



Russia's and China's Geopolitical Offensive in Africa

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Both China and Russia have increased their influence on the African continent through money, diplomacy, and other measures – efforts that go directly against US interests. Washington has paid little attention to Africa and will find it difficult to compete with Moscow and Beijing, particularly as other geopolitical theaters require its immediate attention.

Over the past several years, the world has watched Russia prop up its position in Syria, Venezuela, and other locales. Less attention has been paid to Moscow's ambitions on the vast African continent.

Russia recently won over the Central African Republic (CAR), a country strategically located between the Muslim north and Christian south. Beyond the advantage of its geographical location, CAR possesses sizeable stores of oil, diamonds, gold, and uranium resources.

The US largely disregarded this development, but it warrants attention. Moscow's efforts in Africa are not limited to CAR, and there are signs that its involvement in the continent is set to widen. Indeed, it has been reported that in October of this year, Putin and Egyptian President Abdel Fatah Sisi will convene 50 African leaders at the first-ever Russian-African Summit in Sochi.

There have been reports in the media that Russia intends to increase its presence in at least 13 African countries. Moreover, Russia is increasingly stepping in with trade and business agreements, military sales and cooperation, and political and paramilitary support.

For example, Russia deployed private military contractors to CAR to deliver arms, train government forces, and provide personal protection to the president. Similar steps were taken in Libya and in Sudan, where Russian advisers supported Bashir. In May, Moscow announced plans to deploy technical experts to the Republic of the Congo to train local forces to use Russian military equipment.

For Moscow, the African continent is not only an emerging nuclear energy market but also a growing agricultural export ground for Russian wheat.

On a larger level, notwithstanding Moscow's partial failures in Sudan and South Africa, its moves on the continent have been largely successful so far. They come amid a geopolitical vacuum in Africa created by the declining interest of both Europe and the US in the continent. Russia needs influence in Africa, as the continent is poised by 2050 to have 25% of the world's population of working age and the greatest store of rare earth materials outside China. Also, Africa's 54 countries make up the most important voting bloc in the UN, which can give Moscow additional leverage. Hence Russian minister of foreign affairs Sergei Lavrov's frequent visits to the African states.

Russian interests in Africa can be characterized as imperial in the economic sense. Geopolitical support for various states and their at times embattled leaders gives Moscow a vast opportunity to gain a rich raw resource base. This approach is not that different from what European countries, the US, and China have done across the continent. Africa is large and rich, but it is also militarily and economically unstable. This makes it a geopolitical opportunity.

Russia might still be utilizing the ideological concepts of Pan-Africanism and African nationalism to generate deep connections between African postcolonial activists and Moscow's internationalist agenda. Russian interests in Africa relate primarily to the tradition established during the Cold War, when Moscow expanded its influence on the continent through military sales, economic incentives, and the export of Communism ideology.

But there has been a grand geopolitical shift in Moscow's position that has caused it to increase its efforts in Africa. Ever since its 2014 annexation of Crimea, which distanced it from the West, Russia's geopolitical thrust has shifted elsewhere to leverage its failing position on the Ukrainian front. By intervening in Syria on Assad's behalf, Moscow was hoping to force the West to drop its support for Ukraine in exchange for Russian concessions in Syria.

The same is playing out in Venezuela, and Russia's African economic and diplomatic offensive might be a part of a similar strategy: to gain influence in

regions important to the West in order to develop a more balanced geopolitical position against Washington and other western countries.

Competition over Africa's major resources and the search for geopolitical allies reflects, and is a part of, a larger battle playing out in the world. In Eurasia, the US is facing China and Russia, and the African continent is gradually becoming a similar stage for competition among those three players.

Chinese influence in Africa is well known, and is mainly characterized by a large resource pool. But it also indicates that in the scramble for African resources, China and Russia are challenging the West. This is troublesome for Washington as the US still does not have an effective strategic policy to oppose Moscow and Beijing in Africa. China and Russia once again find themselves aligned against America, and this trend underlines their deep cooperation.

Although it is fashionable to portray the partnership between Moscow and Beijing as a mere alliance of convenience, its potential should not be underestimated. The two undermine US influence across the continents. We will likely see even greater competition in Africa in coming years and larger infrastructure projects pulled off by Moscow and Beijing.

It is possible that the US will pay more attention to Africa by trying to entice the Christian south and some states in the Muslim north via direct economic incentives and/or proxy diplomacy. However, considering the problems the US is experiencing simultaneously in Eurasia against Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, and others, its attention is likely to remain elsewhere for the foreseeable future.

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