



Russia and China in Africa: Prospective Partners or Asymmetric Rivals?

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Executive summary

Since 2000, China and Russia have established their standing as resurgent great powers in Africa. The expansion of China's influence in Africa has been undergirded by its economic might. This has been exemplified by the proliferation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) across Africa and Beijing's lead role in facilitating connectivity projects across the continent. Although China's trade and investments in African countries have furthered socio-economic development, concerns have grown about their impact on the competitiveness of local industries and their potential to erode the sovereignty of countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Russia's resurgence in Africa appears opportunistic, as Moscow has capitalised on state fragility and protracted conflicts. This it has done to secure mining concessions, lucrative arms deals and anti-Western partners to hedge against the impact of US and European sanctions. However, Russia's involvement in Africa is bolstered by a strategic pursuit of great power status, which crystallised during Yevgeny Primakov's tenure as foreign minister from 1996 to 1998. To this end, Russia has positioned itself as a crisis-proof partner for countries facing economic isolation, deploying private military contractors to influence the trajectory of local conflicts in its favour and amplifying its role as a conflict arbiter.

Although the Soviet Union and China were asymmetric rivals in Africa from the 1960s to the 1980s, the current Sino-Russian relationship is more cordial. Russia and China coordinate on challenging Western norms, eroding US-initiated unilateral sanctions and supporting non-interference in the internal affairs of states. However, this relationship in Africa is characterised by limited strategic coordination in the economic and security spheres, and infrequent dialogue on regional conflicts. These limitations suggest that Sino-Russian relations in Africa resemble a competitive partnership and fall short of the level of bilateral cooperation between the two countries or the scale of their collaboration in multilateral institutions.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, China and Russia have transformed from peripheral stakeholders to great powers in Africa. The October 2000 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation brought representatives from 44 African countries to Beijing and precipitated a drastic expansion of China's commercial presence on the continent. From 2000 to 2019, the volume of trade between China and Africa soared from \$10 billion to \$192 billion.¹ By August 2020, only five countries (Benin, Eritrea, Eswatini, Mali, and São Tomé and Príncipe) were yet to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or express support for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global infrastructure development and inter-regional connectivity plan unveiled by Chinese President Xi Jinping in September 2013. China's

¹ China Africa Research Initiative, 2021, 'Data: China-Africa Trade', <http://www.sais-cari.org/data-china-africa-trade>.

security presence in Africa has also expanded, albeit at a slow pace. Eighty-five per cent of China's 2 500 UN peacekeepers are stationed in fragile African states, such as Mali and South Sudan,² while China's People's Liberation Army established its first overseas naval base in Djibouti in 2017.

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Although its trade with sub-Saharan Africa is worth just \$3 billion per year,³ lagging far behind China, India, the US, Germany, Britain and Japan, Russia is the leading arms exporter to Africa. It exerts influence in crisis zones such as Libya and the Central African Republic, or CAR, through the deployment of private military contractors (PMCs). The October 2019 Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi, which was attended by 43 African heads of state, underscored Moscow's diplomatic presence and ambitions regarding Africa.

China and Russia's strategic objectives and tactics in Africa: A historical overview

Although both China and Russia regularly frame themselves as counterweights to old colonial powers in Africa, both countries have been influential players on the continent since the mid-1950s. The April 1955 speech by the Premier of the People's Republic of China, Zhou Enlai, at the first Asian-African conference in Bandung, Indonesia, signified China's commitment to building partnerships with African countries that were seeking to overcome European colonialism (such as Tunisia and Algeria), and its support for the struggle against white minority rule in Southern Africa.⁴ Through concerted diplomatic outreach efforts during 1958-64, China reduced Taiwan's diplomatic network in Africa to seven countries⁵ and increased the appeal of Maoist guerrilla warfare to national liberation movements on the continent.⁶ During the last decades of the Cold War, China's

2 Bradley Bowman and Morgan Viña, 'China's Potemkin Peacekeeping', *The Dispatch*, June 8, 2021, <https://thedispatch.com/p/chinas-potemkin-peacekeeping>.

3 Paul Stronski, 'Late to the Party: Russia's Return to Africa', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 16, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/16/late-to-party-russia-s-return-to-africa-pub-80056>.

4 'Main Speech by Premier Zhou Enlai, Head of the Delegation of the People's Republic of China, distributed at the Plenary Session of the Asian-African Conference', April 19, 1955, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive*, Translation from China and the Asian-African Conference (Documents). (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1955), 9-20, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121623>.

5 Taiwan currently maintains diplomatic relations with only one African country: Eswatini.

6 David Shinn and Joshua Eisenman, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 64-65.

ideological ambitions in Africa waned and Beijing focused its attentions on constraining Soviet influence. China's support for the ZANU-PF President Robert Mugabe against his Soviet-backed arch-rival Joshua Nkomo and support for the Pan-African Congress over the Soviet-aligned ANC in South Africa exemplified this trend. In Angola, China aligned with UNITA (the National Union for Total Independence of Angola) against the Soviet-aligned MPLA (the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola). China also provided military and diplomatic support on a smaller scale to the FNLA (National Liberation Front of Angola) which underscored its willingness to indirectly collaborate with the US and apartheid South Africa in containing Soviet influence. During the 1990s, China's trade with Africa soared by 700%, as Beijing laid the foundations for its current partnerships with regional powers such as Nigeria and Ethiopia.

Although the Russian Empire took fleeting interest in Africa through the establishment of a colony in Sagallo, Djibouti, in 1889 and provided doctors to Ethiopia during the 1890s, Moscow's influence on the continent was peripheral until Joseph Stalin's death in 1953. Decolonisation provided an opening for the Soviet Union to emerge as a superpower in Africa. Soviet policy towards Africa was motivated by the export of Marxist-Leninist ideology but was characterised by a limited risk approach to Cold War contestation, which relied heavily on Warsaw Pact technical advisors and proxy armies, especially from Cuba.⁷ The Soviet Union established fleeting partnerships with Guinea under Sekou Toure and with Congo-Leopoldville (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), under Patrice Lumumba. However, Soviet influence was concentrated in the Maghreb, Horn of Africa and newly independent states of Southern Africa. The high-water mark of this influence in Africa occurred during the late 1970s, when the Soviet Union established robust partnerships with Angola, Mozambique and Ethiopia. The failure of these countries to accede to the Soviet-led Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, where they remained mere observers, and Mikhail Gorbachev's restrained support for socialist clients, caused Moscow's influence to atrophy in the late 1980s. During the early 1990s, Russia's economic and diplomatic presence in Africa declined precipitously, but has incrementally recovered since Yevgeny Primakov became foreign minister in 1996.

Although both Russia and China synthesised technical support, military training and ideological proselytisation during the Cold War, their approaches to power projection in Africa deviated markedly in the post-1991 period. This divergence in tactics reflects China and Russia's disparate capabilities and limitations. China's strategy in Africa relies extensively on long-term investments and the promotion of cross-regional connectivity, but has also featured limited forays into addressing regional security challenges. Russia's strategy in Africa, meanwhile, has weaker commercial foundations and is much more opportunistic. This is because Moscow pairs transactional deals in the mining, energy and defence sectors with tactical illustrations of its resistance to Western norms and military backing for authoritarian regimes in crisis.

7 Abbott Brayton, 'Soviet Involvement in Africa', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 17, no. 2 (1979): 253-254.

China's approach to power projection in Africa

During his June 2019 remarks at the G20 Summit in Osaka, Japan, Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasised the 'win-win' nature of China's involvement in Africa and highlighted Beijing's desire to synergise the BRI with AU's Agenda 2063,⁸ a continental initiative that seeks to promote inclusive growth and sustainable development in Africa. The mining sector has been key for China's long-term investments in Africa, with Beijing's share increasing from 0.4% in 2005 to 7% in 2018.⁹ Although China's reliance on African oil has fallen from 32% in 2007 to 18% in 2020 and remains largely concentrated on its trade relationship with Angola, the China National Petroleum Corporation maintains long-term contracts in Nigeria, with China United International Petroleum Corporation (Unipecc)'s Tang Suxin having facilitated the transfer of one million tons of Gabonese oil in 2004.¹⁰

China has also invested significantly in megaprojects. These include the building of the Caculo Cabaça Hydroelectric Power Station in Angola, the modernisation of Egypt's Suez Canal Economic Zone and the Edo State oil refinery in Nigeria, and the renovation of the AU and the headquarters of the Economic Community of West African States. Xi Jinping has repeatedly stated that Africa's poor infrastructure is the largest impediment to its development, and China's BRI investments emphasise intra-state and inter-regional connectivity.¹¹ In 2018, China contributed \$25.7 billion of Africa's \$100 billion investments in infrastructure projects. These investments include railway projects such as West Africa's longest double-track railway in Nigeria and the \$1.3 billion Tanzania Standard Gauge Railway,¹² but also extend to telecommunications. China has invested at least \$1 billion in Digital Silk Road projects in Angola, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Zimbabwe. The Digital Silk Road was unveiled in 2015 as part of the BRI and gives China a lead role in promoting digital connectivity between participating countries.

To complement its economic presence in Africa, China has cautiously contributed to collective security initiatives on the continent and exported its governance model to African countries. In addition to its deployment of UN peacekeepers, the country's security policy in Africa has emphasised non-interference and the alleviation of the economic drivers of conflict. China has opposed or diluted sanctions against countries accused of human rights abuses, such as Sudan and the CAR, on state sovereignty grounds. It has also countered

8 President Xi Says China-Africa Cooperation Always Yields Win-Win Results, China Global Television Network, June 28, 2019, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2019-06-28/President-Xi-China-Africa-cooperation-always-produces-win-win-results-HTaBDolaDC/index.html>.

9 Magnus Ericsson, Olof Löf and Anton Löf, 'Chinese Control over African and Global Mining - Past, Present and Future', *Mineral Economics* 33, no. 1-2 (2020): 153-181.

10 Jevans Nyabiage, 'Why Is China Looking beyond Africa for Oil Supplies?', *South China Morning Post*, September 5, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3100367/why-china-looking-beyond-africa-oil-supplies>.

11 'China's Xi Says Funds for Africa Not for "Vanity Projects"', Reuters, September 3, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/china-africa-idAFL3N1VO018>.

12 Jevans Nyabiage, 'China's Rail Spending Spree in Africa Is over but It's Still Laying Down the Tracks', *South China Morning Post*, June 27, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3138853/chinas-rail-spending-spree-africa-over-its-still-laying-down>.

accusations of apathy towards human rights by linking state-sponsored infrastructure development programmes to its participation in UN missions. This peace-building model, which was first advanced in Liberia in 2003, is the cornerstone of China's security involvement in Africa.¹³ The country's investments in fragile African states, such as South Sudan, is a key component of its 'developmental peace' model, which views economic modernisation rather than political liberalisation as the key driver of stability in Africa. As its economic assets in fragile states mount, Beijing could pair these investments with an expanded diplomatic role.¹⁴ China's chairmanship of meetings with rival South Sudanese factions in January 2015 and participation in the expanded Intergovernmental Authority on Development plus formal meetings on South Sudan point to this policy.¹⁵ However, China's restrained response to Ethiopia's conflicts with Eritrea, Sudan and, most recently, Tigray, suggest that arbitration is not a natural extension of its growing investment footprint.

Unlike France and Russia, China has refrained from engaging in expansive military interventions in Africa

Unlike France and Russia, China has refrained from engaging in expansive military interventions in Africa. Except for isolated cases, such as its 2017 mediation offer in the Eritrea-Djibouti border conflict,¹⁶ it has treaded cautiously regarding diplomatic arbitration. China has also leveraged its growing soft power through training programmes and targeted outreach efforts to African elites. The Chinese Communist Party, CCP's, post-1976 economic modernisation efforts have been positively received in Africa. For example, a June 2021 report from the Ethiopian Institute of International Affairs summed up the CCP's successful outreach efforts by stating that 'the story of the Communist Party of China proves in the most vivid way: a powerful political party can help the people start from scratch and achieve brilliant achievements.'¹⁷ China has capitalised on the CCP's appeal by organising training workshops and seminars for senior party cadres and political elites across Africa.¹⁸

13 Steven You, 'China's Approach to Peace in Africa Is Different. How and Why', *The Conversation Africa*, January 27, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/chinas-approach-to-peace-in-africa-is-different-how-and-why-129467>.

14 Pascal Abb, 'China's Emergence as a Peacebuilding Actor: From "Peaceful Development" to "Developmental Peace"?', *Asia Dialogue*, December 24, 2018, <https://theasiadialogue.com/2018/12/24/chinas-emergence-as-a-peacebuilding-actor-from-peaceful-development-to-developmental-peace>.

15 Aly Verjee, 'Explaining China's Involvement in the South Sudan Peace Process', *The Interpreter*, December 22, 2016, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/explaining-chinas-involvement-south-sudan-peace-process>.

16 Liu Zhen, 'China Offers to Mediate Djibouti-Eritrea Border Row as It Expands Military Presence in Africa', *South China Morning Post*, July 25, 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2103947/china-offers-mediate-djibouti-eritrea-border-row-it>.

17 'Āi sāi zhǔmíng zhìkù xuézhě mǎ lǎ kù shèngzàn zhōngguó gōngchǎndǎng bǎinián chéng jiù' ('Melakul, A Well-known Think Tank Scholar in Ethiopia Praises the Centennial Achievements of the Communist Party of China'), Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, June 29, 2021, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zfhzlt2018/chn/zfzs/t1887970.htm>.

18 Lina Benabadallah, 'Power or Influence? Making Sense of China's Evolving Party-to-Party Diplomacy in Africa', *African Studies Quarterly* 19, 3-4 (October 2020): 94-114, <https://asq.africa.ufl.edu/benabdallah-oct-2020>.

As almost 60% of foreign students in China's professional military education institutes are African, military academies in Africa, such as Uganda's Oliver Tambo Leadership Academy, are modelled after their Chinese counterparts or, in the case of Tanzania's Mwalimu Nyerere Leadership Academy, are directly funded by China.¹⁹

Despite these advances, China's involvement in Africa has faced periodic backlash. Chinese investments, which include the 2 600 MW hydropower scheme in Nigeria and the \$666 million investments in Kenya's tech city and Nairobi's highway projects,²⁰ have helped to alleviate Africa's energy security and infrastructure challenges. Nevertheless, these projects have been accompanied by extensive debt. The countries with the largest debts to China are Angola (\$25 billion), Congo Brazzaville (\$7.3 billion), Ethiopia (\$13.5 billion), Sudan (\$6.4 billion)²¹ and Zambia (\$6.6 billion).²² This has raised concerns about China's threat to the sovereignty of African countries. For example, because 45% of Angola's external debt is owed to Chinese lenders – under opaque terms – China has secured oil equity and thus far unsuccessfully attempted to expand its access to the strategic Benguela Railway.²³ Zambia is currently locked in a debt repayment dispute with China. These events contribute to China's standing as a lender-of-last-resort rather than a first-choice creditor for many African countries. At the September 2017 UN General Council, nine African leaders expressed a preference for conducting business with the US, but had been forced to settle for Chinese credit due to US disengagement from Africa.²⁴ China's exports of excess manufactured goods to African countries have also created acute trade imbalances, which crowd out local manufacturers from domestic markets and exacerbate structural unemployment. The 40% collapse of Kenya's cement exports after an influx of Chinese construction material entered the country is a compelling example of the risks associated with Beijing's policies.²⁵

Russia's approach to power projection in Africa

Russia's presence in Africa is undergirded by relatively shallow economic foundations, whereas Moscow has expanded its reach in the mining, energy, defence and agriculture sectors. Russia's normalisation of diplomatic relations with South Africa in 1992 was

19 Paul Nantulya, 'China Promotes Its Party-army Model in Africa', Africa Center for Strategic Studies, July 28, 2020, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/china-promotes-its-party-army-model-in-africa>.

20 'Kenya Secures \$666 Million from China for Tech City, Highway', Reuters, April 26, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kenya-china-idUSKCN1S21KC>.

21 Harry Broadman, 'Africa's Debt Dance with China in Creating the Belt Road Initiative', *The Africa Report*, April 21, 2021, <https://www.theafricareport.com/81857/africas-debt-dance-with-china-in-creating-the-belt-road-initiative>.

22 Deborah Brautigam and Yinxuan Wang, 'Zambia's Chinese Debt in the Pandemic Era', CARI Briefing Paper 05/2021, China Africa Research Initiative, September 28, 2021

23 'China's Southern Africa Debt Deals Reveal a Wider Plan', Chatham House, December 10, 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/12/chinas-southern-africa-debt-deals-reveal-wider-plan>.

24 Pearl Risberg, 'The Give-and-take of BRI in Africa', *New Perspectives in Foreign Policy* 17 (April 2019): 43–47, <https://www.csis.org/give-and-take-bri-africa>.

25 Paul Nantulya, 'Implications for Africa from China's One Belt One Road Strategy', Africa Center for Strategic Studies, March 22, 2019, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/implications-for-africa-china-one-belt-one-road-strategy>

expedited by the prospect of securing mining investments, and over the past decade, Russia's presence in Africa's mining sector has grown precipitously. Russia has vigorously targeted investments in platinum, gold and diamond mines in Africa, as Moscow is a leading player in all three sectors. Russia's JSC Afromet and Zimbabwe's Pen East have agreed to jointly produce up to 855 000 ounces of platinum and gold from Zimbabwe's Darwendale mine.²⁶ In April 2019, Russia's Alrosa and Angola's Endiama signed an MOU for cooperation on diamond production and exploration, which in 2020 led to the production of one million carats of diamonds worth \$90 million.²⁷

Russia's mining investments have also extended to countries facing economic isolation and have been aided by private actors. For example, Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close ally of Vladimir Putin, has used companies such as M-Invest and Lobaye Invest to access Sudan's gold mines, Guinea's bauxite deposits and the CAR's diamond reserves.²⁸ Russia's chairmanship of the Kimberley Process on conflict diamonds is aimed at loosening regulations for the export of diamonds from the CAR. In addition, its deployment of Wagner Group PMCs to Sudan and the CAR help to consolidate Russia's mining presence.

Russia has complemented its mining concessions with investments in the energy, defence and agriculture sectors. For instance, Russian oil giant Lukoil has agreed to a preliminary refining sector deal with Nigeria. State development bank VEB, meanwhile, has financed a refinery in Morocco and an oil products pipeline in Congo-Brazzaville.²⁹ Russian nuclear energy giant Rosatom also views Africa as a core market. Although its nuclear reactor deal with South Africa controversially unravelled in 2017, Rosatom has begun constructing the El Dabaa Nuclear Power Plant in Egypt. It has signed construction agreements for nuclear research centres with Rwanda, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Zambia, as well as less comprehensive MOUs with the DRC, Sudan and Uganda.³⁰ It remains to be seen if these translate into tangible nuclear builds.

Russian arms have added fuel to the fire of conflicts – for example, the war in Darfur, Sudan – but have also played a critical role in strengthening the defence infrastructure of African countries. Algeria, Angola and Egypt are Moscow's biggest clients, and Russian military hardware, such as MiG and Su-class jets, Pantsir-S1 missile defence systems and T-90 class tanks, have been distributed to at least 21 African countries.³¹

26 'Russian-Zimbabwean Firm to Invest \$400 Million in Zimbabwe Platinum', Reuters, March 15, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-zimbabwe-mining-platinum/russian-zimbabwean-firm-to-invest-400-million-in-zimbabwe-platinum-idUSKCN1GR222>.

27 Polina Devitt, 'First Diamonds from Angola's New Pipe to Arrive Mid-2020: Alrosa', Reuters, December 11, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-alrosa-africa-idUSKBN1YF1PP>.

28 'Treasury Increases Pressure on Russian Financier', U.S. Department of the Treasury, September 23, 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1133>.

29 Rosemary Griffin, 'Insight from Moscow: Russia Strengthens African Ties in Energy and Raw Materials', S&P Global Platts, July 17, 2020, <https://www.spglobal.com/platts/en/market-insights/blogs/oil/071720-insight-from-moscow-russia-strengthens-african-ties-in-energy-and-raw-materials>.

30 'Russia's Nuclear Play for Power in Africa', Deutsche Welle, June 30, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/russias-nuclear-play-for-power-in-africa/a-54004039>.

31 Mark Episkopos, 'How Russia Became Africa's Dominant Arms Dealer', *The National Interest*, February 23, 2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/how-russia-became-africa%E2%80%99s-dominant-arms-dealer-178656>.

In 2019, Russia announced plans to significantly expand its agricultural cooperation with Africa. To consolidate its standing as a key contributor to global food security, Russia has ramped up its wheat exports to sub-Saharan Africa, signed a vegetable oil production deal with Egypt, pursued meat export contracts with Ghana and Morocco and transferred vital agricultural technology to Lake Tana, Ethiopia.³²

Russia's soft power in Africa lags considerably behind China

Beyond these commercial deals, Russia views Africa as a vital theatre to showcase its opposition to Western norms and bolster its prestige as a conflict arbiter. Russia has maintained commercial links and actively opposed the imposition or retention of multilateral sanctions against regimes, such as Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe, Sudan under Omar al-Bashir, Eritrea and the CAR. Russia has justified these decisions by expressing support for national sovereignty and non-interference, and decrying Western efforts to impose their values on African countries. Moreover, Russia has channelled its economic investments to strengthen relationships with a diverse array of political factions and used Wagner Group PMCs to influence the balance of forces on the ground. This strategy of placing multiple bets within fragile state scenarios has bolstered Russia's arbitration capabilities. In the CAR, it has combined support for President Faustin-Archange Touadéra's government with outreach programmes to a broad variety of opposition groups. Owing to this balancing strategy, Russia helped to create a Central African opposition alliance in 2018, which eased tensions with ex-Séléka rebels and rival opposition groups.³³ Russia has also viewed its support of Libya National Army chieftain, Khalifa Haftar, as a means of expanding his bargaining power and has retained ties with the Tripoli-based authorities to facilitate a de facto partition of Libya.³⁴ Russia's assertive defence of authoritarian regimes and opportunistic actions in fragile states have been accompanied by backlash. Russia's soft power in Africa lags considerably behind China and the US,³⁵ and the conduct of its PMCs and political technologists (including landmine and alleged chemical weapons use in Libya, election interference in Madagascar and attacks on civilians in the CAR) has attracted negative scrutiny. Nevertheless, Russia's influence in the economic, military and diplomatic spheres has risen in a sustainable fashion since 2014, with the combined impact of backlash against its conduct in the Ukraine and economic sanctions forcing it to strike new partnerships in the Global South.

32 Alexander Gavrilenko, 'Zhdut nas v Afrike' ('Waiting for Us in Africa'), *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, November 7, 2019.

33 'Russia to Continue Mediation Efforts for National Reconciliation in CAR', TASS News Agency, August 31, 2018, <https://tass.com/politics/1019394>.

34 Mark Katz, 'What's the Meaning of Moscow's Murky Moves in Libya?', *Responsible Statecraft*, May 30, 2020, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/05/30/whats-the-meaning-of-moscows-murky-moves-in-libya>.

35 Christine Huang and Jeremiah Cha, 'Russia and Putin Receive Low Ratings Globally', Pew Research Center, February 7, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/07/russia-and-putin-receive-low-ratings-globally>.

Patterns of engagement between Russia and China

Since the 2001 Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation was signed, Russia and China have significantly strengthened their bilateral cooperation. This collaboration has not readily extended to extra-regional countries where Russia and China are rising powers, such as the Middle East or Latin America, as both countries pursue independent agendas with minimal strategic coordination, and periodically advance contradictory policies. The strengths and limitations of the Russia-China strategic partnership are also on display through their interactions in Africa. The two countries routinely express solidarity with each other against Western criticisms of their policies towards Africa. In addition, they frequently vote together in the United Nations Security Council, or UNSC, and pursue complementary maritime security agendas in the Indian Ocean. However, Russia and China have pursued disparate policies in fragile states such as the CAR, Libya and Sudan, engaged in asymmetric competition in the commercial sphere and, in general, refrained from bilateral dialogue on African affairs.³⁶ This has produced a competitive partnership dynamic, which blends opportunism, free-riding, low-grade contestation and elements of genuine cooperation.

Areas of Cooperation in Africa between China and Russia

As both Russia and China wish to challenge what they see as Western neocolonialism through the promotion of a multipolar order in Africa and align with anti-Western authoritarian regimes, their policies have received intense pushback from Western powers such as the US and France. As a result, Russian and Chinese officials view solidarity against these criticisms of their conduct in Africa as part of their broader struggle against 'unilateralism, protectionism and hegemony' on the world stage.³⁷ In March 2018, Russian

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36 The sole exception to this trend is the Department of African Affairs-level consultations between the Russian and Chinese Foreign Ministries that have occurred for the past three years. See 'China and Russia Hold the Third Round of Director-level Video Consultation on African Affairs', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, December 24, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1843163.shtml.

37 Zhang Hui and Xie Wenting, 'China, Russia Oppose Protectionism, Hegemony', *Global Times*, September 11, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1200624.shtml>.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov described then US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's remarks about China's role in Africa as 'inappropriate', and raised doubts about his claims that Chinese loans would undermine the sovereignty of African countries.³⁸ China returned the favour by obstructing UN reports that are critical of Russia's conduct in Africa, such as the September 2020 report that accused Moscow of violating the arms embargo against Khalifa Haftar in Libya.³⁹ Russian and Chinese media outlets also regularly promote stories that showcase the favourable aspects of Moscow's and Beijing's foreign policies in Africa. Sputnik, a Russian state-owned media service, regularly amplifies the narrative that China is building equal partnerships in Africa and is actively investing in the development of African countries, in contrast to power-hungry Western countries.⁴⁰ Similarly, RIA Novosti, another Russian state-owned news service, defended China against the Guangzhou racism controversy, which stemmed from forced evictions of Africans from Guangzhou.⁴¹ After the 2019 Sochi Summit, the Chinese Global Times praised Russia's departure from the Soviet-era 'aid model' towards building long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships with African countries.⁴²

Russia and China's normative positions in crises affecting African countries regularly converge, as both countries officially support non-interference in the internal affairs of states

Russia and China's normative positions in crises affecting African countries regularly converge, as both countries officially support non-interference in the internal affairs of states. This was not always the case. During the early 1990s, China was the principal force resisting US unilateralism in the UNSC, and Beijing's positions clashed with the views of former Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, who supported engagement with the West. During the December 1992 debates on Somalia, China called the United Task Force deployments to Mogadishu an exceptional action that should be confined to humanitarian crises, whereas Russia viewed it as a positive precedent for UN peacekeeping deployments in crisis areas.⁴³ The ascension of Yevgeny Primakov to Russia's foreign minister in 1996 caused Moscow to emerge as a strident critic of unilateral US sanctions and military

38 'Lavrov Calls Tillerson's Remarks about China-Africa Relations "Inappropriate"', TASS News Agency, March 8, 2018, <https://tass.com/politics/993308>.

39 Edith Lederer, 'Russia, China Block Release of UN Report Criticizing Russia', Reuters, September 26, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/libya-china-archive-united-nations-russia-383b41a57355670312265c05672153e5>.

40 Ian Taylor, 'Hysteria about China in Africa to Grow as US Always Needs an Enemy - Professor', Sputnik International, March 27, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803271062957831-us-china-africa-hysteria>.

41 Dmitry Kosyrev, 'Kto takoy rasist, ili Kak plokho obrashchalis' s afrikantsami v Guanchzhou' ('Who Is Racist or How Africans Were Mistreated in Guangzhou'), RIA Novosti, April 16, 2020.

42 Cui Heng, 'Russia Seeks to Spread Footprint in Africa', *The Global Times*, November 8, 2019, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1169421.shtml>.

43 Brian Frederking, *Resolving Security Dilemmas: A Constructivist Explanation of the INF Treaty* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 49.

deployments, and paved the way for a Sino-Russian normative alignment on crises in Africa. Russia and China voted to block the imposition of UN sanctions against Zimbabwe in July 2008. In June 2011, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and his Chinese counterpart, Hu Jintao, signed a joint declaration that urged NATO to refrain from expanding the scope of UNSC Resolution 1973, which mandated a no-fly zone in Libya.⁴⁴ Both Russia and China condemned Muammar al-Gaddafi's overthrow via a NATO-led military intervention, which culminated in his death in October 2011. After the June 2019 Khartoum Massacre, which resulted in the deaths of at least 128 Sudanese civilians, China and Russia blocked a UNSC resolution condemning Sudan's Transitional Military Council.⁴⁵

Both Russia and China are alarmed by the threat of piracy in the Indian Ocean, and due to their desire to counter Western influence, the two countries participate regularly in trilateral drills with Iran

Although strategic coordination and substantive cooperation between Russia and China in Africa is limited, maritime security in the Indian Ocean is a nascent area of collaboration between the two great powers. Both Russia and China are alarmed by the threat of piracy in the Indian Ocean, and due to their desire to counter Western influence, the two countries participate regularly in trilateral drills with Iran.⁴⁶ A formative development in Russia-China cooperation on Indian Ocean security was the November 2019 Russia-China-South Africa joint exercise. Moreover, China's naval base in Djibouti and Russia's potential facility in Port Sudan could both contribute to creating a genuinely multipolar security environment in the Indian Ocean and foster security cooperation between the two countries.

Sources of friction in Africa between Russia and China

Unlike the acrimonious rivalry between China and the Soviet Union in Africa, tensions between Russia and China are limited and are unlikely to seriously jeopardise the strength of their bilateral relationship. In October 2019, Chinese commentator Kong Fan argued that Russia-China divergences are minor in comparison to Moscow's rivalries with Western

44 Alexei Anishchuk, 'Update 1 - Russia, China Urge Adherence to Libya Resolutions', Reuters, June 16, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/libya-russia-china-idAFLDE75F13V20110616>.

45 'Toll in Sudan Army Attack Jumps as China, Russia Block UN Action', Al Jazeera, June 5, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/6/5/toll-in-sudan-army-attack-jumps-as-china-russia-block-un-action>.

46 Oriana Skylar Mastro, 'Russia and China Team up on the Indian Ocean', *The Interpreter*, December 16, 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/russia-and-china-team-indian-ocean>.

countries, stating that 'it is not yet known whether it [Russia] will unify with China, but it is impossible for it to unify with the United States.'⁴⁷ However, frictions between Russia and China reinforce negative stereotypes that Russian and Chinese officials possess about their respective foreign policies. Russia is tacitly concerned about China's efforts to infringe on its traditional sphere of influence in Central Asia and therefore views the Djibouti base as a stepping-stone for the globalisation of the Chinese military, which could extend to Tajikistan.⁴⁸ Similarly, Chinese officials are concerned about Russia's disruptive conduct in Africa, which potentially undermines the BRI. In November 2019, Wang Jiahao and Luo Jinyi, academics at Education University in Hong Kong, unfavourably contrasted Russia's military-focused approach to China's economic penetration strategy in Africa. They subsequently concluded that 'Russia and China's strategies in Africa are very different, and there has been no concrete coordination between the two countries to this day.'⁴⁹

Although Russia and China commonly vote together in the UN on African issues, this does not mean their positions uniformly align regarding the continent's security crises. In Libya, China maintained close relations with the UN-recognised Government of National Accord, which included discussions about inclusion in the BRI. This contrasted with Russia's preference for Khalifa Haftar. In the CAR, Russia's residual links with ex-Séléka rebels were viewed with frustration in Beijing, as these militias threaten the security of Chinese-owned oil deposits.⁵⁰ During the 2019 Sudanese Revolution, China's primary concern was state stability, whereas Russia was wedded to a hard-line counter-revolutionary agenda, which saw it first vigorously support Omar al-Bashir and next, support a military-brokered transition. Russia's willingness to capitalise on instability in the Sahel, which has intensified since the August 2020 coup in Mali, contrasts with China's desire to preserve the regional status quo. The proliferation of Russian PMCs across Africa could have an amplifying effect on Moscow's disagreements with China in fragile states, as the Wagner Group implements (at arm's length) most of Russia's policies that Beijing opposes. Former US Ambassador to Ethiopia, David Shinn, asserted in a May 2020 testimony to the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission that Wagner Group PMC activities could 'give China pause'.⁵¹

Despite their vast asymmetry in economic power, Russia and China have engaged in selective competition for commercial deals in Africa. This trend mirrors the competition between Western countries, including the US, Britain, France and Germany, for market share, but could create compartmentalised frictions. Chinese nuclear energy companies have capitalised on the high costs associated with Rosatom's projects to secure contracts

47 Kong Fan, 'fēizhōu, èluósī huì "lián zhōngguó kàng měi" háishi "yǔ zhōngguó jìngzhēng"?' ('Returning to Africa, Will Russia "Join China to Resist the US" or "Compete with China"?'), *Guangcha*, October 26, 2019.

48 'Kitay mozhet postroit' voyennyye bazy na Shelkovom puti' ('China May Build Military Bases on Its Silk Road'), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, August 5, 2019.

49 Wang Jiahao and Luo Jinyi, 'Èluósī zài fēizhōu de "fān zhīmín kǎ" hé "zǐdàn" shìfǒu zúgòu?' ('Are Russia's Anti-Colonial Cards and Bullets Sufficient?'), *The New Lens*, November 20, 2019, <https://www.thenewslens.com/article/127712>.

50 Vita Spivak, 'Russia Can't Compete with China in Africa. Not Yet', *Moscow Times*, October 25, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/25/russia-cant-compete-with-china-in-africa-not-yet-a67910>.

51 David Shinn, 'Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission', May 8, 2020, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Shinn_Testimony.pdf.

throughout Africa.⁵² Chinese cooperation with Libya on infrastructure projects, which are linked with its inclusion in the BRI, could clash with prospective Russian megaprojects – for example, the Russian Railways Benghazi-to-Sirte rail line which was aborted because of the 2011 Arab Spring protests in Libya.⁵³ Russia's and China's COVID-19-related public health assistance has also not been coordinated, as the Sputnik V and Sinovac vaccines have vied for market share in African countries. Although Sino-Russian economic contestation in Africa has generally been confined to individual sectors or bidding wars for selected contracts, a genuine rivalry has surfaced in Zimbabwe. Russia's investments in the Darwendale platinum mine and desire to enter Zimbabwe's gold sector was seen as a means of capitalising on the slowdown in Chinese investment.⁵⁴ As China's announced projects, such as the \$4 billion steel complex construction and \$1 billion Hwange power plant expansion, fell short of their promises, Russia stepped up its efforts to enter the Zimbabwean market after the November 2017 coup that propelled Emmerson Mnangagwa into power.⁵⁵ This pattern of economic contestation in Zimbabwe could intensify, as the COVID-19 pandemic slows the growth of BRI projects in sub-Saharan Africa.

Despite their vast asymmetry in economic power, Russia and China have engaged in selective competition for commercial deals in Africa

The future of Russia and China's policies towards Africa

As the COVID-19 pandemic gradually winds down, China and Russia are poised to see their influence in Africa continue to expand. Sinovac's efficacy struggles and Sputnik V's poor delivery track record have prevented either of the two countries from winning the vaccine diplomacy tussle in Africa. Continued US disengagement from Africa, which has not been reversed in spite of President Joe Biden's 'America is back' rhetoric, and the absence of a coordinated US-Europe great power competition strategy plays into Moscow and Beijing's hands. The most immediate risk to Chinese influence in Africa comes from debt defaults and increased security threats to Chinese nationals and economic projects, whereas Russia is most concerned with countering the backlash and setbacks of its

52 Jason Burke, 'Russia Pushing "Unsuitable" Nuclear Power in Africa, Critics Claim', *The Guardian*, August 28, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/28/russia-pushing-unsuitable-nuclear-power-in-africa-critics-claim>.

53 For details on Chinese reconstruction plans in Libya, see 'Zhuānfāng: Libiyā xīwàng yǔ zhōngguó jiāqiáng duō lǐngyù hézuò – zhuānfāng zhōngguó zhù libiyā dàshǐ guǎn línshǐ dàibàn wángqímín' ('Interview: Libya Hopes to Strengthen Cooperation with China in Many Fields – Interview with Wang Qimin', Charge d'Affaires of the Chinese Embassy in Libya), Xinhua, August 29, 2018.

54 Elena Platonova, 'Rossiya priblizhayetsya k Zimbabve' ('Russia Is Moving Closer to Zimbabwe'), May 15, 2016

55 Vadim Zaitsev and Andrey Maslov, 'Pochemu Rossiya interesuyetsya Zimbabve' ('Why Russia Is Interested in Zimbabwe'), Carnegie Moscow Center, October 9, 2018.

Wagner Group interventions in Africa. Although the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan could result in a further expansion of China–Russia security cooperation and an upgrade of their collaboration within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is little sign that this sense of common purpose will extend to extra-regional countries. The growing interoperability of Russian and Chinese military technology could result in cooperation in the military-technical sphere, but Moscow and Beijing are likely to compete for fighter jet and stealth weaponry contracts in Africa.

The rapid expansion of Chinese and Russian influence in Africa since the arrival of the new millennium has facilitated the creation of a truly multipolar geopolitical landscape on the continent

The rapid expansion of Chinese and Russian influence in Africa since the arrival of the new millennium has facilitated the creation of a truly multipolar geopolitical landscape on the continent. Despite concerns about Chinese economic hegemony and the corrosive impact of Russia’s military interventions on governance in Africa, the foundations of Moscow’s and Beijing’s influence in Africa are resilient. The US and Europe continue to pursue a dual containment policy towards Russia and China, as part of a broader strategic reorientation towards great power competition. However, it remains to be seen whether Sino–Russian engagement in Africa will convert into greater policy coordination.

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Cover image

China's President Xi Jinping, South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa and Russia's President Vladimir Putin arrive to pose for a group picture during the 10th BRICS summit on July 26, 2018 in Johannesburg, South Africa (Gianluigi Guercia/AFP via Getty Images)

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