses to manage this 'historical advantage' over its competitors will determine the overall outcome of its return to Africa. (END)