



# Russia and Africa's Middle Powers: Influence Beyond the Wagner Group

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## Executive Summary

The growing competitiveness of the international environment increases the relevance of middle or regional powers as actors. In Africa, major extra-continental powers such as Russia are actively courting the continent's leading states, Nigeria and South Africa, but also larger states such as Algeria, Egypt and Ethiopia. Their economic and political relevance makes these 'Big 5' states key stakeholders in African – and by extension global – affairs.

Russia's approach to the five states is in line with Moscow's enduring quest for great power status and to build an anti-Western "multipolar world order". By engaging with Africa's middle powers, Moscow is attempting to lay the foundations for a long-term diplomatic and trade strategy intended to evade international sanctions and avoid becoming a pariah on the global stage.

These engagements also reveal Russia's enduring strengths. Unlike countries such as the Central African Republic or Mali, Russia's engagement with Africa's middle powers is by "traditional means" of commercial, diplomatic, military and regional cooperation. Media and soft power instruments add to Russia's reach.

Despite sanctions and wartime challenges, Russia's engagement with Africa's middle powers diversified in 2022 and 2023. Russian business and diplomacy have attempted to compensate for the relative loss of arms and grain markets by enhancing cooperation on nuclear energy and space science. Many agreements, such as those announced at the July 2023 Russia-Africa Summit, may not come to fruition but signal a resolve to lean on the continent in the long term.

In this competitive environment, proactive engagement with the African middle powers could enhance the position of the West, as well as Ukraine. As Russia's aggression against Ukraine enters a protracted phase, building such long-term connections will be essential.

## Introduction

The Niger crisis and the prospect of Nigeria leading a military intervention by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in that country have brought new attention to the security role played by Africa's larger states in regional affairs. The so-called African Big 5 – Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa – are growing in economic and political importance on the continent.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Some define the "Big 5" as including Morocco rather than Ethiopia, especially when examining the economic weight of these countries. However, the approach here concerns both economic and political influence. Morocco's Western Sahara policy isolates Rabat from the rest of Africa, leading to its withdrawal from the Organisation of African Unity in 1984, which it rejoined only in 2017. Ethiopia is the regional power of the Horn of Africa, which is why it is included here. Angola and Kenya are strong contenders for middle power status but their internal challenges and economic size (smaller than the Big 5 and Morocco) preclude them from this analysis.

These five states accounted for approximately 45 per cent of Africa's population and 57 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP) in 2022.<sup>2</sup> Despite their internal challenges, their size and influence make them regional or middle powers. Middle powers across the globe lack the wide-ranging capabilities and political weight of 'great powers', but they are key constituents of multilateral institutions, brokers of regional affairs and important trade nodes.<sup>3</sup> The relative absence of global actors in Africa, and the limited enforcement capabilities of the African Union (AU) have given the Big 5 a more critical role in African security.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, the international relations of Africa's middle powers deserve scrutiny, especially in relation to the international agenda. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has led global affairs since 2022, sparking discussions everywhere about the future of the global order, including Africa's role in it. Faced with isolation and widespread condemnation for its invasion, Moscow is actively seeking partners throughout the global South, and experiencing relative success in Africa. This report asks how Russia has used its relations with Africa's Big 5 to escape isolation and pursue its global revisionist agenda, and what African and western diplomacy can do to counter Russia's aggressive foreign policy in Africa.

Discussion of Russia's approach to Africa tends to focus on those countries where Moscow has gained wide influence, such as the Central African Republic (CAR), Mali and Libya. These are important cases but they cannot alone account for Russia's "return to Africa". Contemporary Russian foreign policy is premised on a messianic notion of "multipolarity", and its engagements are framed as contributing to other regions becoming self-standing power poles that are inherently antagonistic towards the West. As in the Cold War, the Kremlin defines its foreign policy in global terms. Africa – bolstered by its demographics and vast economic potential – is seen by the Kremlin in hopeful, albeit paternalistic, terms as a force that can gain a larger say in world affairs with Russian help.<sup>5</sup>

Russia's engagement with Africa's middle powers has increased relevance in this global context. First, Russia uses its contacts with these five countries for propaganda purposes to deny that Moscow is isolated and claim that a "multipolar world" order is emerging. Second, facing diplomatic isolation, international sanctions and the loss of European markets, Russia is seeking partners to replace lost markets or to facilitate sanctions evasion.

In approaching this topic, I wish to avoid certain analytical pitfalls encountered when examining Russian-African relations. First, the analytical focus on the Wagner group and its activities in Africa has distorted understanding of Russia's strengths and weaknesses on the continent. Wagner was always dependent on Russia's diplomatic, military and intelligence services in order to operate.<sup>6</sup> The group's activities have given Moscow new scope in Africa

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2 GDP figures are in constant 2015 US dollars, taken from the World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org>, accessed 4 December 2023.

3 See, for instance, Senem Aydın-Düzgit (2023), "Authoritarian middle powers and the liberal order: Turkey's contestation of the EU", *International Affairs*, 99:6, 2319-2337.

4 Theodore Murphy, "Middle powers, big impact: Africa's 'coup belt,' Russia, and the waning global order", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 6 September 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/article/middle-powers-big-impact-africas-coup-belt-russia-and-the-waning-global-order/> (accessed 4 December 2023).

5 Ivan U. Klyszcz, "Messianic multipolarity: Russia's resurrected Africa doctrine", *Riddle*, 6 April 2023, <https://ridl.io/messianic-multipolarity-russia-s-resurrected-africa-doctrine/> (accessed 4 December 2023).

6 See, for instance, Ivan U. Klyszcz, "Quel rôle pour les services de renseignement russes en Afrique ?" [What role do Russia's intelligence services play in Russia's engagements with Africa?], *Le Rubicon*, 2 June 2023, <https://lerubicon.org/quel-role-pour-les-services-de-renseignement-russes-en-afrique/> (accessed 4 December 2023).

but have never constituted all of Russia's engagement, which also includes the official and "traditional" presence of commercial, diplomatic and military interests. In other words, the Wagner group is important but only one aspect of Russia's presence in Africa.<sup>7</sup>

Second, it is easy to underestimate Russia's African footprint. While Moscow today lacks the means of economic aid and technical cooperation at the disposal of the Soviet Union, economic indicators can give a skewed image of Russia's presence in Africa. Even though its economy is approximately ten times smaller than the US economy (US\$ 2.2 trillion vs US\$ 25 trillion), Russia's trade with Africa is about 25 percent of US trade (US\$ 17.7 billion vs US\$ 65 billion in 2021). Moreover, Africa's share of Russia's total trade was about 2 per cent in 2021. In comparison, for France, trade with sub-Saharan Africa in 2022 stood at 2 per cent of its total trade.<sup>8</sup> Finally, Russia wants to tap into Africa's demographic and economic dynamism. Despite regional differences and contraction linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, aggregate African annual GDP growth is estimated at approximately 3 per cent in the period 2020 to 2027.<sup>9</sup> While Russia's trade with Europe and North America has diminished in recent years, its trade with Africa nearly doubled between 2013 and 2021, although the value of Russian exports dwarfed that of imports.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Russia's economic footprint has scope in Africa and its impact deserves scrutiny.

In addition to its diplomatic and economic footprint, Moscow has several instruments for pursuing its global goals at its disposal, many of which go against the constitutional order of the countries where they are deployed. Thus, Russia carries out disinformation campaigns, deploys unaccountable mercenary forces (e.g., the Wagner group), backs autocrats and evades sanctions.<sup>11</sup>

## A Glimpse at Russia's Relations with the Big 5 Before 2022

Russia's relations with Africa's middle powers are long-standing and the legacies of past cooperation carry weight for today. At different points in the Cold War, the Big 5 played important roles in Moscow's African engagements. Moscow's open opposition to apartheid in South Africa earned it a positive standing among the decolonising states of the continent and post-apartheid South Africa. As early as 1956, Moscow began to include the Algerian question in UN discussions, later becoming one of the first major powers to recognise

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7 For Russia's dual presence in Africa, see Maxime Audinet & Emmanuel Dreyfus, "A Foreign Policy by Proxies? The Two Sides of Russia's Presence in Mali", IRSEM, Report 97, 2022 (updated 2023), <https://www.irsem.fr/media/report-irsem-97-russia-mali-en.pdf> (accessed 4 December 2023).

8 The figure rises to approximately 4 per cent of total French trade when considering North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa together. "A la une d'Objectif Afrique : Les échanges commerciaux et les investissements entre la France et les pays d'Afrique subsaharienne en 2022" [On the front page of Objectif Afrique: Trade and investments between France and sub-Saharan African countries in 2022], Ministère de l'économie, 7 June 2023, <https://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Articles/2023/06/07/a-la-une-d-objectif-afrique-les-perspectives-economiques-regionales-du-fmi-pour-l-afrique-subsaharienne-en-2023-et-2024> (accessed 4 December 2023).

9 Own calculations based on data from the International Monetary Fund datamapper, <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper> (accessed 6 December 2023).

10 "Volume of trade between Russia and African countries 2013-2021", Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1063423/russia-and-african-countries-trade-volume/> (accessed 6 December 2023).

11 For a global perspective, see Ivan U. Klyszcz, "How Russia Brings Its Aggression Against Ukraine to The Global South", International Centre for Defence and Security, 14 April 2023, <https://icds.ee/en/how-russia-brings-its-aggression-against-ukraine-to-the-global-south/> (accessed 4 December 2023).

Algerian independence in March 1962.<sup>12</sup> Under the Derg regime (1974–1987), Ethiopia was Moscow's closest African ally. Moscow supported Egypt in its war with Israel in the 1960s and early 1970s, and supported Nigeria in the 1967–1970 war.<sup>13</sup> In many ways, the heyday of bilateral ties has passed, but these relations have left lasting legacies for today.

For instance, Russian diplomats today glorify Soviet economic assistance throughout the world, especially in Africa. In 1982, Africa's middle powers accounted for 56 per cent of operational Soviet economic assistance projects in Africa, although these overwhelmingly favoured Algeria and Egypt, and excluded apartheid-era South Africa.<sup>14</sup> It is a common trope in today's Russian messaging on Africa that the Soviet Union was a crucial partner in the independence and de-colonial movements on the continent.

This is misleading and hides the self-serving nature of Soviet assistance in Africa, as well as the low points in Moscow's relations with the continent. The decline in ties with Africa began in the 1980s, following Soviet disillusionment with its Third World partners and Gorbachev's shift in Africa policy from armed intervention to mediation and non-alignment in domestic conflicts.<sup>15</sup> After the break-up of the Soviet Union, policy circles in Moscow in the 1990s endorsed the narrative that the Soviet Union's cooperation with Africa was a factor in the economic troubles that Russia faced in that decade. Russia's war against Chechnya in the 1990s also harmed diplomatic relations with the Middle East and North Africa – Algeria and Egypt included.

Even so, relations with Africa's middle powers in the 1990s did not deteriorate as much as those with other African states. No embassies were closed, for instance, although trade and cooperation reduced. Between 1992 and 2022, all the Big 5 faced war, revolution and regime change, as well as periods of economic turbulence. Nonetheless, the Big 5 – together with others such as Morocco and Tunisia – remained Russia's key African trading partners (see Table 1) in a context of increasing trade with the continent since the 2000s.

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12 The People's Republic of China recognised Algeria as early as 1958.

13 Soviet military aid to Egypt in the 1960s and 1970s dwarfed the Soviet aid given to other countries outside of the Socialist camp. In fact, Russia's General Staff compared the 2015 Syria intervention with Operation *Kavkaz*, the secret Soviet mission to assist Egypt militarily in its fight against Israel. Isabella Ginor & Gideon Remez (2017), *The Soviet-Israeli War, 1967-1973: The USSR's Military Intervention in the Egyptian-Israeli Conflict*, Oxford University Press.

14 166 out of 295 operational projects. Adele Wildschut (1988), "Soviets in Africa: The Soviet Union's economic relations with Southern Africa", *Africa Insight*, 18:2, 80-91.

15 On this disillusionment, see Samuel Ramani (2023), "Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power or Bellicose Pretender?", Oxford University Press, chapter 1.

**Table 1. Top destinations in Africa for Russian exports (% of total Russian exports to Africa)**

1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2021
Egypt (36%)	Morocco (66%)	Egypt (38%)	Egypt (46%)	Egypt (40%)	Egypt (33%)
Morocco (25%)	Egypt (11%)	Morocco (15%)	Morocco (12%)	Algeria (12%)	Morocco (10%)
Tunisia (20%)	Algeria (4%)	Algeria (9%)	Tunisia (11%)	Morocco (11%)	Algeria (9%)
Algeria (7%)	Tunisia (4%)	Tunisia (9%)	Algeria (6%)	Tunisia (5%)	Senegal (8%)
Cote d'Ivoire (4%)	Nigeria (4%)	Nigeria (5%)	Libya (5%)	South Africa (4%)	Nigeria (8%)

Source: Author's own elaboration using data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity, <https://oec.world/en>.

Cereals are a key trading commodity between Russia and Africa. In 2022, 90 per cent of all Russia-Africa trade was in wheat exports and 22 per cent of the continent's wheat imports were from Russia.<sup>16</sup> At the end of 2021, only Egypt of the five middle powers analysed here was dependent on Russian wheat. Approximately 60 per cent of its cereals were imported from Russia. Africa faced high food inflation and food import dependency in 2022. The International Monetary Fund estimates that there were 264 million undernourished people in Africa in 2020.<sup>17</sup> In sum, Russian grains have steadily become more prevalent in African markets but only Egypt of the Big 5 is dependent on them.

The arms trade has been more consequential. The African middle powers and Russia have cooperated militarily at different times since 1992. During the Algerian civil war (1992–2002), Moscow withdrew its large, Cold War-era military presence from the country but continued to provide the Algerian government with arms.<sup>18</sup> In the 1998–2000 Ethiopia-Eritrea war, Moscow provided fighter jets and pilots to Ethiopia.<sup>19</sup> Algeria and Egypt are among Russia's top arms buyers, together accounting for approximately 11 per cent of its arms exports in the period 1992–2021.<sup>20</sup> While inconsistent buyers, Russia is Ethiopia's and Nigeria's largest and second largest foreign arms supplier, respectively, in terms of cumulative transfers since

16 Maher Hajbi, "Blés russe et ukrainien : cinq questions pour comprendre la dépendance de l'Afrique", *Jeune Afrique*, 23 August 2022, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1370710/economie-entreprises/bles-russe-et-ukrainien-cinq-questions-pour-comprendre-la-dependance-de-lafrique/> (accessed 4 December 2023). About the broader implications of Russia's agricultural trade with Africa, see Charlotta Rodhe, "Food, Fertilizer and Global Leverage: Stepping Out of Russia's Game", *SCEEUS*, Report 3, 2023, <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/food-fertilizer-and-global-leverage-stepping-out-of-russias-game/> (accessed 4 December 2023).

17 Seung Mo Choi, "Food Inflation in Sub-Saharan Africa", *IMF Blog*, 6 December 2021, <https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2021/12/06/food-inflation-in-sub-saharan-africa> (accessed 4 December 2023).

18 Susanne Birgersson, Alexander V. Kozhemiakin, Roger E. Kanet (1995), "Russian Policy in Africa: Disengagement or Cooperation?", *Problems of Post-Communism*, 42:5.

19 "Командировка в Африку" [Business trip to Africa], *Red Star*, 11 April 2009.

20 India, Russia's foremost arms customer, held approximately a 28 per cent share of Russian arms exports in the same period. Own calculations based on SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers> (accessed 4 December 2023).

1992.<sup>21</sup> South Africa's large arms industry makes imports from Russia – or elsewhere – mostly unnecessary.

Close military cooperation has overlapped with occasional alignment on regional affairs. Algeria and Egypt reacted positively to Russia's Syria campaign, enhancing their ties with Russia.<sup>22</sup> In Libya, Russia has joined Egypt in supporting the Tobruk-based government led by Khalifa Haftar. In 2017, it was reported that Russian special forces entered Libya from the Egyptian land border.<sup>23</sup> Moscow sometimes "outsources" its Tunisia policy to Algeria.<sup>24</sup> South Africa sees the IS-linked Cabo Delgado insurgency in Mozambique as a potential threat, so reports of Wagner group deployments there did not spark condemnation from Pretoria.<sup>25</sup>

However, there are limits to this alignment. Algeria does not cooperate with Russia in Libya as much as Egypt because Algiers prefers Haftar's rival in Tripoli.<sup>26</sup> Nigeria briefly considered cooperating with Moscow to fight Boko Haram but a plan never materialised.<sup>27</sup> More broadly, Russia's support for the Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger juntas has undermined the unity of the ECOWAS bloc, which Nigeria has sought to consolidate and lead. In the Egypt-Ethiopia conflict over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), Moscow can only balance between Addis Ababa and Cairo as no mediation role is viable.<sup>28</sup> In Western Sahara, Russia has sought a mediating role between Algeria and Morocco but to no avail.<sup>29</sup> In the Red Sea, Russia has been fruitlessly seeking a naval base, eventually securing an agreement with Sudan in 2017 that then stalled.<sup>30</sup> In 2022, Egypt was reportedly displeased at the news that Russia's Sudan base might now proceed.<sup>31</sup>

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21 SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers> (accessed 4 December 2023).

22 Lina Kennouche, "Alger-Damas, un mariage de raison", *L'Orient le Jour*, 30 April 2016, <https://www.orientlejour.com/article/983757/alger-damas-un-mariage-de-raison.html> (accessed 4 December 2023).

23 "Москва отрицает размещение российского спецназа в Египте" [Moscow denies the deployment of Russian special forces in Egypt], BBC Russian, 14 March 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-39264149> (accessed 4 December 2023).

24 Klyszcz, "How Russia Brings its Aggression Against Ukraine to the Global South".

25 Wagner group forces retreated from the region in 2020 and the South Africa-led SADC mission entered in 2021. Peter Fabricius, "Mozambique's apparent Islamist insurgency poses multiple threats", *Institute for Security Studies*, 20 November 2018, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/mozambiques-apparent-islamist-insurgency-poses-multiple-threats> (accessed 4 December 2023).

26 Ramy Allahoum, "Haftar overtaking Tripoli a 'nightmare' for Algeria, Tunisia", *Al-Jazeera*, 10 February 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/10/haftar-overtaking-tripoli-a-nightmare-for-algeria-tunisia> (accessed 4 December 2023).

27 Andrew McGregor, "Nigeria Seeks Russian Military Aid in Its War on Boko Haram", *Jamestown Foundation*, 8 May 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/nigeria-seeks-russian-military-aid-in-its-war-on-boko-haram/> (accessed 4 December 2023).

28 Samuel Ramani, "Russia and the GERD: An uneasy balancing act", *Middle East Institute*, 16 August 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russia-and-gerd-uneasy-balancing-act> (accessed 4 December 2023).

29 Jacques Roussellier, "A Role for Russia in the Western Sahara?", *Carnegie Endowment*, 5 June 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/76532> (accessed 4 December 2023).

30 Ivan U. Klyszcz, "Russia's Thwarted Return to the Red Sea", *Orient XXI*, 10 November 2020, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/russia-s-thwarted-return-to-the-red-sea,4283> (accessed 4 December 2023).

31 "Egypt displeased with Sudan over Russia military base: report", *Middle East Monitor*, 7 March 2022, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220307-egypt-displeased-with-sudan-over-russia-military-base-report/> (accessed 4 December 2023).

Beyond military affairs, arms exports and grains, Russia is seldom able to compete in Africa with other major powers. That said, Russian energy, mining and nuclear companies are present throughout the continent, sometimes playing critical roles in foreign economies (Table 2). All five powers are cooperating with Russia on nuclear power.<sup>32</sup> Algeria and Nigeria cooperate with Russia on oil prices through the OPEC+ format. In Egypt, the El Dabaa nuclear plant has been Rosatom's leading project in Africa since development began in 2015.

**Table 2. Russian energy and mining companies present in the Big 5 as of January 2022**

	Russian energy, mining, and nuclear companies
<b>Algeria</b>	Gazprom, Lukoil*, Rosatom*, Rosneft (until 2017)
<b>Egypt</b>	Lukoil, Rosatom, Rosneft
<b>Ethiopia</b>	Rosatom*
<b>Nigeria</b>	Lukoil, Rosatom, Rosneft, Rusal
<b>South Africa</b>	Evraz, Gazprom, Nornickel, Novolipetsk Steel, Rosatom (until 2018)

\*Memorandum of Understanding

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Some projects exhibit more promise than results. In 2007, Egypt signed a Memorandum of Understanding for Russia to run two sites at the Suez Canal free trade zone under the label of the Russian Industrial Zone (RIO), but full-scale development is yet to begin at the time of writing. Other similar large-scale deals have gone nowhere. Talks on Russia supporting Nigeria's first two nuclear power plants – the Geregu and Itu plants – have been inconclusive.<sup>33</sup> Rosneft withdrew its Algerian oil exploration project in 2017 due to lack of prospects, with no plans to return.<sup>34</sup>

Space is another burgeoning area of cooperation. The development of weather and geological monitoring, satellite communications and space science are among the priorities of roughly 20 African space programmes. Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa are the continent's space pioneers, and together with Ethiopia all have active satellite programmes. Russia has been the launch site of various Algerian, Egyptian, Nigerian and South African satellites since the early 2000s, although Russia has never held a privileged position in this market. For instance, Russia last launched a satellite for Nigeria in 2011 and Russia has never launched any Ethiopian satellites. Russia's main African partner in space exploration has been Angola. Some cooperation projects, such as the 2010s KONDOR-E satellite surveillance project with South Africa, have been marred by mistrust.<sup>35</sup>

32 Kacper Szulecki & Indra Overland (2023), "Russian nuclear energy diplomacy and its implications for energy security in the context of the war in Ukraine", *Nature Energy*, 8, 413-421.

33 Ben Ezeamalu, "SPECIAL REPORT: Amidst safety concerns, Nigeria signs nuclear power project with Russia's Rosatom", *Premium Times*, 6 January 2018, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/254629-special-report-amidst-safety-concerns-nigeria-signs-nuclear-power-project-russias-rosatom.html> (accessed 4 December 2023).

34 Tsvetana Paraskova, "Rosneft Seeks to Pull Out of its Only Project in Algeria", *Oil Price*, 9 January 2017, <https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Rosneft-Seeks-To-Pull-Out-Of-Its-Only-Project-In-Algeria.html> (accessed 4 December 2023).

35 Later it would be revealed that South Africa allegedly spied on Russian manufacturers. Will Jordan, "S Africa spied on Russia for satellite project details", *Al-Jazeera*, 25 February 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/>

In sum, by the start of 2022, relations between Russia and the Big 5 were shaped by various strategic portfolios (Table 3), all of which have been affected by Moscow’s war on Ukraine.

**Table 3. Summary of Russia’s strategic engagements with the Big 5 as of January 2022**

	<b>Strategic portfolios</b>
<b>Algeria</b>	Arms; energy; OPEC+; space
<b>Egypt</b>	Arms; energy; grains; Libya; nuclear; RIO; space
<b>Ethiopia</b>	Arms
<b>Nigeria</b>	Arms; energy; OPEC+
<b>South Africa</b>	BRICS; energy; mining; space

Note: “Nuclear” refers to cooperation on peaceful nuclear energy generation and “energy” refers to other forms of energy cooperation.

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

Beyond these portfolios, the use of disinformation and “grey zone” tactics by Russia must be addressed. As mentioned above, these informal means have given Moscow profound influence over countries such as CAR and Mali but the same cannot be said for the middle powers on the continent. Of the five, Russian Private Military Companies have operated only in Nigeria, with a smaller impact than the CAR or Mali Wagner deployments.<sup>36</sup> Before 2022, Kremlin-linked entities had attempted to meddle in Nigerian and South African elections, and both countries were targeted by pro-Russia disinformation campaigns.<sup>37</sup> Similar efforts have not been documented in Algeria, Egypt or Ethiopia.

“Soft power” instruments include Russian state-controlled media and affiliated media, governmental scholarships to study in Russia and cultural institutions.<sup>38</sup> In addition to publishing or broadcasting in widely spoken Arabic and French, RT and Sputnik collaborate with African media companies to spread the Kremlin’s strategic narratives. In 2019, RT had a presence in 24 of the 54 African states, including Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa.<sup>39</sup> Finally, Egypt, Ethiopia and South Africa all host a branch of the “Russia House”, a Russian state cultural institution primarily intended to disseminate Russian strategic narratives and soft power.<sup>40</sup> An Algerian branch was announced in 2023. In short, Russia’s influence on

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[news/2015/2/25/s-africa-spied-on-russia-for-satellite-project-details](#) (accessed 4 December 2023).

36 Documented cases between 2005 and 2019; 36 deployments (not necessarily armed) in 16 African countries. Adam R. Grissom, et al (2022), “Russia’s Growing Presence in Africa. A Geostrategic Assessment”, *Rand Corporation*. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR4399.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4399.html) (accessed 4 December 2023).

37 Roman Badanin, et al, “Шеф и повар. Часть третья. Расследование о том, как Россия вмешивается в выборы в двадцати странах” [Chef and cook. Part three. Investigation into how Russia interferes in elections in twenty countries], *Proekt media*, 11 April 2019, <https://www.proekt.media/investigation/prigozhin-polittekhnologi/> (accessed 4 December 2023); “Mapping Disinformation in Africa”, *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 26 April 2022, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-disinformation-in-africa/> (accessed 4 December 2023).

38 On government-funded scholarships and their influence, see Patrick Jack, “Russian scholarships for African students ‘echo Cold War tactics’”, *Times Higher Education*, 9 August 2023, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/russian-scholarships-african-students-echo-cold-war-tactics> (accessed 4 December 2023).

39 The figure of African countries with RT presence is likely larger today. Cayley Clifford & Steven Gruz (2022), “Russian and African media: Exercising soft power”, *South African Institute of International Affairs Policy Insights*, 125:1.

40 Nadiia Koval et al (2022), “Rossotrudnichestvo: The Unbearable Harshness of Soft Power”, *Ukrainian Institute*, <https://ui.org.ua/en/sectors-en/rossotrudnichestvo-the-unbearable-harshness-of-soft-power-2/>

Africa's middle powers is built on cooperation in "official spheres" and informal means play a secondary role.

## Russia and the Big 5 since 2022

Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and escalation in 2022 did not dramatically alter relations with Africa's middle powers (Table 4). Since 2014, only Nigeria has voted "with Ukraine" at the UN General Assembly to condemn Russia's aggression. The other four have generally abstained. Apart from specific restrictions, none of the Big 5 has joined the international sanctions regime against Russia. Nor did they significantly reduce their diplomatic presence in Moscow in 2014 or 2022. High-level representatives of the five attended the July 2023 Russia-Africa Summit. Along with global trends, African public opinion has tended to favour Ukraine throughout 2022 and 2023, but African public opinion tends to see Russia less negatively compared to Europe.<sup>41</sup>

**Table 4. Diplomatic reaction to Russia's aggression against Ukraine**

	2014: 68/262	2022–2023: ES-11/1 to 11/6	Sanctions	Russia-Africa Summit 2023
<b>Algeria</b>	Abstained	ES-11/1-6: Abstained	None	Prime Minister*
<b>Egypt</b>	Abstained	ES-11/1, 2, 4, 6: In favour ES-11/3, 5: Abstained	Restrictions <sup>42</sup>	Head of State
<b>Ethiopia</b>	Abstained	ES-11/1: Absent ES-11/2, 4, 6: Abstained ES-11/3, 5: Against	None	Prime Minister
<b>Nigeria</b>	In favour	ES-11/1-6: In favour	None	Vice President
<b>South Africa</b>	Abstained	ES-11/1-6: Abstain	Restrictions	Head of state

\*: The head of state visited Moscow shortly before the Summit. *Source*: Author's own elaboration.

The Russian foreign policy community has welcomed this trend, although not without reservations. On the one hand, Russian diplomacy has repeatedly praised the "balanced" and "objective" position of abstaining countries, including Africa's middle powers.<sup>43</sup> However,

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(accessed 4 December 2023).

41 About the public opinion shift, see Roberto Foa et al, "A World Divided: Russia, China and the West", *Bennett Institute for Public Policy*, 20 October 2022, <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/a-world-divided/> (accessed 4 December 2023). The lowest favourability of Russia among the polls consulted was in South Africa, with about 32 per cent of respondents having a positive view of Russia. That poll was conducted in the summer of 2023. "African sentiment is favouring Ukraine", *Ipsos*, 21 June 2023, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-za/african-sentiment-favouring-ukraine> (accessed 4 December 2023).

42 Certain government bodies in Egypt and South Africa have imposed restrictions on Russian officials. In Egypt, the use of the Russian MIR payment system was restricted in 2022. In South Africa, Western Cape state banned in March 2022 the entry of Russian officials to its Provincial Parliament.

43 "Ethiopia, Russia Have Similar or Very Close Positions, Good Tradition of Mutual Cooperation: Ambassador Terekhin", *Ethiopian News Agency*, 8 June 2023, [https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/eng\\_2905072](https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/eng_2905072) (accessed 4

Moscow was reportedly displeased with Algeria's March 2022 abstention in the General Assembly.<sup>44</sup> More broadly, in mid-2023, Russian analysts identified the abstentions of Algeria, Ethiopia and South Africa as the most conducive to cooperation with those countries, and the voting records of Egypt and Nigeria as the least conducive.<sup>45</sup>

Alongside these diplomatic trends, trade has continued between Russia and the Big 5. Despite being the world's most sanctioned country, the departure of many international companies and the depreciation of the Ruble, the volume of Russia-Africa trade remained stable in 2022 (US\$ 17.9 billion in 2022 compared to US\$ 17.7 in 2021) and allegedly grew by 35 per cent in the first half of 2023, with Russian exports to Africa leading the growth.<sup>46</sup> In turn, Africa's overall share of Russian trade grew from 2.3 per cent at the start of 2022 to 3.7 per cent in the first months of 2023.<sup>47</sup> Most of this trade was with North Africa, notably Algeria and Egypt.

The structure of this trade has changed. Russian arms exports have been diminishing since 2020, although a few deliveries took place in 2022, including to Algeria.<sup>48</sup> The biggest shift has been in the agricultural market. Russia's naval war in the Black Sea and its own halting of grain exports have impacted global markets. On 17 July 2023, Russia withdrew from a UN-brokered grain deal intended to facilitate the export of Ukrainian and Russian agricultural products. Moscow left the deal to put pressure on the West to suspend certain sanctions.<sup>49</sup> While Putin promised to "replace" the lost Ukrainian grain exports with Russian products, the Big 5 have shifted their food and fertiliser supply chains to other producers, both domestic and foreign.<sup>50</sup> Only Algeria has increased its volume of Russian grain imports.<sup>51</sup>

The imposition of sanctions has also altered the activities of Russia's large energy and mining companies in Africa. On the one hand, sanctions have prompted Russia to seek new markets and conduits for evading sanctions. Russian refined oil exports to Africa grew in volume by

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December 2023).

44 Akram Belkaid, "Maghreb-Ukraine (1). L'Algérie et le Maroc refusent de choisir" [Maghreb-Ukraine (1). Algeria and Morocco refuse to choose], *Orient XXI*, 19 May 2022, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/maghreb-ukraine-1-l-algerie-et-le-maroc-refusent-de-choisir,5603> (accessed 4 December 2023).

45 Oleg Barabanov et al, "Russia and Africa: An Audit of Relations", *Valdai Club Report*, July 2023, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/russia-and-africa-an-audit-of-relations/> (accessed 4 December 2023).

46 These figures are reported by Russian officials. "Russia's trade with Africa increased by 35% In the first half of 2023", *Africanews*, 27 July 2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/07/27/russias-trade-with-africa-increased-by-35-in-the-first-half-of-2023/> (accessed 4 December 2023).

47 "Власти раскрыли топ-5 торговых партнеров России в Африке" [The authorities have revealed the top 5 trading partners of Russia in Africa], *RBK*, 30 September 2023, <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/30/09/2023/6516a0959a79473878cc7d3c> (accessed 4 December 2023).

48 SIPRI data. "Ukraine war cuts off arms flows to Abuja from Moscow and Minsk", *Africa Intelligence*, 17 March 2022, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/west-africa/2022/03/17/ukraine-war-cuts-off-arms-flows-to-abuja-from-moscow-and-minsk,109761222-art> (accessed 4 December 2023).

49 Iwona Wiśniewska, "Russia is weaponising food", *Centre for Eastern Studies*, 12 July 2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-07-12/russia-weaponising-food> (accessed 4 December 2023).

50 For example, Abdel Latif Wahba & Aine Quinn, "Egypt Swaps Out Russian Wheat After Moscow Objects to Pricing", *Bloomberg*, 20 September 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-09-20/egypt-swaps-out-russian-wheat-after-moscow-objects-to-pricing> (accessed 4 December 2023).

51 Estelle Maussion, "L'Algérie compte plus que jamais sur le blé russe" [Algeria is counting more than ever on Russian wheat], *Jeune Afrique*, 8 August 2023, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1471011/economie-entreprises/lalgerie-compte-plus-que-jamais-sur-le-ble-russe/> (accessed 4 December 2023).

more than ten times, as Egypt and Nigeria saw large spikes in Russian fuel purchases.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, Russian companies in Africa have struggled to replace their lost sources of international financing.<sup>53</sup> Many of Russia's African partners have withdrawn from joint projects.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, apart from Nornickel's exit from South Africa, no other major withdrawals took place among the Big 5.<sup>55</sup> In fact, Russian companies have been courting African counterparts consistently, such as during the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit. Ethiopia and Russia began to implement their nuclear energy cooperation roadmap in September 2023, which had been dormant until then.<sup>56</sup>

Russian diplomacy has attempted to compensate for the ground lost to sanctions and to shifts in the market. Russia has been positive about expansion of BRICS membership. Algeria, Egypt and Ethiopia became candidates in 2023 but only the latter two were admitted. In November 2023, Nigeria's foreign minister announced that Nigeria aims to join the BRICS by 2026.<sup>57</sup> At the UN Security Council, Russia has leaned towards Ethiopia's position, something which Ethiopia's diplomats have praised.<sup>58</sup> However, Russia's grain donation programme, which is designed to compete with Ukraine's programme and offset Russia's withdrawal from the grain deal, has not met the needs of the market, including those of the Big 5.<sup>59</sup>

Egypt has a central role in Russia's economic footprint in Africa. The Eurasian Economic Union – a commercial bloc dominated by Russia – has been negotiating a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Egypt since 2019, and rounds of negotiations took place throughout

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52 Charlie Mitchell & Rosemary Griffin, "Russian oil product flows to Africa jump following Western sanctions", *S&P Global*, 4 July 2023, <https://www.spglobal.com/commodityinsights/en/market-insights/latest-news/oil/070423-russian-oil-product-flows-to-africa-jump-following-western-sanctions> (accessed 4 December 2023).

53 "Ukraine war leaves Russia's Gazprom, Rosneft, Lukoil in limbo in Africa", *Africa Intelligence*, 15 March 2022, [https://www.africaintelligence.com/oil-gas\\_exploration-production/2022/03/15/ukraine-war-leaves-russia-s-gazprom-rosneft-lukoil-in-limbo-in-africa,109760673-eve](https://www.africaintelligence.com/oil-gas_exploration-production/2022/03/15/ukraine-war-leaves-russia-s-gazprom-rosneft-lukoil-in-limbo-in-africa,109760673-eve) (accessed 4 December 2023); "Ukraine-Russia: Oligarchs' African mining projects struck hard by economic sanctions", *Africa Intelligence*, 2 March 2022, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/the-continent/2022/03/02/ukraine-russia-oligarchs--african-mining-projects-struck-hard-by-economic-sanctions,109737407-eve> (accessed 4 December 2023).

54 "Bekker, Penny, Dos Santos... Russia's African partners kept at bay by war in Ukraine", *Africa Intelligence*, 25 April 2022, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/southern-africa-and-islands/2022/04/25/bekker-penny-dos-santos-russia-s-african-partners-kept-at-bay-by-war-in-ukraine,109780029-ge0> (accessed 4 December 2023).

55 "Nornickel will pay \$18 mln to drop its stake in nickel JV in South Africa", *Reuters*, 24 November 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/nornickel-will-pay-18-mln-drop-its-stake-nickel-jv-south-africa-2023-11-24/> (accessed 4 December 2023).

56 "Russia, Ethiopia to consider construction of low- or high-capacity NPP", *Interfax*, 28 July 2023, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/93104/> (accessed 4 December 2023).

57 Ruth Olurounbi, "Nigeria Wants to Be Part of BRICS Bloc in Two Years, Join G-20", *Bloomberg*, 22 November 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-11-22/nigeria-wants-to-be-part-of-brics-bloc-in-two-years-join-g-20> (accessed 4 December 2023).

58 Abel Abate Demissie, "Navigating the regionalization of Ethiopia's Tigray conflict", *Chatham House Research Paper*, 8 September 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/09/navigating-regionalization-ethiopia-tigray-conflict/05-role-international-community> (accessed 4 December 2023).

59 The promised deliveries would total 200 000 tonnes split among six countries, none of them the five contemplated here. To put this sum into perspective, Egypt imported an average of 12 million tonnes of wheat every year in the past few years. "Russia sends first free grain to Africa since end of Black Sea deal", *Al-Jazeera*, 17 November 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/17/russia-sends-first-free-grain-to-africa-since-disrupting-ukraines-trade> (accessed 4 December 2023).

2023.<sup>60</sup> The re-export of Russian goods from Egypt will be a possibility, especially from the free trade zone, which creates clear opportunities for financial crime as well as sanctions evasion.<sup>61</sup> On 19 October, Russia's Ministry of Trade commented that the RIO would serve as the basis for new zones in India, Iran and Latin America.<sup>62</sup>

In sum, there has been continuity in the strategic portfolios of Russia and the five African middle powers (Table 5). Notable shifts are the expansion of relations with Ethiopia, the loss of ground for Russian grain and arms, and the enhanced role of the BRICS.

**Table 5. Summary of the impact of the invasion of Ukraine on Russia-Big 5 ties**

	<b>Strategic portfolios at the start of 2022</b>	<b>Change after 2022</b>
<b>Algeria</b>	Arms; energy; OPEC+; space	Arms; energy; OPEC+; space
<b>Egypt</b>	Arms; energy; grains; Libya; nuclear; RIO; space	<i>BRICS</i> ; energy; nuclear; RIO; space
<b>Ethiopia</b>	Arms	<i>BRICS</i> ; <i>nuclear</i>
<b>Nigeria</b>	Arms; energy; OPEC+	Energy; OPEC+
<b>South Africa</b>	BRICS; energy; mining; space	BRICS; energy; mining; space

Notes: "Nuclear" refers to cooperation on peaceful nuclear energy generation and "energy" refers to other forms of energy production; Italics: new active portfolios since 2022. *Source*: Author's own elaboration.

Some commentators interpret these trends in Russia-Africa relations as demonstrating the "neutrality" of the African states.<sup>63</sup> The reactions of many African governments to the war in Ukraine have aimed to expand the space for African agency, which is often constrained in global affairs. Scholar Ueli Staeger has characterised this foreign policy as "equidistance".<sup>64</sup> In this context, the Big 5 have reasserted their relevance in regional affairs. The June 2023 African peace mission stands out as one of the first pan-African attempts at external crisis management. The mission was not endorsed or planned by the African Union but led by South Africa with Egypt's participation, thereby reinforcing the relevance of Africa's regional powers.<sup>65</sup>

60 "EAEU and Egypt held sixth round of negotiations on free trade agreement", Eurasian Economic Union official website, 17 August 2023, <https://eec.eaeunion.org/en/news/eaes-i-egipet-proveli-shestoy-raund-peregovorov-po-soglasheniyu-o-svobodnoy-torgovle/> (accessed 4 December 2023).

61 In its website, the RIO points to Egypt's many FTAs as an incentive for companies to operate therein. On Free Trade Zones being exploited for sanctions evasion, see Anton Moiseienko, Alexandria Reid, Isabella Chase, "Improving Governance and Tackling Crime in Free-Trade Zones", *RUSI*, 13 October 2020, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/improving-governance-and-tackling-crime-free-trade-zones> (accessed 4 December 2023).

62 "Минпромторг рассматривает создание промзон в Индии, Иране, Латинской Америке" [The Ministry of Industry and Trade is considering the creation of industrial zones in India, Iran, Latin America], *Interfax*, 19 October 2023, <https://www.interfax.ru/business/926680> (accessed 4 December 2023).

63 See Ivan U. Klyszcz, "It is not about 'neutrality': How the Global South responds to Russia's invasion", *Heinrich Boell Foundation*, 30 January 2023, <https://www.boell.de/en/2023/01/30/it-not-about-neutrality-how-global-south-responds-russias-invasion> (accessed 4 December 2023).

64 Ueli Staeger (2023), "The War in Ukraine, the African Union, and African Agency", *African Affairs*, 1-28.

65 See Staeger, pp. 22-23. The African peace mission consisted of Comoros, Congo, Egypt, Senegal, Uganda, Zambia, and South Africa.

Russia has not fully embraced these efforts, cooperating only marginally. In June 2023, Russia endorsed Algeria's aspiration to mediate in the war, although no concrete plan was announced.<sup>66</sup> The pressing issue of Russia lifting its restrictions on Black Sea grain deliveries was addressed during the visit of the African peace mission, but there was no change to Russian policy.<sup>67</sup> At the Russia-Africa Summit, President of South African Cyril Ramaphosa stressed the negative impact on Africa of the war, and especially of Russia's withdrawal from the grain deal.<sup>68</sup>

The regional role of the five African middle powers has provided only limited benefits for Russia's wartime foreign policy. The Russo-Ukrainian war was on the agenda, for instance, at the Arab League annual summit in Algiers in November 2022, and Putin addressed the meeting. At the following summit, in Saudi Arabia in May 2023, Zelensky addressed the League representatives at the invitation of the host country. Unlike Myanmar at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations summit, Russia's partners in the Arab League – including Algeria and Egypt – did not prevent Ukraine's participation at the 2023 meeting.<sup>69</sup> Burgeoning wartime ties with Eritrea and Somalia may also be restricted by Russia's growing partnership with Ethiopia.<sup>70</sup>

## The US, the European Union and Ukraine

Western reactions to the enduring ties between the Big 5 and Russia have oscillated between condemnation and engagement. Lawmakers in Europe and the United States have demanded throughout 2022 that sanctions be imposed on Algeria for its continuing arms purchases from Russia, while US lawmakers have attempted to move the US-Africa summit from Johannesburg.<sup>71</sup> In South Africa, the “*Lady R* incident” threatened to end that country's duty-free access to the US market.<sup>72</sup> Allegations of war crimes in Ethiopia's civil

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66 “Russia: Algeria can play role of mediator in conflict with Ukraine”, *Middle East Monitor*, 16 June 2023, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230616-russia-algeria-can-play-role-of-mediator-in-conflict-with-ukraine/> (accessed 4 December 2023).

67 “Kremlin publishes joint statement of Putin, African peace mission on Ukraine”, *TASS*, 4 August 2023, <https://tass.com/politics/1656533> (accessed 4 December 2023).

68 “South Africa's president raises food security concerns in Russia-Africa summit”, *Africanews*, 29 July 2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/07/29/south-africas-president-raises-food-security-concerns-in-russia-africa-summit/> (accessed 4 December 2023).

69 In November 2022, it was reported that the Myanmar junta vetoed the participation of Zelensky in the annual ASEAN summit. “Myanmar Junta in Spotlight After Zelensky Barred from ASEAN Summit”, *The Irrawaddy*, 11 November 2022, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-in-spotlight-after-zelensky-barred-from-asean-summit.html> (accessed 4 December 2023).

70 Mahad Dara, “Ethiopia's Abiy takes a page from Russia, China in asserting the right to restore historical claim to strategic waters”, *The Conversation*, 13 November 2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/05/26/russia-offers-support-to-somalian-army-in-fight-against-terrorist-groups/> (accessed 4 December 2023).

71 “US lawmaker group wants S Africa punished over Russia ties”, *Al-Jazeera*, 13 June 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/13/us-lawmakers-want-s-africa-to-lose-trade-summit-over-russia-ties> (accessed 4 December 2023).

72 On 11 May 2023, the US Ambassador in Pretoria accused South Africa of providing Russia with weapons through the *Lady R*, a ship that docked in South Africa in December 2022. An official South African investigation concluded that no such arms transfers had taken place. At the time of writing, there has been no resolution to the issue of preferential access to US markets. Ray Mahlaka, “South Africa pins its hopes on an early 2024 US Congress renewal of Agoa”, *Daily Maverick*, 5 November 2023, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023->

war had previously distanced the EU from Addis Ababa. By mid-2022, however, the EU was beginning to show an interest in countering Russia's influence there.<sup>73</sup> In October 2023, an EU-Ethiopia development deal was signed in Addis Ababa in a step towards normalising ties.<sup>74</sup>

Russia's influence in Africa, while growing, is still smaller than the combined weight of the EU, the US and the United Kingdom, which remain Africa's preferred partners in economic, security and development matters. Nonetheless, this status quo is fragile. China, India, the Gulf states and Russia are all rising actors on the continent, creating a more competitive environment for the West. Despite AFRICOM's wide-ranging operations and awareness of the Wagner threat to African security, for the US, the Indo-Pacific, the Middle East and Europe will remain higher priorities than Africa. In this context, regional powers such as the Big 5 might become trendsetters and act as key nodes for the Africa policies of external powers.

The EU has made efforts to improve its strategic position in Africa but translating economic weight and soft power into effective strategic depth has proved a struggle. Despite its ambitious – albeit implicit – goal of taking on China's Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Gateway is yet to meet expectations. In addition, EU and specifically French operations in the Sahel are the target of widespread discontent, as well as disinformation campaigns, in the region. Faced with setbacks in Mali, CAR and Niger, Paris has been rethinking its approach to Africa, with implications for the EU's strategic edge there.<sup>75</sup> Western calls for African countries to condemn the war or support Ukraine seldom resonate.

Nonetheless, since Russia's full-scale invasion, Kyiv has sought to proactively engage with African leaders, media and regional organisations, often in its first such engagements since 1991. Ukraine has gathered African support at the UN and in other forums and opened new commercial opportunities for the future. Since February 2022 Ukraine's Foreign Minister, Dmytro Kuleba, and its Middle East and Africa representative, Maxim Subkh, who was appointed in July 2022, have visited the African middle powers several times. Ethiopia was among the early recipients of the Grain from Ukraine donation programme.<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, challenges remain. Most of Ukraine's support in the General Assembly came from the "smaller" African states. The Big 5 engaged with Ukrainian diplomats and initiatives but, apart from Nigeria, continued to abstain.

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73 Ilya Gridneff, "Russia's Africa moves force Europe rethink on Ethiopia", *Politico Europe*, 28 July 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-russia-ethiopia-rethink/> (accessed 4 December 2023).

74 "EU signs 650m euro deal with Ethiopia in step to normalize ties", *Ahram Online*, 3 October 2023. <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/509531.aspx> (accessed 4 December 2023).

75 Sylvie Corbet, "Macron: 'New era' in economic, military strategy in Africa", *AP News*, 27 February 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/politics-france-government-russia-mali-macron-23faec486af7f0b3a6e945c0a2486e75> (accessed 4 December 2023).

76 Mohammed Yusuf, "Grain from Ukraine Arrives in Ethiopia", *VOA News*, 8 September 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/grain-from-ukraine-arrives-in-ethiopia-/6736661.html> (accessed 4 December 2023).

## Policy Recommendations

Russia's messianic multipolarity doctrine drives Moscow to engage with Africa and its middle powers in a zero-sum logic that antagonises the West. This report has shown how these ties have helped Russia to evade diplomatic and economic isolation and assist Russia's plans for a long war against Ukraine and a hybrid war against the West. Breaking this strategic nexus might not be possible, at least in the short term. Nonetheless, the case of Africa's middle powers shows that several measures are available to counter Russia's aggressive foreign policy in Africa without constraining the foreign policies of the African states themselves.

First, any understanding of Russian and African diplomacy must be grounded in ongoing dynamics rather than an attempt to fit them into a rigid Cold War-style "democracy vs autocracy" framework. Moscow is not actively seeking to overthrow regimes, as it did during the Cold War. It is seeking to reinforce its global "multipolar" foreign policy and support its aggression against Ukraine. In addition, African diplomacy is not seeking the types of exclusive alignments it sometimes pursued with the Cold War blocs. The approach of African states today is flexible, engaging all relevant major powers to maximise their own autonomy. Understanding the goals of African states will help to counter Moscow's aggressive goals in Africa. For this reason, further attention to and investment in interdisciplinary research on African foreign policy priorities will be required.

Second, engagement with African partners will be key. For nearly two years, world leaders have heard all the arguments in favour of sanctioning Russia and supporting Ukraine. What is needed now is direct engagement through delegations, fact-finding missions and diplomatic exchanges. The weight and influence of the Big 5 in Africa make them natural candidates for engagement, although other countries should not be neglected. This will be a costly and time-consuming effort but, as the war enters a protracted stage, a necessary one.

Third, countering Russia's market replacement strategies will be difficult. Almost two years after the full-scale invasion, few countries outside of the West have joined the international sanctions regime on Russia. To undermine Russian commercial interests – and the tax revenue these bring to state coffers – direct competition with Russian firms can give African partners more options for trade and investment. Proactive campaigns to promote trade and investment in Africa, including business missions, would create alternatives for those markets where Russia has become entrenched. Due diligence will be key to countering Russian sanctions evasion. Western states should add further due diligence requirements for partners that engage with Russia commercially. This will be especially important for Egypt as Russia moves to use it as a commercial hub through its RIO.

Fourth, Russia has gained much scope for its African engagements thanks to the alignment of the African middle powers on regional issues. In cases such as Libya, this alignment and Russian activities could complicate international contributions to regional conflict management and resolution. Diplomatic and humanitarian efforts in Africa must contemplate not only "the Russia factor", but also potential alignments between Moscow and Africa's regional powers – and red lines might have to be drawn.

Fifth, votes for Ukraine in the General Assembly are important but to transform expressions of support into material aid, Ukrainian and western diplomacy need to engage with those countries that have the resources to help. In this context, middle powers worldwide are important. A discreet approach to cooperation will avoid compromising the leadership of

these countries, their constituents and their enduring Russian partnerships. Morocco's apparent transfer of tank components to Ukraine could serve as a template, although non-military cooperation must also be contemplated.<sup>77</sup>

Finally, messaging alone cannot accomplish much, but there are some messages that must be sent. For the African middle powers, the principle of territorial integrity is key. The Big 5 have all fought regional and secessionist movements inside their borders, so their attachment to this international norm is deep. Russia's blatant attempts at a landgrab in Ukraine undermine the notion of Russia as a supporter of international norms. Ukrainian diplomacy highlights this to countries at every opportunity. Western partners can help to disseminate this message further.

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77 Ivan U. Klyszcz, "Discretion Rather Than Pressure Will Get the World on Ukraine's side", *ICDS*, 21 November 2023, <https://icds.ee/en/discretion-rather-than-pressure-will-get-the-world-on-ukraines-side/> (accessed 4 December 2023).



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