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# Beyond the Sahel

## Russia's Toolbox for Influence in Africa

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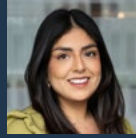


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# Table of Contents

01	Executive Summary	12	Case Studies
02	Introduction	13	Egypt
03	Why Russia's Engagement in Africa Matters for U.S. National Security	15	Ethiopia
04	History of Russia in Africa	17	Nigeria
05	Russia's Foreign Policy Toward Africa	20	South Africa
07	Pillars of Russian Engagement in Africa	22	Implications of Russia's Closer Ties with Africa
		26	Conclusion
		27	Recommendations



## Executive Summary

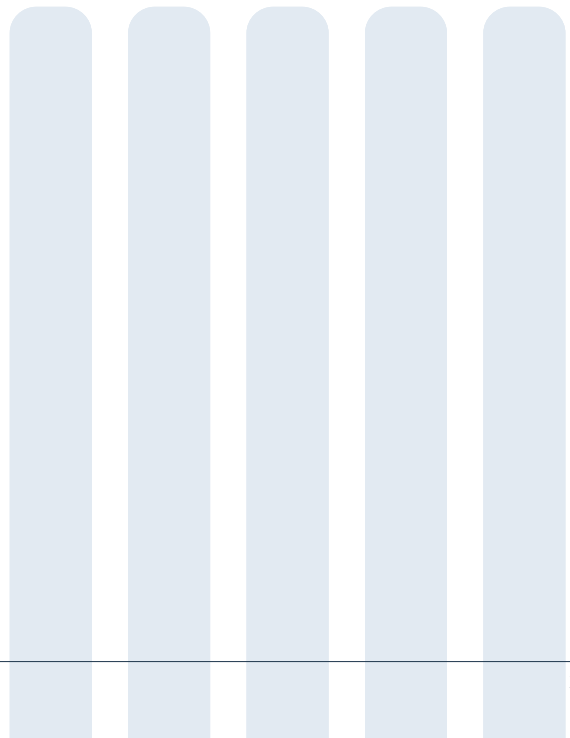
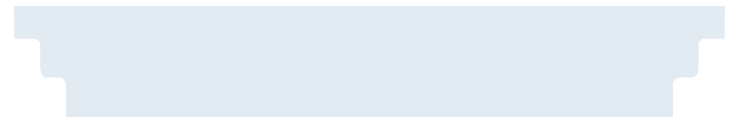
**RUSSIA HAS BEEN EXPANDING** its engagement in Africa under President Vladimir Putin, seeking to increase Russia's access to resources (either natural or military, including port access), burnish its credentials as a global power, and gain support for Moscow's vision of an alternative world order. Its most visible efforts have been in the security space in the Sahel,<sup>a</sup> Libya, and Sudan, where Russia has deployed mercenary forces and provided support to military juntas, or provided weapons and supplies during ongoing civil wars. Russia has also engaged in exploitative mining deals in places such as the Central African Republic and Sudan. But the rest of Africa is not immune to Moscow's engagement, and Russia is using both hard- and soft-power tools to project its influence on the continent, including through arms sales, nuclear power plant deals, disinformation campaigns, media outreach, and an extensive network of cultural "Russian Houses" and outposts of the Russian Orthodox Church that spread Russian propaganda.

Russia's outreach in Africa is supported by an overarching narrative that draws on Russia's history and presents the country as a benevolent actor in Africa, unencumbered by a colonial past, and a long-standing supporter of African independence and sovereignty. This narrative obscures Russia's true intentions in Africa, which are focused on its own enrichment and the promotion of a world order that benefits Russia at the expense of Africa. Greater Russian influence in Africa threatens islands of stability in volatile regions, weakens U.S. and European influence in strategic states, threatens African democracies, builds support for Russia's harmful alternative world order, and ultimately risks greater instability, conflict, and underdevelopment on the continent.

a. The Sahel is a semiarid region of western and North Central Africa that stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea and encompasses all or part of Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Nigeria.

This paper explores Russia's engagement with four key "swing states" in Africa—Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Africa. These states make up 34 percent of Africa's population, constitute a significant proportion of its economy, and are influential within their region of Africa. All four are multialigned, to greater or lesser extents, maintaining relations with the United States and Western allies as well as with Russia. Russia is attempting to deepen its engagement with these swing states in order to amplify its influence on the continent and is using different tools and approaches in each. Egypt's relationship with Russia is centered on their strong and growing economic relationship; Ethiopia looks to Russia for security support and to counter Western isolation; Nigeria lacks a close substantive relationship with Russia but is a target for Russian disinformation campaigns; and South Africa shares the closest ideological alignment regarding an alternative world order with Russia.

The United States can and should enhance its relationship with Africa by developing a comprehensive Africa strategy, supporting civil society and local media outlets, enhancing educational opportunities and partnerships, partnering with key states to tackle terrorism, and increasing public diplomacy efforts to more clearly communicate U.S. engagement. Focusing on the swing states identified in this report offers a framework for U.S. prioritization and would allow limited resources to have greater impact.



## Introduction

**GLOBAL POLITICS ARE** in a period of intense competition and upheaval. Many of the rules and conventions that previously governed how states behaved are being ignored, and great powers are working to revise the international system to their advantage. Russia and China are seeking a multipolar world order where they have more influence, and the United States is pursuing an aggressive foreign policy that favors unilateral action over multi-lateral and allied cooperation.

Africa is one region where this competition is playing out. China has engaged heavily in Africa for decades, through both its Belt and Road Initiative and the Digital Silk Road, but Russia has also been increasing its footprint in Africa.<sup>1</sup> While much of Russia's visible effort has gone into shoring up authoritarian regimes in the Sahel through mercenary forces such as the Wagner Group and Africa Corps, Russia is also focusing its efforts on key regional African states—including Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Africa—to varying degrees of success.<sup>2</sup> Building relationships with these states, and others, is allowing Russia to expand and amplify its influence across Africa.

Russia cannot compete economically in Africa with China, or even the United States and Europe. Instead, Russia acts as a disruptor on the continent, using extensive media and cultural outreach to spread a narrative about an alternative world order that it claims will benefit Africa, but which in reality serves Moscow's own aims. In countries outside the Sahel, Russia's approach is coupled with economic and security cooperation in niche areas—such as the promise of nuclear power plants—which seek to bind African states more closely to Moscow. Collectively these efforts seek to disrupt the status quo and turn states away from the West and toward Russia—at a relatively low cost for Russia. Engagement with Russia also offers some relief from Western geopolitical isolation for states such as Ethiopia (and at times Egypt), which can undermine Western efforts to encourage reform.

This matters for the United States because an increased Russian presence in Africa harms the United States' own objectives there, including its ability to tackle terrorism and secure economic deals on the continent—the focus of the current administration. Russia's extensive disinformation campaigns on the continent also undermine democracy and reduce the ability of African governments and Western countries to communicate truthful and clear information about a range of issues, from public health to the war in Ukraine. Ultimately, Russia's actions also impact longer-term efforts to reduce conflict and improve security and prosperity for African citizens.

Africa has never been a high priority for the United States, but Russia's expansion is happening at a time when the United States is further reducing its engagement with the continent. U.S. development funding to Africa, including the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), has been scaled back significantly; Voice of America is no longer broadcasting; the Global Engagement Center at the State Department (which monitored disinformation, including Russian activity in Africa) was closed in April 2025; and the long-term fate of the African Growth and Opportunity Act currently hangs in the balance. (At the beginning of the year, Congress extended it just until the end of 2026.)<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the United States and South Africa (a key African state, both in the region and globally) had a public falling-out in 2025 that resulted in South Africa's withdrawal from the G20 for the duration of the United States' 2026 presidency of the group. Washington's decision to scale back its engagement with Africa is likely to hurt U.S. influence on the continent in the short and long term; both China and Russia will seek to capitalize on the United States' absence to build their influence and attempt to bring more countries into alignment with their own worldviews.

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This report examines Russia's approach to Africa, focusing on its tools for influence in countries where it does not have a significant security presence (as in the Sahel). It then focuses on Russia's outreach to four key states—Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Africa—African “swing states,” which have an outside influence due to their multialigned political orientation.<sup>4</sup> The report considers the tools Russia has used to build relationships with these states, the future trajectory of those relationships, the implications of Russia's engagement for Western security interests, and recommendations for how the United States and its partners can more effectively strengthen their relationships with these key states and therefore Africa overall. In an era of finite resources, building strong U.S. partnerships with key regional states will likely have a significant knock-on effect across the continent more broadly, including in countering Russia.

# Why Russia's Engagement in Africa Matters for U.S. National Security

**RUSSIA'S FOOTPRINT IN AFRICA** has increased since the early 2000s and its growing presence has prolonged conflicts, supported authoritarian regimes across the continent, and reduced opportunities for the United States and its allies to tackle terrorism. Over the last decade, the locus of terrorism has shifted from the Middle East to the Sahel; over half of terrorism-related casualties in 2024 were in the Sahel, and 6 of the top 10 countries affected by terrorism are in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>5</sup> Because terrorist activity can and does quickly spread beyond borders, tackling the threat of terrorism at the source reduces global risk. Authoritarian regimes—supported by Russian mercenaries—have forced France and the United States to scale back their counterterrorism operations in the Sahel, reducing the West's ability to understand the threat picture and to contain terrorist activity.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the security support Moscow has provided to regimes in the Sahel, Russia is also actively involved in the ongoing civil wars in Libya and Sudan, prolonging those conflicts. Russia has been attempting to supplant the UN-backed government in Tripoli by supplying Libyan National Army (LNA) Commander Khalifa Haftar with troops and equipment for years—building on a partnership that goes back to 2014—and the Haftar regime is now almost entirely dependent on Russian resources.<sup>7</sup> Russia deployed the Wagner Group to Sudan in 2017 to shore up President Omar al-Bashir and to support the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). In 2024, Moscow also began supporting the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), to which Russia, alongside Iran, now supplies weapons, fuel, drones, and parts for fighter jets.<sup>8</sup>

Russia's engagement in Libya and Sudan allows Moscow to project power further into Africa. In Libya, Russia has access to a main air base at Maaten al-Sarra, as well as a network of smaller bases around the country, and regularly brings in supplies and soldiers through the port at Tobruk. None of these assets formally belong to Russia, and Moscow is reportedly exploring options for a permanent base in Libya on the Mediterranean at either Tobruk or Benghazi.<sup>9</sup> In Sudan, there are reports that Russia has finalized an agreement (first discussed with Sudan in 2019) with Lieutenant General Abdel Fatah al-Burhan (the head of the SAF, which controls most of the country) to construct a port at Port Sudan—giving Moscow longed-for access to the Red Sea. Formalizing ownership or access to these assets would help Russia sustain its operations in the Sahel and beyond.<sup>10</sup>

Russia continues to be one of the main arms suppliers to Africa—supplying 21 percent of the continent's weapons in

2023—but this has declined in recent years as Moscow needs to preserve its supply for the war in Ukraine.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, with fewer values-based constraints on who Russia will supply arms to, Russian arms sales contribute to the proliferation of arms on the continent. Russia also conducts military exercises with African countries, and in January 2026, the Russian navy joined Chinese and Iranian ships to conduct naval exercises with South Africa off the coast of the country as part of a BRICS+ military exercise.<sup>12</sup> Arms sales and military exercises serve to bring partner countries into Russia's orbit (to some extent) while signaling to others that they have alternatives to Western security arrangements.

Not content with providing support to existing authoritarian regimes in Africa, Russia is also promoting authoritarianism across the continent, threatening the stability of fragile democracies and increasing the risk of democratic backsliding. The Varieties of Democracy project notes that democratization in Africa has stagnated in the last 20 years, and the overall democracy levels in Africa have reverted to their 2000 level.<sup>13</sup> Russia is also seizing on simmering feelings of discontent toward democracy, particularly among young people who feel that democracy has brought them neither prosperity nor security, and amplifying these feelings through disinformation campaigns.<sup>14</sup> Yet the alternative to democracy that Russia is offering (and supporting in the Sahel) offers much worse outcomes for African populations. After the military junta took over in Niger (in part thanks to Russian support), violence increased, economic growth declined, local councils were dissolved, and many journalists were detained.<sup>15</sup> More authoritarian states aligned with Russia brings benefits to Moscow, but a more democratic Africa accompanied by good governance will bring prosperity and security not just for the continent, but also for the United States and the wider world.

One of the most effective and low-cost ways in which Russia threatens African security and Western interests is by spreading anti-American and anti-Western propaganda. Russian disinformation campaigns aim to sow division within societies, foment discontent, and ultimately advance Russian goals across the continent. The Russian narrative has two parts. One is anticolonial and portrays Russia as a strong supporter of the Global South (drawing heavily on the Soviet Union's role in Africa's liberation struggles) and as a country engaged in a competition against the West for what it describes as a more equitable and multipolar world order. The second part is explicitly anti-Western and targets Western actions and narratives—twisting reality to suggest that the West is not a supporter of the Global South. Moscow linked food shortages in Africa to Western sanctions (rather than Russia's own actions in Ukraine), and in 2024, a widespread Russian disinformation campaign targeted two crucial U.S.- and U.K.-led efforts to tackle malaria, claiming both countries were killing African citizens with these efforts.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, Russia’s engagement in Africa is not intended to improve the lives of African citizens but to access resources, burnish Moscow’s credentials overseas, and gain support for its vision of an alternative world order. Russia’s engagements in Africa are less focused on ordinary citizens than on gaining the support of elites—and while those elites may benefit from Russia’s actions, usually the general population suffers. Attacks on civilians, sexual assaults, and the recruitment of child soldiers have been some of the hallmarks of Russian mercenary activity in Africa—particularly in the Central African Republic (CAR)—and the nuclear power plant deal in South Africa that former President Jacob Zuma entered into with Russia would have enriched Zuma and his associates, but left South Africa with a significant debt.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the alternative world order that Russia is promoting downplays the importance of human rights, civil society, and democracy, an approach that would undoubtedly leave African citizens worse off.<sup>18</sup>

Many African states are keen to partner with Washington if the United States is willing to reach out and build these relationships.

If the United States remains committed to “supporting key African states’ progress toward stability, citizen-responsive governance, and self-reliance” (as set out by the State Department’s Africa Bureau), countering Russian influence on the continent is essential.<sup>19</sup> Great power competition is already playing out in Africa and will only increase over the coming years. The United States is starting out on the back foot with reduced tools and influence, but many African states are keen to partner with Washington if the United States is willing to reach out and build those relationships. In an era of constrained resources and interest, prioritization is vital. Some of the states where Russia is most active are not U.S. policy priorities or are so insecure and fragile that U.S. engagement is likely to have little impact. Therefore, the United States should invest in building relationships with those countries in Africa that are vital for regional stability and influence—the focus of this report.

## History of Russia in Africa

**ALTHOUGH RUSSIA MAINTAINED RELATIONSHIPS** with African countries for over a century, Russia’s engagement (initially as the Soviet Union) on the continent began in earnest in the 1950s. Its engagement grew throughout the 1960s, when the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) focused on supporting African countries emerging from decades of European colonialism with both economic and military assistance.<sup>20</sup> Soviet engagement in Africa peaked in the 1970s and early 1980s, with vast arms transfers and significant packages of economic support as the Soviet Union tried (with varying degrees of success) to bring African countries into its orbit.<sup>21</sup> In the late 1980s to early 1990s, however, Soviet influence in Africa declined, driven by internal Russian challenges, cooling Cold War tensions, and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>22</sup>

Russia’s revitalized interest in Africa began in the mid-2000s under Vladimir Putin’s first presidency. Russia sought to reengage across the continent and initially focused on North Africa and anti-Western regimes, such as Sudan and Zimbabwe.<sup>23</sup> Moscow also viewed regional organizations such as the African Union (AU), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as vehicles through which it might be able to garner support for its multipolar agenda. This reengagement coincided with Moscow’s desire to reassert itself as a great power. After 2014 and Russia’s annexation of Crimea—and the beginning of its isolation from the West—engagement with Africa increased. Russia signed 20 military cooperation agreements with African countries between 2017 and 2020, compared with just seven between 2010 and 2017.<sup>24</sup> The high point of this engagement was the Russia-Africa summit in Sochi in 2019, which 40 African heads of state attended, demonstrating Moscow’s ability to convene almost all of Africa’s leaders.<sup>25</sup>

The 2020s have been dominated by Russian private military company (PMC) activity across Africa—destabilizing countries and undermining Western counterterrorism efforts. Russian PMCs have aided coups in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso and are providing support for the newly installed military juntas in these countries.<sup>26</sup> French troops, present in Mali and Niger for years, were unceremoniously removed from both countries, and in Niger, the United States was forced out of bases that had been crucial to counterterrorism efforts in the area.<sup>27</sup> The UN’s mission to Mali (MINUSMA) was also forced to withdraw after demands from the new government, leaving Russian-linked groups dominant across the Sahel. In the CAR, Sudan, and Mali, Russian PMC activity has also been accompanied by exploitative Russian mining deals.<sup>28</sup>

In the 2020s, Russia also advanced its narrative of “multipolarity.” A truly multipolar system is appealing to many African countries who feel that it might give them a larger voice, but in

reality, “multipolarity” is the vehicle through which Russia is seeking to promote the demise of the liberal international order from which all states largely benefit. For Moscow, “multipolarity” is a convenient, and innocent-sounding, way to describe the alternative world order it is seeking to create rather than a desire to see a truly more equitable world. Russia’s vision is diametrically opposed to the current “rules-based international order” supported by multilateral institutions, such as the UN, in which countries can be held to account for violations of international laws and norms. Instead, Russia is seeking a world order governed by transactional relationships between leaders with little regard for individual human rights.<sup>29</sup> Leaning heavily on its history as a supporter of liberation struggles in Africa, Russia argues that it is a defender of African sovereignty and that a multipolar system, in which Russia has a major role, will better serve African interests than the current system. Given the instability Russia has already caused in the Sahel, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and the CAR, it seems highly unlikely that Africa will be better off under Russia’s vision for a new world order.

## Russia’s Foreign Policy Toward Africa

**RUSSIA’S APPROACH TO AFRICA** is organized around three main objectives: to reassert itself as a global power and promote a multipolar world order that does not obstruct Russia’s interests and actions, to demonstrate Moscow is not isolated on the world stage, and to access resources—natural, military (including port access to the Mediterranean and Red Seas), or financial—where possible.

Moscow’s most recent Foreign Policy Concept, published in March 2023, demonstrates that it sees Africa as a crucial place where it can achieve these foreign policy objectives.<sup>30</sup> The concept gives increased attention to Africa and raises it up the geographical list of priorities—above both Europe and the United States.<sup>31</sup> The section on Africa emphasizes “solidarity” between Russia and Africa in their “desire for a more equitable polycentric world” and the sovereignty and independence of African states, as well as the goals of strengthening Russian-African cooperation in a range of areas, and increasing trade and investment.<sup>32</sup> The concept also advocates for “African Solutions for African Problems,” a phrase coined in the 1990s by a Ghanaian economist and that was likely deliberately chosen by Moscow to resonate in Africa and show Russia’s rhetorical commitment to the principle of foreign noninterference. The importance of Africa to Moscow’s goal of advancing a multipolar world order was also recently emphasized in Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s article leading up to the 2025 Russia-Africa ministerial in Cairo. In this, he described the continent as an “influential centre in a multipolar world” and focused on the importance of African sovereignty and independence.<sup>33</sup>

However, the Russian view of sovereignty is based on the principle of total noninterference in the internal affairs of a state, and focuses on the autonomy of the state, rather than the individual.<sup>34</sup> This framing of sovereignty thus allows leaders to disregard principles such as human rights and political participation and to condemn any criticism of human rights violations as “interference.” Yet Russia’s actions in some African states undermine the rights of states and citizens to determine their own futures (a core tenet of sovereignty) by undermining democracy. Leaked files from a Russian disinformation network known as “The Company” (connected to the Russian intelligence services) lay out Russia’s aims for Africa—clearly stating a desire to undermine “the image of Western countries as reliable political and military partners” in Africa and “reformat the African space, with the creation of a belt of regimes friendly to the Russian Federation.”<sup>35</sup> These documents, although small in number, are some of the clearest indications to date that Russia’s objectives in Africa are entirely self-interested.

The idea of a truly multipolar system appeals to many states in Africa that feel they have been shut out from or disadvantaged by the current international system. When the United Nations was established in 1945, there were just four independent African countries; there are now 54. Despite being the largest voting bloc at the UN, African countries have only three seats on the UN Security Council (UNSC), and they lack the veto power of permanent members.<sup>36</sup> Though Russia benefits from being a permanent member of the small, exclusive UNSC, Moscow is publicly supportive (at least rhetorically) of expanding Security Council membership in order to burnish its credentials as a supporter of the excluded “Global South.”<sup>37</sup> Moscow is also careful with its language when referring to non-Western countries. It uses the phrase “global majority” or “world majority” when talking about non-Western countries—a direct contrast to many Western countries’ use of “Global South.”<sup>38</sup> With this language, Russia aims to signify the importance of the countries of the “global majority”; it also sees itself as part of this grouping, aligning itself with them and against the West.

Russia leans heavily on its history to weave a narrative that portrays Russia as standing in solidarity with African states against the neocolonial liberal West. In Lavrov’s article last year ahead of the Russia-Africa ministerial in Cairo, he reminded Africa of the ties that were forged during their independence struggles, stating that it was the “Soviet Union back then, [that] supported their desire to break free from the shackles of colonial dependence” and that “we have never been involved in the exploitation of the African people.”<sup>39</sup> Even the war in Ukraine is sold as part of a massive struggle against the legacy of Western imperialism.<sup>40</sup> Yet many of Russia’s actions in Africa are exploiting African citizens and seek only to benefit Moscow.

As part of this narrative, Russia also portrays itself as a strong supporter of individual state sovereignty and noninterference in internal affairs. It is content to support postcoup leaders, aging leaders who refuse to leave power, and heavy crackdowns on human rights and free speech.<sup>41</sup> This focus on state sovereignty and noninterference is partly due to Putin’s long-standing fear of Western-inspired “color revolutions,” which he sees as an

existential threat to the survival of the Russian regime.<sup>42</sup> He is fearful that successful revolutions in one part of the world may inspire others, eventually reaching Russia. Moscow, unlike the West, therefore does not demand transparency, elections, or accountability for many of the African countries with which it works.<sup>43</sup> Of course, this approach stands in stark contrast to Russia’s actions in Ukraine, where it *has* interfered in the internal affairs of another country.

When it comes to Ukraine, the 2026 Afrobarometer data shows that most African citizens would prefer their country to stay neutral—a stance broadly reflected in the early UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions in 2022 and 2023.<sup>44</sup> However, of the 22 percent of respondents who picked a side (over remaining neutral), there was a small preference for Russia (14 percent)

over Ukraine (8 percent).<sup>45</sup> This preference for neutrality is also evidenced in many African governments’ approaches to Russia’s war in Ukraine—approaches that likely reflect an inherent distrust of NATO based on its previous engagement in Libya; a desire to avoid being pulled into what many view as a great power competition; and a pragmatic need

to maintain good relations with Russia. The United States and its allies therefore face an uphill battle in convincing African states of the merits of siding with Ukraine over maintaining a neutral stance.

Finally, Russia also uses outreach to Africa to counter its geopolitical isolation. While Russia has mainly turned to the “axis of upheaval”—China, Iran, and North Korea—to economically sustain its war of aggression against Ukraine, a range of other countries across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East have continued to trade with Russia despite a growing network of U.S. and European sanctions.<sup>46</sup> Between 2022 and 2024, the Kremlin earned \$2.5 billion from trade in African gold, which undoubtedly helped to sustain its war effort in Ukraine.<sup>47</sup> Although the economic connections between Russia and Africa are small, the fact that African countries are still willing to trade with Russia helps to mitigate the economic and geopolitical isolation imposed on Moscow by sanctions and other measures, such as its expulsion from the G8. Africa therefore remains a vital region for Russia.

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## Pillars of Russian Engagement in Africa

**WHILE RUSSIA'S MOST VISIBLE** recent engagement in Africa has been security support for military dictatorships and exploitative deals with corrupt governments and elites to access resources, its strategy encompasses a much wider effort to build influence across Africa. Russia knows it cannot compete with bigger economic or security investors in Africa, such as China, Europe, or the United States, to gain influence on the continent. Instead, it is playing to its strengths, offering small-scale and niche security and economic partnerships to support elites, and/or providing “no strings attached” alternatives when Western options dry up. Moscow combines these tangible offers alongside low-cost disinformation campaigns and a range of soft-power tools to promote its alternative world order. By using economic relationships, security relationships (including arms sales), information, and soft power, Russia is building and deepening relationships across the continent.

### Economic Relationships

While Russian trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) with Africa are relatively low, Russian state-owned companies do have a presence in the mining and energy sector across the continent, and nuclear energy deals have become a key plank of Moscow's economic relationships with many African countries. This approach allows Russia to access resources for its own enrichment and demonstrates that it still maintains some economic significance, even if many of the agreements remain in name only.

In 2024, Russian trade with Africa totaled \$24.5 billion, significantly lower than EU trade with Africa, which totaled \$355 billion in the same period.<sup>48</sup> Most Russian exports went to Algeria, Egypt, and South Africa.<sup>49</sup> Africa primarily exports agricultural products to Russia, but these exports make up just 0.4 percent of the continent's exports overall.<sup>50</sup> Some countries in Africa (particularly Egypt) are dependent on exports of Russian wheat, which accounts for 30 percent of the continent's grain supplies.<sup>51</sup> Russia would like to increase its level of trade with Africa, but announcements and trade deals signed at summits and other meetings rarely come to fruition.

Russia has mining projects in 10 African countries, and oil and gas projects in an additional 10.<sup>52</sup> It has also signed nuclear cooperation agreements with 20 countries and has agreements to build nuclear power plants in Egypt, Ethiopia, and Nigeria (although the latter has made no progress on construction).<sup>53</sup> These agreements are part of what some have called Russia's “nuclear energy diplomacy,” which is a way for Moscow to generate income from state-owned Rosatom and develop long-lasting relationships with new markets, especially as

EU countries diversify away from Russian energy suppliers.<sup>54</sup> Rosatom is using a “build-own-operate” (BOO) model for many of its projects. Under this model, Rosatom covers 80 to 90 percent of the costs of building the nuclear power plants and offers low-interest long-term repayment plans to host countries while maintaining ownership and operation of the plants for decades.<sup>55</sup> The BOO model is unusual in that the donor country (in this case Russia, via Rosatom) retains ownership, and therefore control, of power plants for the entirety of their operational lives. For the host country, BOO projects are often quicker to implement than traditional models, in part because they do not require large financial investments. However, BOO projects also create long-term dependency on the donor country, reduce host country control over manufacturing, and can reduce the opportunities for skills and technology transfer.<sup>56</sup> Such contracts are also ripe for corruption and elite enrichment, as was the case in South Africa. In Africa, many of the Russian nuclear energy projects have been slow to progress beyond signing agreements, but given the relatively low upfront costs and Africa's increasing energy needs, these deals may continue to proliferate.

Russia does not have the resources to fund large-scale infrastructure projects in Africa, and while trade with the continent may increase, it is unlikely that relationships with African countries will be built solely around economic transactions. Instead, Russia is likely to double down and seek to expand existing economic relationships (especially when they engender some sort of dependence on Moscow) as well as offering niche options (such as nuclear power plants) to key partners.

### Security Relationships

Moscow has traditionally used extensive arms sales to help bind countries to Russia. In the last five years, however, Russian global arms exports have fallen by 64 percent as a result of Russia's war in Ukraine and Moscow's own military needs, (although it should be noted that Russian arms sales are difficult to track as Moscow stopped making the data public after its invasion of Ukraine.)<sup>61</sup> And while Russia remains the largest single supplier of weapons to Africa, providing 21 percent of the continent's weapons, its declining role has created opportunities for other countries such as China and Türkiye to increase their arms exports to Africa.<sup>62</sup> Seventy percent of African armies now operate Chinese armored vehicles, and in 2024, Türkiye was the fourth-biggest arms supplier to West Africa.<sup>63</sup>

With fewer resources, Moscow is taking a more strategic and targeted approach to arms sales. Imports to West Africa have increased significantly over the last 10 years, with imports 100 percent higher in 2020–24 compared with 2015–19, likely reflecting the deteriorating security situation in the region.<sup>64</sup> Much like its approach to some economic relationships, Russia has focused on symbolic security ties between Moscow and African states, signing military cooperation agreements with 43 African countries since 2015.<sup>65</sup>

### Russia and BRICS

The BRIC group was originally conceived in 2001 as a description of a group of emerging markets, but since the inaugural summit in 2009, it has operated more like an intergovernmental organization. The first members of BRICS were Brazil, Russia, India, and China in 2009 (South Africa joined a year later), but there are now 11 members, including Egypt and Ethiopia, encompassing more than a quarter of the world's economies.<sup>57</sup> BRICS was originally focused on improving economic cooperation among the members and reforming international financial institutions, but it is now often seen as a grouping of states frustrated with Western-dominated international economic institutions.<sup>58</sup> Russia sees the bloc as one of the primary counterweights to the West.

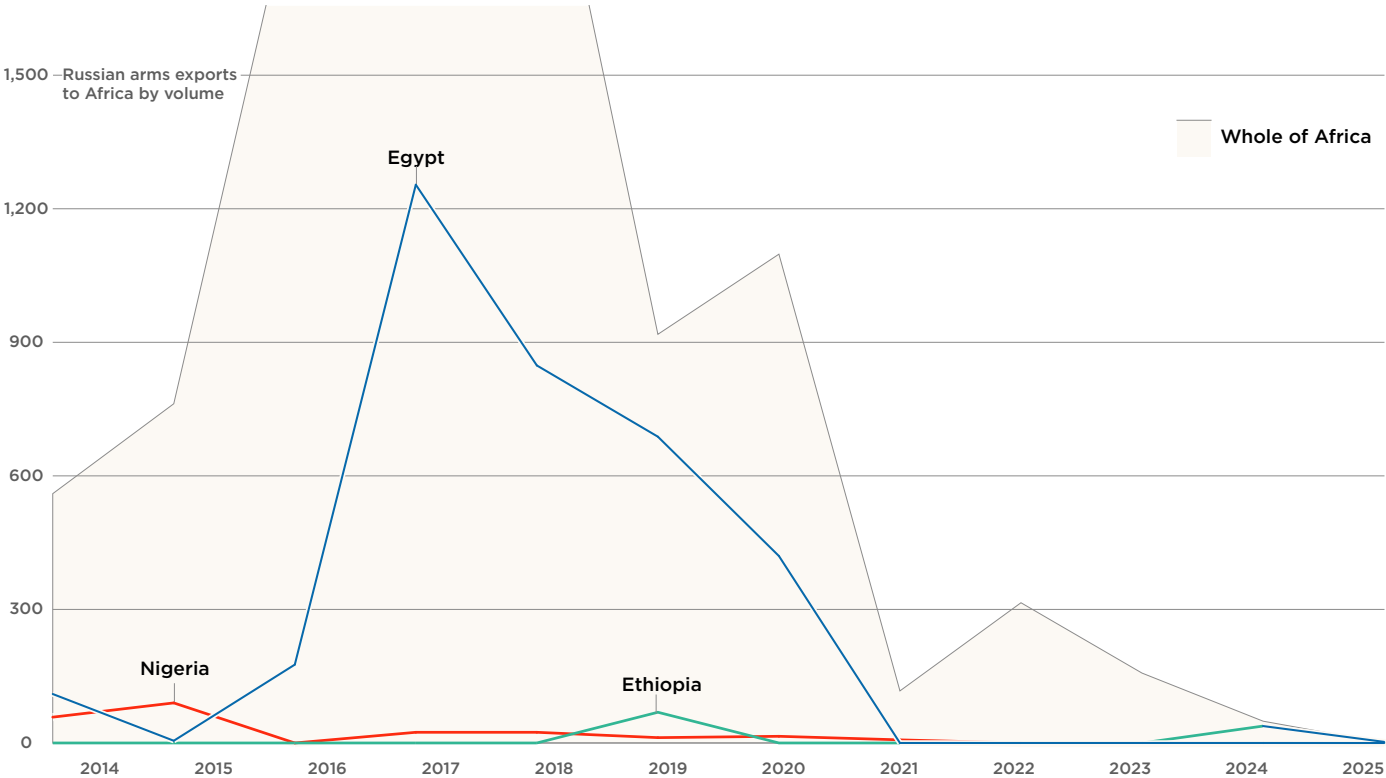
Russia (and China) have pushed for the bloc's expansion to include more countries aligned with their own views. Expansion

carries risks, however, especially if the group takes on an increasingly anti-Western slant and is largely populated by authoritarian regimes. Russia, Iran, and, to a certain extent, China are adversaries of the United States, but many of the other BRICS countries have good relations with the United States and Europe and do not want to jeopardize those relationships if the grouping becomes increasingly anti-Western. Tellingly, Saudi Arabia—a key U.S. ally—has accepted an invitation to join BRICS but has delayed the process of formally joining.

While many BRICS members see the bloc as a way to hedge their bets between the superpowers, Russia has greater ambition for the organization. During the 2024 BRICS summit in Russia, Russian President Vladimir Putin was explicit about seeing the group as a means to create a new multipolar world order that specifically

counters Western hegemony.<sup>59</sup> Russia has also pushed ideas of de-dollarization and alternative payment systems for the bloc. However, while a large amount of intra-bloc trade is carried out in local currencies, it seems unlikely that the dominance of the dollar and the SWIFT payment system will be challenged. Russia's presence in BRICS has also brought challenges since its invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Western sanctions have made trading with Russia more difficult and a less appealing prospect for many states that are worried about U.S. secondary sanctions or losing investment from Western partners. Others argue that Western sanctions against Russia have pushed the BRICS countries closer together.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, BRICS remains an attractive option for African countries looking to expand their economic connections and a good vehicle through which Russia can increase its global influence.

Figure 1: Russian Arms Exports to Africa<sup>66</sup>



Russian arms exports to Africa as a whole, and to Egypt, Ethiopia, and Nigeria have decreased significantly as compared to 2014. There were no arms exports to South Africa during this period.

Rosoboronexport, Russia's state-owned arms export company, also claims that it has entered into contracts with 46 African states—totaling \$4 billion in contracts overall.<sup>67</sup> Many of the military cooperation agreements are opaque: Some seem to be primarily symbolic, whereas others involve agreements around training, weapons supply, support with counterterrorism efforts, and/or negotiations for Russian access to ports and air bases.<sup>68</sup>

While the war in Ukraine continues, it is unlikely that Russia will be able to return to the large-scale arms sales of the past, but strategic, small-scale (and often high-impact) arms transfers and increased cooperation (potentially in the form of military exercises) will continue to be part of the Russian influence toolbox in Africa.

### Information and Media

With traditional options for influence (trade and arms sales) reduced due to constraints on Russia's economy, Moscow has looked for other low-cost, high-impact tools to influence Africa. It has focused particularly on the media and information sector and has flooded social media and news channels across the continent with fake and misleading information. This approach has proved successful in allowing Russia to spread disruption and sow discord across Africa for relatively little cost.

Although RT (the Kremlin-backed Russian news channel) has a relatively small physical presence on the continent, with just one bureau in Algeria, the channel can be viewed in the Maghreb,<sup>b</sup> Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, and a number of other countries via China's StarTimes service.<sup>69</sup> Sputnik (also backed by the Kremlin) is available across large parts of Africa, broadcasts in both English and French, and recently added a service in Amharic to reach more people in Ethiopia.<sup>70</sup> By expanding the reach of existing news channels, Moscow is able to influence large audiences across Africa and shape the narratives that African citizens are hearing on a daily basis.

While there are some excellent African journalists and news outlets, the sector is largely underdeveloped, and most Africans do not have access to reliable and accurate sources of news. Moscow is exploiting this vulnerability to pump out its own narrative. Media organizations in 10 African countries now have formal partnerships with either RT or Sputnik, which means they largely just rebroadcast Russian content.<sup>71</sup> RT has also provided “training” for journalists, reaching over 1,000 journalists across Africa, but this too is focused on indoctrinating African journalists with Russian narratives, which often bear little relation to reality.<sup>72</sup> Russia also pays journalists and media outlets for stories—evidence shows \$600 was paid for an article in Benin and \$10,000 for an article on Libya.<sup>73</sup> The Russian approach is

depriving citizens of reliable news sources, undermining efforts to support local journalism, and reducing the ability of African media outlets to potentially hold governments to account.

Russia has also been successful in spreading harmful narratives online, sponsoring 80 disinformation campaigns across Africa, which targeted 22 countries—almost half of all disinformation campaigns on the continent.<sup>74</sup> It uses a vast network of social media accounts, fake “local” organizations (such as PARADE and GPCI)<sup>c</sup>, and Telegram channels, as well as Russian state-sponsored media and radio communications, to spread false narratives to users.<sup>75</sup> In addition, approximately 4,000 African online news sites—reaching millions of readers—republish content from RT and Sputnik.<sup>76</sup> Networks of influencers and local journalists also promote pro-Kremlin propaganda, including in local languages, thus ensuring that people across Africa are regularly exposed to Russia's message.<sup>77</sup>

The most prominent online outlet for Russian content in Africa and directed at an African audience is African Initiative, a Moscow-based news agency that spreads pro-Kremlin and anti-Western propaganda.<sup>78</sup> Created in September 2023 and operating online, as well as through a Telegram channel, Facebook page, VK account, and two Rutube channels, it has ties to the Russian intelligence services.<sup>79</sup> African Initiative has offices in Burkina Faso and Mali, a correspondent in Niger, and also operates through a localization model whereby it recruits local influencers and journalists to amplify narratives supplied by the channel.<sup>80</sup> Although African Initiative has been most prominent in the Sahel, there is evidence to suggest it paid influencers to promote Russian talking points during the Nigerian “end bad government” protests in 2024, including calling for Russia to “save Nigeria” and saying that the “army is the answer for Nigeria.”<sup>81</sup> African Initiative presents itself as an independent and objective news agency, but its coverage regularly promotes anti-Western narratives, including dangerous health misinformation.<sup>82</sup>

In North Africa, RT Arabic is one of the most popular media outlets in the region, and its YouTube channel has more subscribers than any other RT channel, with social media accounts posting much more frequently than outlets such as Al Jazeera and the BBC.<sup>83</sup> Since the war in Ukraine, RT Arabic has significantly increased its number of followers and has become one of the main ways Russia spreads propaganda about the war in Ukraine in Africa and the Middle East.<sup>84</sup>

Russian engagement in the media space and in spreading online disinformation is low cost but high impact and aims to sow polarization and discord within populations, with the ultimate goal of undermining democratic governments.

c. PARADE (Partenariat Alternatif Russie-Afrique pour le Développement Économique) and GPCI (Groupe Panafricain pour le Commerce et l'Investissement) are fake, Russian-linked “front” organizations designed to spread disinformation and influence narratives in Africa.

b. The Maghreb is a region in Northwest Africa that includes Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia.

**Figure 2: Russian Influence in Africa<sup>85</sup>**



Russia has increased its soft power presence in Africa significantly in the last ten years. There are now 20 Russian Houses across Africa, the Russian Orthodox Church has expanded its presence to 32 countries (up from just one in 2022), and Russian media outlets such as Sputnik and RT are gaining a foothold across Africa through their own offices and distribution and content deals with local media outlets.

### Soft Power

Alongside information operations, Russia seeks to shape public opinion in Africa using soft-power tools such as education, culture, and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Russia also offers African students various educational opportunities in Russia with the aim of building long-lasting ties between countries. Additionally, a network of cultural “Russian Houses” showcase Russian culture (and propaganda) and emphasize ideological alignments between Russia and Africa—often in opposition to what is viewed as the liberal West. Through communication and cultural propaganda, Russia presents itself as a bastion of traditional family values—a message it hopes will resonate in many socially conservative African countries. Russia’s 2023 Foreign Policy Concept references the importance of “protecting traditional spiritual and moral values, and the right to freedom of religion.”<sup>86</sup> Moreover, Russia presents itself as engaged in an existential battle against the liberal forces of the West that promote harmful (as Moscow sees them) human rights and individual freedoms.<sup>87</sup>

Encouraging students to study in Russia is a key part of Moscow’s outreach to Africa. Not only does this approach strengthen informal ties between the countries now, but it also creates a potential cadre of Russian-educated elites who may be favorable to Russia in the years to come. The Russian government claims that 34,000 students from Africa studied in Russia in 2023–24.<sup>88</sup> For comparison, in the 2023–24 academic year, there were 56,780 African students studying at American universities, so the number in Russia is not insignificant.<sup>89</sup> In 2025, Moscow announced it would provide 5,000 fully funded scholarships for African students to study in Russia, with a desire to host up to 500,000 foreign students overall.<sup>90</sup> This is in sharp contrast to the United States, where citizens from 19 African countries can no longer apply for student visas, meaning fewer are building long-lasting ties with the United States.<sup>91</sup>

However, not all these proposed educational opportunities materialize, and Moscow is capitalizing on interest from African citizens to study abroad to recruit students for its war effort

against Ukraine. As many as 1,000 African women have participated in the Alabuga Start educational program, an initiative run by the Russian government that promises a work-study program in the Alabuga Special Economic Zone in Russia but is in fact recruiting women to assemble drones for Russia's war against Ukraine.<sup>92</sup> Recruiters for the Alabuga Start program have visited high schools in South Africa, Kenya, and Uganda to directly appeal to students and teachers to join the program, and the governments of Nigeria and Uganda seem to have promoted the program on official government websites.<sup>93</sup> Additionally, Alabuga Start paid social media influencers to visit the factory and make promotional videos that bear no resemblance to actual conditions.<sup>94</sup> A number of African governments have launched investigations into the recruitment of women to work at Alabuga, and African journalists have attempted to expose the conditions at the factory.<sup>95</sup> But for a continent where many young people are unemployed and where the average salary is significantly lower than what Russia offers, schemes to lure young people to Russia still hold some appeal.

Russian Houses aim to deepen cooperation and understanding between countries and Russia, but in reality they are an arm of the Kremlin's propaganda and intelligence-gathering machine.<sup>107</sup> There are currently around 20 Russian Houses across Africa, and an additional seven were announced in 2024.<sup>108</sup> Through language

education and cultural promotion, which often takes the form of pro-Russian (and often anti-Ukraine) films, photo exhibitions, and other events, Russian Houses are part of Moscow's efforts to shape the narrative around the war in Ukraine and the West's treatment of Russia. The EU has sanctioned Rosstrudnichestvo,<sup>d</sup> the organization that runs most Russian Houses, for its role in promoting pro-Kremlin and anti-Ukraine propaganda.<sup>109</sup> Some Russian Houses are described as "private" and are run by local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or alumni of Russian university programs, but they remain connected to Moscow through Rosstrudnichestvo. Others are run by former mercenaries, including individuals previously involved with the Wagner Group.<sup>110</sup>

Moscow also uses the ROC as a soft-power tool. The ROC has close ties to the Kremlin and receives funding from Russian state-owned companies such as Russian Railways, Rosatom, and Rusal.<sup>111</sup> As an indication of the close links between the Kremlin, the ROC, and the political nature of the ROC's work in Africa, in 2021, the ROC established the Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa, splitting from the long-established Patriarchate of

d. Russia's Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation

## Russia's Efforts to Recruit Africans for the Front Line in Ukraine

Russia has pursued an organized campaign to recruit foreign nationals for its war in Ukraine, including in Africa. Russia exploits socioeconomic vulnerabilities to recruit African nationals through travel agencies, local pro-Russian actors, and co-optation recruitment networks (where former recruits become recruiters) to fight on the front lines in Ukraine.<sup>96</sup> Young people who are seeking higher education, job opportunities, and irregular migration to Europe are targeted online through schemes with fake job offers and promises of education.<sup>97</sup> Recruitment also targets African nationals already studying or working in Russia.

A recent report from INPACT has exposed Moscow's use of travel agencies and mass employment agencies to lure young Africans—often through deceit—to leave their countries, only to find themselves fighting on the front lines of Russia's war in Ukraine.<sup>98</sup> Some travel agencies openly advertise opportunities to join the Russian army, while others offer trips within Russia—which turn out to be deployments to the front lines—all with expedited timelines

for receiving Russian tourist visas. Some agencies are accredited by the Russian authorities directly, and in at least one recruitment example, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) was explicitly mentioned. It is likely that the FSB coordinates all or part of the recruitment networks.<sup>99</sup>

Recruitment campaigns present joining the Russian army as an attractive opportunity, promising cash payments, robust salaries, insurance, and eventual naturalization, but this is often not the reality.<sup>100</sup> Most recruits are unaware that they are being recruited into combat roles; many are deployed to the front lines after only very minimal training and often after having been told they were going to work as guards or receive training for security work.<sup>101</sup> Ukrainian forces that have captured Africans in battle say those soldiers tell of having been rapidly deployed after signing a contract in Cyrillic that they could not understand, and a group of 14 Ghanaians who traveled to Russia in August 2024 after being promised security and agricultural work found that the employment contracts they signed were actually recruitment agreements.<sup>102</sup>

Between 2023 and 2025, at least 1,417 African men signed contracts to enlist in and fight with the Russian army, including 361 from Egypt (the largest contingent), 10 from Ethiopia, 36 from Nigeria, and 32 from South Africa.<sup>103</sup> INPACT's data records the average duration of service for African nationals killed in action as just six months.<sup>104</sup> In some places, local African authorities have also been involved in the recruitment of individuals for the Russian army. A report by Kenya's National Intelligence Service on the recruitment of Kenyan nationals to fight for Russia describes a network of collusion between human trafficking syndicates and rogue state officials. Kenyan airport staff, immigration officers, antinarcotics officers, and officers at the Directorate of Criminal Investigations and National Employment Authority have all allegedly facilitated recruits' travel and worked with staff at the Russian embassy in Nairobi and the Kenyan embassy in Moscow to help recruits get Russian visas.<sup>105</sup> In February 2026, the South African government said it had secured the release of 17 of its citizens who had allegedly been lured to fight for Russia under false pretenses.<sup>106</sup>



Moscow uses the Russian Orthodox Church as a soft-power tool. Pictured here is the Russian Orthodox Church in Midland, Johannesburg. (Getty Images)

Alexandria and All Africa, after the latter’s recognition of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. To lead the church in Africa, the ROC appointed Metropolitan Leonid Gorbachev—a man known as “Prigozhin in a cassock”—who is a vocal supporter of the war in Ukraine.<sup>112</sup> Under his leadership, there has been an increase in visits from the ROC’s headquarters in Russia and broader outreach across Africa, aiming to peel away priests and parishes previously loyal to Alexandria with higher salaries and promises of church construction and rapid promotion.<sup>113</sup> The ROC claims to have expanded its presence in Africa from 4 to 34 countries between 2022 and 2024, and established 350 parishes across 32 countries since 2022.<sup>114</sup> Last year, the ROC announced it intended to create additional “Spiritual Education Centers” across Africa, which will work closely with Russian Houses to further spread pro-Kremlin narratives.<sup>115</sup> The ROC is also involved in recruiting Africans to fight for Russia in Ukraine.<sup>116</sup> The ROC does not appear to be prioritizing large-scale conversion in Africa, but instead is focused on establishing influence (particularly through humanitarian and educational projects) and cultivating local audiences who are more receptive to Russia’s pro-Kremlin, anti-Western propaganda.

## Case Studies

**EGYPT, ETHIOPIA, NIGERIA, AND SOUTH AFRICA** are key regional states in Africa. They have a combined population of over 500 million, make up 34 percent of the continent’s population, and are some of the largest economies in Africa.<sup>117</sup> All four have key roles in regional or international organizations, including BRICS. (Nigeria is the only one not a full member of BRICS.)

These four states are also “swing states”—states that aim to maintain ties with the United States, as well as with Russia and China.<sup>118</sup> Swing states such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Africa are neither exclusively part of overtly Western blocs nor fully aligned with Russia and/or China. Swing states matter most in shaping a potential new world order, and, in Africa, these states are shaping the continent’s approach to that world order. Both Ghana and Kenya could potentially be included in this category as key regional players, but they engage with Russia less than the four chosen.

Thinking about the role these states play in shaping the global order through the swing states framework encourages policy-makers to prioritize their engagement with states that have the most impact. The United States cannot engage everywhere in Africa and needs to make strategic choices about where to deploy finite resources. The swing states approach offers a framework to identify countries that will likely yield the most significant return on engagement.

The four states chosen have different historical and current relationships with Russia. Ethiopia and South Africa had very close relationships with the Soviet Union for many years. Egypt's historical relationship with the Soviet Union and Russia has waxed and waned. While Nigeria's relationship with Russia lacks substantial formal cooperation, the country has been subject to widespread Russian disinformation campaigns that are shaping narratives and seizing on existing fractures within society. Russia's current approach to each country is different too. With limited resources, Moscow has identified niche areas for cooperation with each state; coupled with extensive disinformation campaigns and soft-power tools, Russia acts as a spoiler and disruptor, even in more stable and established states—realizing outsized benefits in terms of influence in Africa. Each case therefore offers an insight into the Russian approach and the factors that influence its success or failure.

With limited resources, Moscow has identified niche areas for cooperation with each state; coupled with extensive disinformation campaigns and soft-power tools, Russia acts as a spoiler and disruptor, even in more stable and established states—realizing outsized benefits in terms of influence in Africa.

The case studies examine each country's history of engagement with Russia, the pillars of Russian engagement—economic relationships, security relationships, information and media, and soft power—and what the outlook for each relationship might be in the coming years.

## Egypt

Over the years, Egypt has sought to balance its relationship with Russia and the United States and has largely viewed Russia as a pragmatic alternative when it cannot access support from Western partners. Although Egypt is a key U.S. ally, Cairo retains a close economic relationship with Moscow—in part sustained by Egypt's dependence on Russia for wheat imports. The El Dabaa nuclear power plant deal (in which Russia is building a power plant in Egypt) has further deepened the economic relationship between the two countries. While security cooperation between Moscow and Cairo has waned in recent years, deep educational ties and an information space sympathetic to Russian views has helped maintain close people-to-people links between populations.

**History.** Prior to Egypt becoming a republic in 1953, its engagement with the Soviet Union was minimal and largely symbolic.

The first substantial collaboration between Egypt and the USSR was the 1955 Czechoslovakia Arms Deal.<sup>119</sup> This deal provided \$83 million of Soviet weaponry to Egypt and significantly upset the balance of power in the Middle East—threatening Western interests and giving the USSR an entry point to the region. Moscow also supplied Egypt with tanks, aircraft, and missiles for the Six Day War against Israel in 1967.<sup>120</sup> Despite the large amount of Soviet funding and arms provided to Egypt during Gamal Abdel Nasser's tenure as president, Cairo nominally maintained a position of nonalignment during the Cold War, wanting to counter and resist domination from both the United States and the USSR.

In the 1970s, Egypt began to move away from Moscow. As détente became the dominant Cold War policy, the USSR—wary of inflaming tensions between Israel and its Arab neighbors—refused to increase funding and military aid for Cairo in 1972.<sup>121</sup> As the Egyptian-Soviet relationship wavered, the Egypt-U.S. relationship strengthened.<sup>122</sup> The 1978 Camp David Accords, which ended decades of conflict between Israel and Egypt, unleashed a flow of American aid to Egypt—including \$1 billion in U.S. economic aid—and ensured that Washington, rather than Moscow, became Egypt's primary arms supplier.<sup>123</sup>

During the 1980s and early 1990s, Cairo prioritized maintaining a close relationship with the United States. President Hosni Mubarak's first visit to Moscow was not until 1997, when he signed the Russian-Egyptian Political Declaration affirming a joint commitment to the creation of a multipolar world.<sup>124</sup> Over 10 years later, in 2009, Moscow and Cairo signed the Treaty of Strategic Partnership, which outlined a desire to increase trade, explore a free trade zone in Egypt, and reinforce military-technical cooperation.<sup>125</sup> When Mubarak was overthrown in February 2011, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev stated Moscow's hopes for a restored democratic government in Egypt and a continued strategic partnership.<sup>126</sup> Yet Mohamed Morsi, Mubarak's short-lived successor, failed to secure a \$2 billion loan from Moscow.<sup>127</sup>

Abdel Fattah el-Sisi began his presidency with a desire to cultivate a close relationship with Russia, making a point to visit Russia twice during his first year in office.<sup>128</sup> Following the U.S. decision to reduce arms transfers to Egypt after Sisi's crackdown on opposition protesters, Egypt turned to Russia, securing a \$3.5 billion arms deal for the purchase of Russian fighter jets, helicopters, and antiballistic missile systems in September 2014.<sup>129</sup> While Moscow did not aspire to replace the United States as Egypt's principal ally, it did want to increase trust within the Arab world, which had been badly damaged by Russia's support for Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria.

The late 2010s saw a flurry of deals signed between Moscow and Cairo covering nuclear power plant development, base access, and a Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Cooperation Agreement that aimed to strengthen cooperation between both countries in the political, security, economic,

technical, and cultural fields.<sup>130</sup> This period also saw an increase in bilateral trade, and in 2019, Russia was the third-largest exporter to Egypt behind China and Saudi Arabia.<sup>131</sup> Arms sales also continued with a 2019 deal to buy \$1.5 billion worth of military jets from Russia.<sup>132</sup>

**Economic relationship.** The economic relationship between Egypt and Russia remains strong. Trade between the two increased by 30 percent in 2024 and this is expected to increase in the coming years.<sup>133</sup> More than 72 million Egyptians rely on government-subsidized bread, and Egypt is dependent on imported wheat—including large amounts of Russian wheat—to meet demand.<sup>134</sup> Cairo sees the provision of subsidized bread as a matter of national security and regime stability, fearing a repeat of the so-called bread riots in 1977.<sup>135</sup> Before Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the majority of Egyptian wheat imports came from both Russia and Ukraine, and while Egypt has since diversified its suppliers, Russia still provides 50 percent of Egyptian wheat.<sup>136</sup> In return, Russia is a large importer of Egyptian consumer goods and Egypt is Russia's leading trade partner on the continent.<sup>137</sup> Cairo plans to create a Russian Industrial Zone (RIZ) within the Suez Canal Economic Zone—set to be operational in 2030—which will give Russia greater (and preferential) access to African markets, as goods produced in the RIZ will be sold in Egypt on the same terms as local goods.<sup>138</sup>

A key pillar of Russia and Egypt's economic relationship is the development of a nuclear power plant at El Dabaa—financed, built, and operated by Russian state-owned conglomerate Rosatom. The plant will provide around 10 percent of Egypt's energy needs and produce electricity for 20 million people.<sup>139</sup> A Russian loan will cover \$25 million of the \$30 million construction cost, with a 3 percent interest rate and a repayment term of 22 years.<sup>140</sup> The power plant is being constructed under a BOO model, which means Rosatom (and therefore Russia) will have a role in operating the plant and will receive revenue from the electricity generated and sold to Egyptian citizens.<sup>141</sup> Presidents Sisi and Putin attended a concrete-pouring ceremony in January 2023, and the power plant should become operational in 2028.<sup>142</sup>

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The development of the El Dabaa power plant binds Cairo and Moscow together for many decades to come, but with Rosatom retaining so much control over the plant—even once it is operational—Cairo will be at the mercy of Russian whims over the provision of fuel rods and their disposal.

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Both countries benefit from the strong economic relationship, which may deepen when the RIZ comes online in a few years. Egypt will likely remain dependent on Russian wheat to meet its domestic needs, although Cairo may look to diversify its

supply and increase wheat imports from Kyiv should the war in Ukraine end. The development of the El Dabaa power plant binds Cairo and Moscow together for many decades to come, but with Rosatom retaining so much control over the plant—even once it is operational—Cairo will be at the mercy of Russian whims over the provision of fuel rods and their disposal. This is a risky arrangement for Cairo, but with a high (and growing) demand for energy and no other offers (particularly with such generous financing and potential opportunities for patronage if the infamous Russia–South Africa nuclear deal is anything to go by), Egypt may have felt it had little choice but to go with the Russian proposal.

**Security relationship.** Despite the signing of a Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Cooperation Agreement between Russia and Egypt in 2018, the security relationship between the two has declined in recent years. Arms sales have slowed considerably since 2017 and there have been no arms exports from Russia to Egypt since 2021.<sup>143</sup> The United States remains a major arms exporter to Egypt, but as U.S. presidents over the last decade have regularly turned American military packages off due to Egyptian human rights violations, Cairo has looked for other security partners. Egypt has conducted military exercises with a range of partners, including the United States, Russia, and China, and in recent years has turned to European countries for arms.<sup>144</sup> But Cairo seems keen to remain on the United States' side and canceled plans to buy Russian Su-35 fighter jets in 2021/22 when threatened with American sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).<sup>145</sup>

**Information and media.** Moscow is also seeking to deepen its influence in the information space in Egypt, and its efforts have largely gone unchecked by Cairo. Russian outlets such as RT Arabic and Sputnik are popular in Egypt, and some local Egyptian outlets have arrangements with the Russian outlets to promote their content.<sup>146</sup> In June 2023, when Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov met Sisi, the Egyptian General Intelligence Service instructed Egyptian media outlets to use Russia's narrative regarding the war in Ukraine and to refer people to RT Arabic and Sputnik as primary sources of information when reporting on Lavrov's visit.<sup>147</sup> Both RT and Sputnik are Kremlin-affiliated and known to spread anti-Western propaganda. Since Egyptian media is consumed widely outside the country, by influencing Egyptian outlets Russia can spread its narratives into the wider Middle East and North Africa. Unlike in Europe or the United States, Egyptian authorities have not reduced Sputnik or RT Arabic's ability to operate, allowing them to spread Kremlin propaganda and disinformation unchecked.

**Soft power.** Russia and Egypt maintain close cultural and educational ties between their populations. Branches of Russian

universities are planning satellite campuses in Egypt (particularly in the fields of nuclear science and medicine), and around 23,000 Egyptian students studied in Russia in 2024.<sup>148</sup> However, not all programs advertised in Egypt (and elsewhere) are educational. Egyptian students have been sent to the front line in Ukraine, having been either persuaded or forced by Russian authorities to abandon their studies or deliberately lured to Russia with the promise of a decent salary and eventual Russian citizenship.<sup>149</sup> In 2025, this issue became such a risk that the Egyptian government introduced new security checks for any men of military age wishing to travel to Russia or Ukraine.<sup>150</sup>

Russian tourism to Egypt has also been a key part of the two countries' relationship, especially under Putin. Egypt remains the most popular destination for Russian tourists, with over one million visiting the country each year.<sup>151</sup> Direct flights between Russia and the Egyptian resort of Sharm El Sheikh resumed in 2021 after a six-year pause due to a terrorist attack in 2015 that targeted a Russian plane, and Moscow plans to open a Russian consulate at the resort to support the growing number of tourists.<sup>152</sup> While a number of countries continue to restrict access for Russian tourists as a result of the war in Ukraine, Egypt remains an attractive option for Russians due to good weather and plentiful flight connections. Tourism represents around 10 percent of Egypt's gross domestic product (GDP) and is therefore a vital source of income for the country. Any decrease in Russian visitors would have a significant negative impact on the economy.<sup>153</sup>

**Outlook.** Egypt and Russia are likely to continue to maintain a close but pragmatic relationship over the next five years. Moscow will want to prioritize a relationship with Egypt to maintain an additional access point (beyond Syria and Libya) to the Middle East and North Africa. Egypt is an obvious choice given its size, relative stability, significant economy, and the long history between the two countries. Furthermore, Sisi and Putin share a similar distaste for the Western-dominated international system, and notably, Cairo was chosen as the location for the Second Ministerial Conference of the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum in December 2025.

Despite this relatively close relationship, Cairo has demonstrated that there are limits to its partnership with Moscow and continues to hedge between Russia and the West. Egypt voted to condemn Russia's aggression in Ukraine in the UNGA resolutions in 2022 and 2023 and is increasingly looking to European options for arms sales rather than turning to Russia. Russia remains unable to compete with China when it comes to large-scale infrastructure investment, and notably, the new Egyptian administrative capital is being built by the state-owned China State Construction Engineering Corporation, part of the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>154</sup> Furthermore, Egypt's dependence on the United States for economic and humanitarian aid is too

Despite this relatively close relationship, Cairo has demonstrated that there are limits to its partnership with Moscow and continues to hedge between Russia and the West.

substantial for Cairo to exclusively partner with Moscow. Mirroring the approach of their government, many Egyptians view Russians as a good friend in times of crisis but maintain a dislike for Russia's actions in Ukraine.<sup>155</sup>

### Ethiopia

Low-level trade, and security cooperation largely sustains the Ethiopia-Russia relationship, but it is also supported by ideological alignment about the world order and the fact that both countries benefit from a partnership that shows they are not entirely geopolitically isolated. In September 2025, Putin described Ethiopia as a "long-time, trusted friend in Africa," recognizing the value that a closer relationship with Ethiopia could provide to Moscow as a large and influential country on the continent.<sup>156</sup> Ethiopia is an interesting case given the deep and long history between Addis Ababa and Moscow, particularly during Ethiopia's Communist period. Had this history been more positive, it might have led to a long and stable relationship with Russia; instead, a more pragmatic relationship has developed, ebbing and flowing depending on the needs of each side.

**History.** Russia's history with Ethiopia dates back to the 19th century, but the relationship strengthened during Ethiopia's postindependence period when the Soviet Union became the main backer for Ethiopia's Communist government under the "Derg," which came to power in 1974. Prior to this, the United States had been Ethiopia's main supporter, providing significant military and economic aid, and Addis Ababa's switch in alignment occurred at the height of the Cold War. By 1983, Ethiopia had received over \$2.3 billion in military aid from the Soviet Union, allowing the Ethiopian government to quash rebellions in Eritrea and Tigray.<sup>157</sup> Soviet support waned in the mid to late 1980s, however, as the Soviet Union moved away from Communism and sought to reduce tensions with the West. By 1989, Moscow confirmed that it would end military support for Ethiopia.

During the 1990s, Ethiopia largely leaned back toward the West and became a key ally of Europe and the United States. The United States provided significant economic and humanitarian aid to Ethiopia, and Ethiopia became a key partner in East Africa for the United States in the war on terror. While overall Russian support dwindled during this time, Russia notably did provide planes and pilots to the Ethiopian government during the Ethiopia/Eritrea war in the 1990s.<sup>158</sup>

Ethiopia's deepening relationship with the West fractured in 2020 when conflict in Tigray broke out. The United States imposed sanctions on government officials in September 2022, many of which remain in place, and excluded Ethiopia from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). Development aid from the United States was also restricted, which led to thousands protesting against this decision in Addis Ababa in 2021, with some in the crowd holding posters of Putin and Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping to show their support for other, non-Western world leaders.<sup>159</sup> Although Russia did not provide substantial material support to the Ethiopian government during the war in Tigray, Moscow refused to condemn Ethiopia's actions in Tigray and used its position on the UN Security Council to block statements about abuses carried out by Ethiopian forces.<sup>160</sup>

**Economic relationship.** Trade between Russia and Ethiopia mainly consists of low levels of trade in raw materials, but it is increasing; the Russian government claims that trade increased by almost 50 percent between 2024 and 2025.<sup>161</sup> In 2019, the two countries signed an agreement for the planning and construction of a nuclear power plant.<sup>162</sup> Like in Egypt, Russia will finance the proposed power plant under a BOO model. In Ethiopia's case, Russia will finance up to 90 percent of the project, with Ethiopia paying back the funds over 25 years at a 3 percent interest rate.<sup>163</sup> Despite the slow pace of development (after six years, work has only just moved into the implementation stage), the BOO model is attractive for Addis Ababa as it lacks the capital for such a large infrastructure project. The model also gives Russia an advantage both in terms of a long-term reliable source of income from loan repayments and significant influence over Ethiopia's energy sector.<sup>164</sup>

Ethiopia was a surprising candidate for membership when it joined BRICS in 2023. It is the poorest and least developed of the bloc's members and has been beset with financial crises over the last few years. Joining BRICS offered relatively limited economic benefits to Addis Ababa but does allow it to access loans and financing through the New Development Bank (NDB). However, many saw Ethiopia's ascension to BRICS as a way for Addis Ababa to revitalize its image on the world stage after the Tigrayan war.<sup>165</sup> Ethiopia's membership also demonstrates that the group is beginning to transition from one comprising the largest developing economies to an anti-Western club, with many members—Russia leading the charge—seeing it as a potential alternative to the Western-dominated global financial system. The expansion of BRICS members benefits Russia too, allowing it to demonstrate that it is not entirely isolated and that despite its invasion of Ukraine there are still countries willing to join a group that it leads, alongside China, including large and influential regional states such as Ethiopia.

**Security relationship.** Security cooperation remains a core pillar of Russia's relationship with Ethiopia. In 2018, Moscow and Addis Ababa signed a security agreement focused on counterterrorism, antipiracy, and peacekeeping.<sup>166</sup> In 2019, Ethiopian army officers received naval training in Russia, and in 2021, the two countries signed a military cooperation agreement allowing Russia to provide technical assistance to the Ethiopian armed forces.<sup>167</sup> While the overall level of arms sales from Russia to Ethiopia has slowed in recent years, in 2026, Ethiopia received six light combat aircraft and one Orion combat drone.<sup>168</sup> Security cooperation with Russia has increased in part due to the reduction of Western support (as a result of human rights violations during the Tigrayan war), and Moscow may be taking advantage of a failed deal with the French to revamp the Ethiopian navy—demonstrating its ability to fill gaps when Western states retreat.<sup>169</sup>

Ethiopia and Russia both share a desire to gain access to the Red Sea. Ethiopia is landlocked and relies heavily on the port in Djibouti for sea-based trade, and Russia wants access to increase its trade and power projection options in the Middle East and Africa. In January 2024, Ethiopia signed a controversial memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Somaliland that broadly (the exact details remain unclear) gives Addis Ababa access to a strip of Somaliland coastline and the ability to establish a naval base on the coast in return for recognition of Somaliland statehood.<sup>170</sup> The signing of this MOU threatens to upset the delicate balance of power in the Horn of Africa, and while there has been little progress on implementation, Addis Ababa does not seem willing to back down from its commitments either. Russia's

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security cooperation with Ethiopia has focused on cooperation with the Ethiopian navy despite Ethiopia's landlocked status, suggesting that Moscow may be positioning itself to benefit should Ethiopia eventually secure Red Sea access. Somalia, Eritrea, and Sudan offer better options for a Russian base in the region, and Moscow is also seeking to deepen security relationships with all three, while being wary not to upset the fragile regional balance.

**Information and media.** While Ethiopia and Russia's current relationship is anchored by their security relationship and deepening economic engagement, Moscow still uses its other influence tools to a lesser extent in Ethiopia. Sputnik, the Russian state-owned media company, opened its first editorial center in

Africa in Addis Ababa in February 2025.<sup>171</sup> This center demonstrates Moscow's desire to influence information and media across the continent. The event held to mark the opening was attended by high-profile guests, including the speaker of the Russian Federation Council, who emphasized in her remarks the "formation of a truly fair multipolar world order, in which the interests of African countries will be fully taken into account."<sup>172</sup>

**Soft power.** There is an active Russian House in Addis Ababa, which hosts cultural and educational activities throughout the year.<sup>173</sup> And although relatively few Ethiopian students are studying in Russia, Moscow is seeking to expand educational opportunities and offered an additional 55 scholarships (on top of an existing 100) for the 2026 academic year.<sup>174</sup> The ROC has also been trying to build connections with the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church through joint activities and visits.<sup>175</sup> Although the ROC and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (and the Coptic Church) do not belong to the same branch of Christianity, Russia has emphasized shared Christian moral values and the defense of these values against "liberal ideology" in an effort to establish a relationship between the two churches.<sup>176</sup> In 2018, the two churches established a Commission for Dialogue between the ROC and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, formalizing their relationship.<sup>177</sup> Despite their different theological positions, the ROC has sought the support of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in pushing back against criticism of the ROC and in opposing the separation of the Ukrainian Russian Orthodox congregation from the ROC.<sup>178</sup>

**Outlook.** In January 2026, the Russian ambassador to Ethiopia described 2025 as a "breakthrough year," highlighting the increase in trade between the two countries, progress on the nuclear power plant, and a fivefold increase in the number of Ethiopian students taking up scholarships in Russia over the previous six years.<sup>179</sup> It is likely that the relationship between the two countries will continue to deepen, particularly on the economic side with the nuclear power plant agreement as a flagship project.

While the war with Tigray formally ended in 2022, Ethiopia remains somewhat geopolitically isolated and locked out of the African Growth and Opportunity Act. Although humanitarian (and some development) aid from the EU and the United States resumed shortly after the war ended, subsequent cuts to U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funds for Ethiopia have had a significant impact. While the West has a strong desire to counter Russian and Chinese influence in Ethiopia, and in the Horn of Africa more generally, the importance of maintaining a principled stance on human rights and governance restricts the amount of support it can provide to Ethiopia. The U.S. strategy in Africa remains unclear, and while a focus on critical minerals may bode well for Ethiopia with its

large reserves of lithium and potash, private investment from U.S. firms will likely not be enough to bring Ethiopia firmly into the U.S. orbit.

The reduction in Western support for long-term development is contributing to Addis Ababa's desire to look for alternative partners, and increased partnership with Russia offers both states opportunities for greater regional influence and reduced international isolation. And if Ethiopia's relationships with its neighbors—Egypt, Eritrea, and Somalia—continue to worsen, Addis Ababa may look to Moscow for increased support as a counterweight to the Western support provided to its neighbors. Finally, Ethiopia has offered to host the third Russia-Africa summit sometime in 2026—indicating a willingness to make a public declaration of its association with Russia.<sup>180</sup>

## Nigeria

Nigeria's engagement with Russia matters less in terms of its levels of economic and security cooperation (which are relatively low) but because Nigeria is a huge prize for Moscow in West Africa (and on the continent as a whole) and it is increasingly vulnerable to Russian influence given Russia's expanding presence in the neighboring Sahel. In Nigeria, Russia is not focusing on security and economic engagement, but is instead dominating the information and media space in an attempt to sow discord and discontent with the government, which it can then capitalize on.

**History.** Nigeria and Russia do not share a long history of close engagement. The USSR's first engagement with Nigeria was providing military and political assistance to the government during the Nigerian civil war from 1967–70. This support included fighter jets, artillery, and large amounts of small arms and light weapons, accompanied by military trainers and strategists. At the time, many in Nigeria felt betrayed by the lack of support from the United States and Europe in its struggle to defeat the Biafran separatists.<sup>181</sup> Soviet support was welcomed, and many saw it as decisive in the government's victory over Biafra. The Soviet Union's engagement in the Nigerian civil war was also viewed as a victory for the USSR in establishing greater influence in postindependence Africa, but it had little additional engagement with Nigeria in the years that followed.<sup>182</sup>

China became Nigeria's partner of choice during its postindependence, military dictatorship period, having few other options due to its isolation from the West. With the end of Nigeria's military dictatorship in 1999, there was a flurry of offers from Russia to invest in the new democracy but many of these failed to materialize, primarily due to Russia's inability to finance projects.<sup>183</sup> Instead, Nigeria deepened its relationship with China, which provided loans (albeit not always at favorable rates) and infrastructure expertise to build roads, railways, and transport hubs. During this time, Nigeria also had substantial support from

the United States and Europe, with U.S. aid to Nigeria reaching \$98 million in 2001.<sup>184</sup>

Russia's reengagement with Nigeria began in 2001 when, during a visit to Moscow, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo signed a partnership agreement, leading to a limited set of bilateral programs and cooperation between the two countries.<sup>185</sup> This was followed by a visit from Medvedev in 2009—the first visit of a Russian president to the country. Russia and Nigeria signed military cooperation agreements in 2017 and 2021, the latter establishing that the Russian armed forces would provide training and equipment for the Nigerian armed forces.<sup>186</sup>

Although Russia and Nigeria do not have a long history of a formal bilateral relationship, people-to-people connections between the two countries have been strong for many years. There is a long history of Nigerian students studying in Russia (in the Soviet era, many Nigerian students accepted nuclear science scholarships to Russia), and many of the current Nigerian elite completed their education in Moscow—creating long-lasting connections and a potentially friendly disposition toward Russia.

**Economic relationship.** Russia has a limited economic relationship with Nigeria, and Russian trade and investment in Nigeria is low. The UK is the dominant investor in Nigeria, and China is the main supplier of cheap goods in the country. Even in the energy space, often a fruitful area for Russia in Africa, cooperation is limited. In 2009, Gazprom—the Russian state-owned gas company—signed a deal to invest \$2.5 billion in Nigeria's natural gas supplies and to build pipelines, refineries, and gas power stations around the country.<sup>187</sup> Over a decade later, there is little to show for any of this investment and Gazprom is currently not thought to be operating in Nigeria.<sup>188</sup> In 2025, Gazprom invited Pakistan to coinvest in the Nigerian oil and gas fields owned by the company, perhaps indicating that Russia lacks the resources needed to move this project forward.<sup>189</sup> Like many other sub-Saharan countries, Nigeria signed a deal in 2019 with Rosatom to develop a nuclear power plant in the country, eight years after initial discussions of the project in 2011.<sup>190</sup> With little evidence of any subsequent progress, this project looks set to be symbolic for the time being.

**Security relationship.** Nigeria's security relationship with Russia has increased over the last 10 years, but Abuja continues to look toward the West, and particularly the United States, for close security cooperation. A 2017 military cooperation agreement with Russia focused on training in Russian military educational institutions for Nigerian servicemen and the sharing of counterterrorism and counterpiracy knowledge between the two countries.<sup>191</sup> This was followed in 2021 with an agreement that provided a legal framework for Russia to sell military equipment and provide training to Nigeria.<sup>192</sup> Significant arms sales have sometimes accompanied these agreements and in 2017,

Nigeria reportedly bought 12 Su-30 fighter jets from Russia and received a delivery of attack helicopters.<sup>193</sup> Despite this growing cooperation with Russia, the Nigerian government is explicit that it does not see these agreements as prohibiting the development of partnerships with other countries (particularly the United States, from which Nigeria receives substantial military equipment and support) but instead allows Abuja to diversify its weapons suppliers.<sup>194</sup>

**Information and media.** Of all the pillars, Russia's influence is most prevalent, although less obvious, in Nigeria's information space. Through social media platforms, websites, and TV stations, Russia can spread disinformation quickly and effectively at very little cost and is winning the battle for influence in large parts of the country.<sup>195</sup> Russian organizations such as African Initiative (which has ties to the Russian intelligence service) recruit and pay influencers and journalists in Nigeria to produce content aligned with Russian talking points, including in local languages, reaching large numbers of people over TikTok, Instagram, and radio.<sup>196</sup> During protests in northern Nigeria in 2024, some protesters were seen waving Russian flags, influenced by messages online that said the Russian flag represented freedom and the power of the military.<sup>197</sup> Russia is also offering Nigerian journalists funded trips to Moscow for “training,” as it does elsewhere on the continent.<sup>198</sup> This is often an appealing prospect for some journalists when Western funding for training has declined significantly.

Efforts to combat the spread of disinformation in Nigeria are small scale. Local NGOs provide fact-checking services, including in local languages, and work with religious leaders on how to spot disinformation, but they cannot compete with the scale of the Russian propaganda machine. Support from the West

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*Without a concerted effort from both local and international actors, Nigeria stands little chance of reclaiming its information and media space from Russian interference—interference that could pose a direct threat to the country's fragile democracy.*

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is decreasing too—Voice of America's Hausa service ended in June 2025 after 46 years, and other U.S. development funding that previously supported journalists and civil society groups has also declined.<sup>199</sup> This matters because, without a concerted effort from both local and international actors, Nigeria stands little chance of reclaiming its information and media space from Russian interference—interference that could pose a direct threat to the country's fragile democracy.

**Soft power.** Interestingly, and perhaps because its disinformation campaigns seem to have been so effective, Russia is not



Russia is winning the information war in Nigeria, and during protests in 2024, several protestors in the north of the country were seen waving Russian flags—responding to encouragement from Russian-linked influencers online. (Reuters/Stringer)

utilizing soft power tools in Nigeria in the same way as it does in other African states. Despite the long history of educational connections between Nigeria and Russia, fewer Nigerian students are studying in Russia, both because parents are worried about students' safety and because the Nigerian government has stopped funding transport and accommodation for students who receive foreign scholarships.<sup>200</sup> Russia is beginning to offer more cost-free scholarships, which may make Russia a more appealing prospect, especially if Moscow also seeks to capitalize on the fact that it is no longer possible for Nigerian students to get a visa to study in the United States.<sup>201</sup>

**Outlook.** In December 2025, the Russian ambassador to Nigeria outlined his vision for closer relations with Nigeria, as well as with Africa as a whole, focusing on deepening economic and trade ties and revitalizing the Intergovernmental Joint Commission on Economic, Scientific, and Technical Cooperation.<sup>202</sup> Yet there is little evidence that this approach will be backed by concrete actions, and Nigerians are skeptical that Moscow has the funds or the inclination to invest seriously in Nigeria.

Nigeria is also trying to leverage its relationship with the United States on the back of its October 2025 designation as a Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act. This designation caused consternation among the

Nigerian government and general population, many of whom dispute the assertion by President Donald Trump's administration that the conflict in northern Nigeria is solely due to Muslim attacks on Christian communities.<sup>203</sup> Nevertheless, the Nigerian government welcomed U.S. strikes on ISIS targets at the end of 2025 and the deployment of U.S. troops and equipment in February 2026 in the hope that they might usher in a new era of U.S.-Nigeria partnership to address the terrorism and banditry problem in the north of the country.<sup>204</sup>

Nigeria remains open to Russia as an option, especially when it comes to foreign investment, trade, and resource extraction, but Abuja is wary of getting too close to Moscow given the potential geopolitical consequences. Nigeria's approach instead is to hedge, both economically and politically, and to spread risk by maintaining connections with multiple countries. Abuja is also concerned about Russia's actions in the Sahel and the wider consequences for regional stability. The government is particularly irked by what it sees as Moscow's hand behind Mali's, Niger's, and Burkina Faso's decision to pull out of ECOWAS in September 2023 and establish the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). As a founding member of ECOWAS and the host of its headquarters, Nigeria views ECOWAS as a vehicle through which it can demonstrate its influence in West Africa and the wider continent. Losing three states, and while under the Nigerian rotating presidency, was a particular blow for Nigeria.<sup>205</sup>

Russia's activities in the neighboring Sahel region have made Nigeria skeptical of Moscow's motives in attempting to deepen the relationship with Abuja. But Nigeria would be a huge prize for Russia in West Africa. Russia has already shown an appetite

A robust civil society and a preference for Western partners means Russian success in Nigeria is not guaranteed, and there are plenty of opportunities for increased U.S. engagement—if Washington wants to seize them.

and ability to seize on discontent and foment protests, as it did in Nigeria in 2024, and the elections coming up in 2027 give Russia plenty of time to manipulate the information environment and produce a favorable outcome for Moscow. Russian-linked content in Nigeria is promoting a narrative that democracy is not delivering for Nigeria and that a return to military government is preferable.<sup>206</sup> Content shared from across the border in Niger also aims to show that life is “better” since the military came to power.<sup>207</sup> A robust civil society and a preference for Western partners means Russian success in Nigeria is not guaranteed, and there are plenty of opportunities for increased U.S. engagement—if Washington wants to seize them.

## South Africa

While Russia's relationship with South Africa is not defined by large-scale trade or security cooperation, Moscow's close ties to South African elites and the African National Congress (ANC) nonetheless give it considerable influence in the country. Russian disinformation campaigns are prevalent across South Africa, especially during elections, where they often focus on empowering the ANC and close Russian allies, such as Zuma, the former president.

South Africa is a leading voice on the continent, and its approach to Moscow is therefore key for Russia's Africa policy. South Africa and Moscow's shared desire for an alternative world order is apparent through their cooperation in BRICS and the New Development Bank, although South Africa would likely prefer a more rules-based order than the one Russia is promoting. Continuing to engage South Africa through regional and global forums is a key approach for Russia—one that Pretoria is receptive to as it looks to diversify partners around the world.

**History.** The Soviet Union provided significant support for the ANC's antiapartheid struggle during the 1960s–1980s, including providing military training, weapons, and financing.<sup>208</sup> Over

3,000 ANC fighters received training in the Soviet Union during this period, creating long-lasting bonds and affection for Russia among a cadre of South Africans.<sup>209</sup> Due to policy changes in Moscow and the end of the Cold War, Russian funding to the antiapartheid ANC ended in 1991. Russia's then-president, Boris Yeltsin, hosted proapartheid President FW de Klerk for a state visit in 1992, part of an attempt to distance himself from previous Soviet foreign policy.<sup>210</sup>

Engagement between Russia and South Africa was limited during the 1990s and early 2000s. President Nelson Mandela, who became the first democratically elected president in 1994, did not visit Moscow until 1999, when he signed a bilateral declaration that pledged to boost political ties and economic relations between the two countries and laid the foundation for the Treaty of Friendship and Partnership, signed in 2006.<sup>211</sup> In the early 2000s, trade between South Africa and Russia was extremely low as South Africa prioritized Western economic partnerships capable of providing much-needed foreign investment.<sup>212</sup> Nevertheless, Russian companies pursued commercial deals in South Africa, specifically in manganese and vanadium metal mining, building the elite-level links that would come to define the subsequent decades.

Under Zuma, South Africa joined the newly formed BRIC economic bloc in 2010—now with an added “S” for South Africa—giving Pretoria the opportunity to increase trade and engage in high-level agreements. South Africa was not an obvious choice for the bloc given its relatively small economy and high inequality compared with other candidate countries, but Russia strongly endorsed its request to join.

During the early 2010s, Zuma and Putin's relationship grew close, with regular visits from Zuma to Moscow and deepening connections between Russia and the South African security services. The high point of the Zuma-Putin relationship was the signing of a controversial nuclear deal in 2015 between South Africa and Russia's Rosatom, which gave Rosatom the opportunity to build up to eight nuclear power plants in South Africa without any international competition.<sup>213</sup> The deal would have pushed South Africa into debt and enriched Zuma and his associates at the expense of the population. It also made little economic sense for Moscow given the enormous financial outlay, but it bound the two countries together economically and politically. In 2017, South African courts ruled the deal unlawful, precipitating a series of further corruption scandals that led to Zuma's eventual resignation in 2018.

In 2019, when Cyril Ramaphosa assumed the presidency, he inherited a complicated relationship with Russia, as many South Africans were still reeling from what they saw as Russia's state capture of the country due to its dominance across the South African economy and close (often corrupt) relationships with South African politicians.<sup>214</sup> Yet Ramaphosa, rather than distance himself from a country rapidly becoming an international

pariah, instead maintained a close relationship with Russia, including through multiple face-to-face meetings in the first five years of his presidency and appointing his deputy as a special envoy to Russia.<sup>215</sup>

Today, the ANC's nostalgia for Soviet antiapartheid support continues to influence the South Africa–Russia relationship.<sup>216</sup> Yet while South Africa and Russia share historical connections and new commitments through international forums like the BRICS and the New Development Bank, the relationship remains largely symbolic and defined through political and strategic alignment rather than significant economic cooperation.<sup>217</sup>

**Economic relationship.** Trade between Russia and South Africa remains minimal and declining, with Pretoria running a trade deficit with Moscow in 2024.<sup>218</sup> Trade has never been a significant component of the relationship, and even during Zuma's presidency Russia only accounted for 0.4 percent of South African trade.<sup>219</sup> With a capable indigenous defense industry (due to decades-long sanctions and a 17-year UN-imposed arms embargo in response to the apartheid regime), South Africa does not have a large stock of Soviet-era weapons, nor a more recent history of Russian arms transfers.<sup>220</sup> As far back as the 1970s, South Africa could meet 70 percent of its defense needs through local production.<sup>221</sup> And despite budget cuts to South Africa's National Defence Force that resulted in a decline in arms manufacturing, South Africa exports around 50 percent of its locally produced arms to Europe.<sup>222</sup>

**Security relationship.** Instead of arms sales, South Africa maintains a limited security relationship with Russia through joint military exercises. During the most recent exercise in early 2026, Pretoria hosted a naval exercise with BRICS+ members, which included Russia, China, and Iran.<sup>223</sup> Although these joint exercises were part of a regularly scheduled series (the last two were in 2019 and 2023), against a background of heightened geopolitical tension they demonstrate a desire from some BRICS members that the bloc become more than merely an economic grouping. The exercises additionally demonstrate that Russia, China, and Iran are not as isolated as Washington would like them to be. Recognizing the symbolism of the exercises, India declined to participate, perhaps worried that doing so would further imperil their already fragile relationship with Washington. Recent reports have also suggested that Iran was not meant to be part of the exercises, with the South African government launching an investigation into their participation.<sup>224</sup>

**Information and media.** In South Africa, Russia is the leading disinformation actor, with campaigns aimed at bolstering the ANC and pushing anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives.<sup>225</sup> In 2024, during South Africa's national election, Russian online accounts amplified false information regarding election results in an effort to support the MK Party—Zuma's pro-Russian party.<sup>226</sup>

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According to leaked documents from a Russian propaganda network (linked to the Wagner Group), the network budgeted over \$180,000 in May 2024 for their influence activities in South Africa during the election year.<sup>227</sup> Despite evidence of Russian involvement in these campaigns, the Kremlin has denied any wrongdoing—and South African officials have shown little willingness to condemn Russian actions.<sup>228</sup> Russian disinformation in South Africa is exploiting social and political fault lines to polarize the public, particularly during election cycles, promoting authoritarian alternatives, and ultimately undermining South African democracy.<sup>229</sup>

**Soft power.** Despite a long history of cultural and educational exchanges between South Africa and the Soviet Union during the apartheid era, as of March 2026, only around 500 South African students were studying at Russian universities, in part due to the high quality of tertiary education available in South Africa. Russia has attempted to recruit young people in South Africa for its war effort in Ukraine, and South African women were targeted by the Alabuga Start campaign and lured to Russia to work in drone factories, which the government is now investigating.<sup>230</sup> More recently, Zuma's daughter was accused of luring young men to fight for Russia in Ukraine when promised jobs as bodyguards or personal development courses turn out to be cover for deployments to Ukraine.<sup>231</sup>

A Russian House in South Africa promotes educational opportunities and ties between Russian and South African institutions as well as cultural events.<sup>232</sup> Although programmatic details and daily operations of the Russian House are not well documented, its public scholarship program, in collaboration with South Africa's Department of Higher Education and Training, offers South African citizens an opportunity to receive all-expenses-paid higher education in Russia in the fields of science, technology, and innovation.<sup>233</sup> Despite close ideological alignment, South Africa's comparatively developed civil society and educational sector have limited Moscow's ability to advance the kind of cultural agenda it has pursued more successfully elsewhere on the continent.

**Outlook.** Despite the lack of substance to the Russia–South Africa relationship, shared history and close ideological alignment will likely help sustain the relationship in the near future. Moscow's continued engagement with South African elites,

## Implications of Russia's Closer Ties with Africa

**AS RUSSIA SEEKS TO DEVELOP** closer relationships with Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Africa, its actions have implications both for Africa and for the United States and its allies.

### Islands of Stability in Volatile Regions Are Threatened

Since 2020, conflict in Africa has risen to a 30-year high, a trend that shows no immediate signs of reversing.<sup>243</sup> Russian actions, particularly in the Sahel, Sudan, and Libya, have played a role in exacerbating and prolonging conflict and could also threaten the security and stability of states that neighbor these areas.

The Horn of Africa is a notoriously volatile region, and stability in Ethiopia matters for stability in the rest of the Horn. Ethiopia is surrounded by states experiencing varying levels of conflict or severe underdevelopment, except for Kenya. In the early 2000s, the United States considered Ethiopia an “anchor state” with the potential to help stabilize the rest of the region.<sup>244</sup> The United States retains a base in nearby Djibouti, which has been essential for counterterrorism operations in Somalia and Yemen. Should instability spread in the Horn of Africa, it could threaten the security of the U.S. base and/or reduce the United States’ ability to operate within, and beyond, the region. Russia’s deepening security relationship with Ethiopia, particularly in providing arms and equipment, is creating long-term ties and dependency between the two countries and may reduce the ability of the United States to influence Ethiopian security approaches.

Nigeria also sits at a vulnerable location at the edge of the so-called coup belt. The northern Nigerian border is porous, and many people maintain familial and social ties in neighboring Niger, where Russia is helping to prop up a military junta.<sup>245</sup> In part due to increased instability, the Sahel is fast becoming a locus for terrorist groups, and preventing these groups from spreading deeper into the region is essential not just for Nigeria and West Africa’s stability but for countering terrorism more generally.<sup>246</sup> Despite the lack of substantial security or economic ties between Moscow and Abuja, Russia’s influence over the information space in Nigeria makes the population particularly vulnerable to Russian attempts to sow division and discord. Given Nigeria’s size and position within West Africa, conflict or civil unrest in Nigeria would have significant regional consequences, driving migration, destabilizing neighboring economies, and undermining counterterrorism efforts across the region.

Russian actions in the Sahel, CAR, Libya, and Sudan have all led to greater conflict and human rights abuses. Should islands of stability such as Nigeria and Ethiopia become unstable, increased conflict and instability will drive up displacement, putting more pressure on host countries in Africa and potentially driving

including the current president and ex-President Zuma, will also ensure it retains some level of influence. In 2023, the disgraced Zuma broke away from the ANC to establish his own political party—the MK Party. Since its founding, the party has faced accusations that it received money from the GRU (Russia’s intelligence agency), and that the party was involved in recruiting men to fight for Russia in Ukraine after having promised them jobs with the party.<sup>234</sup> The MK Party currently holds 58 seats, about 15 percent of the total seats in parliament, making it the third-largest party and the ANC’s primary opposition across different regions.<sup>235</sup> In addition, Zuma continues to repeat Moscow talking points relating to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, including that the invasion was a result of NATO’s eastern expansion.<sup>236</sup>

Against this background of elite-level connections, the South African population is increasingly questioning Pretoria’s decision to gravitate toward Russia and BRICS countries rather than the West.<sup>237</sup> Furthermore, as South Africa’s apartheid generation ages out of the ANC, this generational shift will gradually erode Moscow’s Soviet-era leverage.<sup>238</sup> Moscow may therefore need to lean on shared commitments to an alternative world order to maintain a strong relationship with Pretoria.<sup>239</sup>

Furthermore, U.S.–South Africa relations have declined over the past few years, in part because of South Africa’s perceived support of Russia’s war in Ukraine. Relations deteriorated further in 2025 when the United States announced a refugee program for white Afrikaner farmers whom the Trump administration claimed were being killed and discriminated against.<sup>240</sup> Pretoria vehemently denies these accusations and the data does not support such claims.<sup>241</sup> Thirty percent tariffs and the ending of U.S.–South Africa defense cooperation have further soured the relationship, and after the United States did not attend the South African–hosted G20 meeting in 2025, Pretoria announced it was stepping back from the G20 for the duration of the United States’ 2026 presidency.<sup>242</sup> These conditions are ripe for Moscow to take advantage of, but as yet it seems to be holding back, perhaps because it does not have the ability to replace the United States’ practical support to South Africa. Washington’s actions may nonetheless strengthen the appeal of Russia’s alternative world order narrative in Pretoria, potentially deepening ideological alignment between the two countries in the near term.

refugees to make perilous journeys across the Mediterranean to Europe. Already, 45.7 million Africans are displaced—43 percent of the global total of displaced people.<sup>247</sup> The vast majority of Africans displaced by conflict remain within the region, and both Egypt and Ethiopia host vast numbers of refugees: 900,000 in Egypt and one million in Ethiopia, out of a population of 4.72 million.<sup>248</sup> Increased instability on the continent will have significant human and economic consequences in Africa and beyond.

### **U.S. Influence Weakens When Strategically Important States Align with Russia**

All four states covered in this report are strategically important both for Africa and for the United States and Western allies. And all four countries are likely to continue to “hedge” in their relationships with Russia and the West, neither fully aligning with one or the other. As Russia tries to deepen its relationships on the continent, and the United States pulls away, Washington may find it harder to shore up its relationships and encourage these states into closer alignment with the United States. Russia’s efforts in the security and economic space across Africa, combined with the dissemination of a compelling narrative across the Global South, mean the United States will have to work hard to ensure these countries do not shift from a “hedging” position to closer alignment with Moscow.

Egypt occupies a key geostrategic position as the bridge between the Middle East and Africa and maintains close economic and cultural ties with countries in both regions. The Suez Canal, which runs through Egypt, is also a vital trade route, with over 30 percent of global container ship traffic passing through the canal every year.<sup>249</sup> Egypt is a key ally in maintaining peace and stability in the Middle East and in tackling terrorism, piracy, arms smuggling, and illicit trade in the Sinai and Red Sea. Should Cairo begin to lean more toward Moscow, this would have significant consequences for ongoing security cooperation between Egypt and the United States.

The potential for Nigeria to be a regional and continental powerhouse is significant, and its importance is only growing as the Sahel becomes more volatile. Largely, Nigeria maintains a good relationship with the West and sees the United States and other Western allies as its partners of choice. The United Kingdom is the largest foreign investor in Nigeria, and Nigeria is the second-largest export market for U.S. goods (after Egypt).<sup>251</sup> These facts make it hard for Russia to compete with the United States and the West in terms of economic or security cooperation. Instead, Moscow is waging an effective information war by spreading disinformation and a disruptive narrative that seeks to turn citizens against their government and the concept of democracy. Should Moscow’s disinformation campaign succeed



*Exercise Bright Star, a joint exercise between U.S. Central Command and the Egyptian armed forces, has been running since 1980. In 2025, it brought together 40 nations and over 1,800 U.S. military personnel.<sup>250</sup> (Angela Wilcox/U.S. Marine Corps)*

in pulling Nigeria closer to Russia (or pushing it further from the United States), it would potentially damage Washington's relationship with Abuja and limit the scope for deeper U.S.-Nigerian cooperation.

While South Africa's relationship with the United States has deteriorated over the past few years, Pretoria remains an important partner for Washington. In practical terms, South Africa is the continent's most industrialized economy and hosts 80 percent of the world's reserves of platinum group metals, a commodity critical to the U.S. economy and national security because of its use in advanced technologies and defense systems.<sup>252</sup> As one of the continent's largest economies and a thriving democracy, South Africa has an outsized influence on the continent as a whole. Pretoria's deepening relationship with Moscow fuels perceptions that South Africa is siding with authoritarian states and potentially reduces the opportunity costs for other African states that might want to pursue a closer relationship with Moscow.<sup>253</sup>

Ethiopia remains important for regional stability in the Horn of Africa and a partner for the United States and the West in the fight against terrorism in East Africa. The war in Tigray has made relations between Addis Ababa and Washington more challenging due to the large-scale human rights abuses carried out by Ethiopian armed forces. Reductions in humanitarian and development funding as a result of the war, and subsequently the Trump administration's dismantling of USAID, have hit Ethiopia hard and may lead it to look more proactively for other partners. Without the economic resources or investment to match Ethiopia's needs, Russia is unlikely to deliver material benefits, but its anti-Western narrative may become more compelling if Ethiopia's international isolation persists.

### Russia's Influence in Regional Organizations Increases

By focusing its attention on Ethiopia and South Africa, Russia has also sought to increase its influence in key regional institutions in order to amplify its message across the continent.

Ethiopia hosts the African Union and the UN Economic Commission for Africa and plays a significant role in the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, East Africa's regional trade and development bloc. Russia signed an MOU with IGAD in 2023, signaling an intent to deepen its cooperation (and influence) with the organization.<sup>254</sup> Russia has stated that it sees the AU as having an important role in enhancing Africa's global voice and that it views Addis Ababa as an important and symbolic location due to the number of regional organizations based there.<sup>255</sup> South Africa is seen as the voice of Africa in many regional and global organizations such as BRICS, the G20, and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Moscow, by deepening its relationship with Pretoria (especially as South Africa is already ideologically aligned with Russia's quest for a multipolar world),

can use South Africa as a force multiplier for its anti-Western narrative in regional and global organizations. In recent years Russia has focused on regional organizations as a way to increase its influence. In the Sahel, Russia's hand in the breakaway of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS (to create the Alliance of Sahel States) has undermined ECOWAS's security efforts in West Africa and created a regional organization loyal to Moscow and with an explicitly anti-Western stance.

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In November 2025, Russia hosted an "International Conference on Ensuring Food Sovereignty in African Countries" in Addis Ababa.<sup>256</sup> During the conference, the Russian ambassador emphasized that Russia is a reliable partner for African countries and that Russia saw Africa not as "a field for geopolitical confrontation but a space for equal interaction and mutually beneficial cooperation."<sup>257</sup> On the surface, this statement sounds appealing—much of the African continent has been the victim of geopolitical competition for centuries—but there is very little evidence to back it up. Greater engagement with Russia has brought little benefit to most African citizens, and any economic partnerships tend to be exploitative rather than cooperative. Moscow is not interested in the overall economic development of Africa but sees the continent as a location for geopolitical competition and resource extraction.

Although Russia likely did not play a direct role in the decision of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to leave ECOWAS to form the AES, Moscow's engagement with all three states (in supporting their military juntas) gave them an alternative security partner, making the decision to leave ECOWAS somewhat easier. Russia is now the main external supporter of the AES, and in August 2025, Moscow signed a defense cooperation memorandum formalizing defense cooperation between all four countries.<sup>258</sup> While regional states and ECOWAS have underlined their commitment to continue working with the AES states, the creation of the AES fundamentally undermines the ability of West African countries to work collectively to tackle regional security threats, including terrorism, potentially making the region more volatile.

### Russian Interference Threatens African Democracies

Russia's actions in the Sahel have been the most obvious example of its desire to undermine democracy and promote authoritarianism, but it is attempting to sow discord in other places too, all

with the aim of increasing the number of leaders sympathetic to Moscow's views across the continent. Russian disinformation campaigns either overtly support Russian activity (such as in the Sahel or the Central African Republic) to support coups or extend leaders in power, or they form the backbone of Russian engagement in other countries not experiencing conflict. Such campaigns are effective in identifying and exploiting existing fissures within society and can precipitate protests, as in Nigeria.

Of the four countries studied, Nigeria is potentially the most vulnerable to interference in its democratic process due to the prevalence of Russian disinformation campaigns. Nigeria's democracy is fragile and it faces an increasingly complex security environment in the north of the country. The 2023 election results are still subject to challenge in Nigeria's courts, and International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute election observers stated that the election "fell well short of Nigerian citizens' legitimate and reasonable expectations."<sup>259</sup> With elections due next year, many Nigerian NGOs are already worried that Russia will seek to foment disillusionment with democracy and influence the outcome of the election by using Moscow's extensive network of influencers and journalists within the country.

A recent Afrobarometer survey found that while greater support for Russia does not align with less support for democracy, in some African countries, those who believed Russia was a positive influence were more tolerant of military rule as an alternative to democracy.<sup>260</sup> Although the correlation is small, and not widespread across the continent, this is a development to watch given how often Russia has been pushing military rule as an alternative form of governance in many countries, including in Nigeria in the 2024 protests.

### Russia Builds Support for Its Alternative World Order

Russia's engagement with these four key regional states is helping to build support for Moscow's vision of an alternative world order. South Africa has been most outspoken in its desire for a truly multipolar world order, which it hopes would give more power to African voices, but Nigeria has also been a prominent voice for UN Security Council membership expansion, including at the most recent UNGA.<sup>261</sup> Egypt and Ethiopia's

recent membership in BRICS also demonstrates a desire to deepen their engagement with non-Western institutions. But these countries' desire for an alternative world order does not align with Russia's vision. The Russian vision for a new world order may be multipolar (with Russia playing a greater role), but it also deprioritizes human rights and individual freedoms and relegates democracy to just one of many acceptable forms of government. Russia's engagement in the Sahel, DRC, and CAR shows that its vision does not empower African governments or provide greater opportunities for citizens but instead attempts to mold them in Russia's image while extracting resources and profit.

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However, the Russian narrative is powerful and compelling for countries that feel disadvantaged by the current system. Russia is careful with language choices, taps into local grievances and narratives, and uses a variety of methods, including co-opting local influencers and media outlets to convey its message. Disillusionment with the current world order is growing in the Global South, particularly due to a perceived reluctance by the global powers to respect and enforce aspects of the rules-based international order in places such as Gaza and Iran. Without the articulation of a more positive vision or a demonstrable commitment to changing the current world order, the Russian approach will continue to hold some appeal.

Russia's world order will not bring stability or prosperity for Africa or for the Global South. It is disruptive and manipulative, and will take the world back to 19th-century transactionalism. Preventing the Russian message from gaining more of a hold in Africa by working with influential regional swing states as this report identifies will help counter the spread of the Russian narrative, which will in turn hopefully result in more stability overall.

## Conclusion

**RUSSIA IS USING DIFFERENT APPROACHES** to build closer relationships with key African states—to varying degrees of success. Russia’s narrative in Africa focuses on the Soviet Union’s historical support of liberation struggles and the unjustness of the current international order. While this resonates with many African states, narrative alone is not enough for Russia to build strong relationships on the continent. South Africa and Ethiopia both share deep histories with Russia, yet they continue to work with a range of partners, including the United States. Neither country can be viewed as being fully within Russia’s orbit. All four of the countries studied show no desire to fully align with Moscow. In an increasingly multipolar world, they are wisely seeking to “hedge” and spread political risk by working with the West, Russia, and China.<sup>262</sup> They are also pragmatic, often turning to Russia when they cannot get what they need from other, preferred partners. But there remains a strong desire to work with Washington. Although negative perceptions have recently increased, the United States is viewed far more positively than Russia by African citizens (52 percent to 36 percent). If the United States is willing to reach out and build relationships, it will be pushing at an open door in many countries.<sup>263</sup>

Russia has been most successful where it has combined a shared history and/or a close ideological alignment with a substantial economic or security relationship, such as in Egypt or, increasingly, Ethiopia. Increased isolation from the West has also made Russia a more appealing partner for Addis Ababa, and Cairo has at times turned to Moscow when American support has been turned off or reduced.

In South Africa, the relationship floundered due to the absence of substantive ties beyond shared history and the nuclear deal—and ultimately South Africa’s robust checks and balances ended the nuclear deal, leaving Moscow with little to show for its efforts. In Nigeria, a lack of substantive economic or security investment by Russia has made it hard to convert relatively strong cultural and educational ties into something more substantive. Instead, Russia is relying on cheap, low-effort disinformation campaigns, perhaps hoping that the instability in the Sahel will spill over into Nigeria and afford Moscow greater opportunities.

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In the near term, it seems unlikely that any of these countries will become reliable long-term economic or security partners for Russia. But they are also unlikely to fully turn away from Moscow as Russia continues to offer opportunities that cannot be found elsewhere and a narrative that promises a greater voice for Africa. It is a difficult time for Washington to increase engagement with Africa due to the loss of many of its soft-power tools and USAID, but there are still ways to build relations with these key states, both through commercial and trade opportunities as well as cultural and educational routes. The United States has a significant diplomatic presence across Africa (second only to China), and it should utilize this to full effect to promote and protect U.S. interests.

## Recommendations

**ALL IS NOT LOST IN THE AFRICAN SWING STATES.** Many want to partner with the United States and its allies or deepen existing relationships, and there are plenty of relatively low-cost options if the United States wants to engage in countering Russia on the continent. Putting African interests first will be essential, however, and to that end the United States should:

- Develop a comprehensive Africa strategy that sees the potential of the continent, views African countries as partners, and focuses on the security and prosperity of all Africans. While countering Russia should be part of this strategy, it should not be the primary focus; it should instead be an outcome of greater engagement with African countries.
- Focus on countries that are vulnerable to Russian influence and that have a clear desire to work with the West, moving beyond a focus on the Sahel where the United States has little influence. This approach should focus on shoring up countries and building their resilience so they are better able to withstand Russian efforts to influence elites or the population.
- Support civil society and a flourishing media landscape across Africa, but particularly in Nigeria and Ethiopia, to help citizens push back against the false and polarizing narratives that Russia promotes. This support should include training for journalists, partnerships with Western media outlets, and the dissemination of effective fact-checking and counternarrative techniques.
- Partner with leading universities and academic institutions in Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Africa. These partnerships should include joint research projects, opportunities for academic exchanges, and support for students to study in the United States. If student visas continue to be restricted for many African countries, U.S. universities should consider opening outposts, or finding other ways to engage with universities in key sub-Saharan states.
- Continue to work closely with Nigeria to tackle terrorism in the north of the country that builds on but moves beyond the December 2025 strikes and February 2026 deployment of U.S. troops.
- Identify countries in Africa that are vulnerable to Russian interference or countries that have successfully pushed out Russian influence to identify lessons learned that can be applied elsewhere.
- Increase public diplomacy efforts across Africa to ensure better signposting of aid and projects; develop a communication strategy that tells a compelling American story, resonates with African audiences, and directly pushes back against Russian messaging; and improve the cultural offerings from the United States to Africa.

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