

Russia–Africa relations in an age of renewed great power competition

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Rising global tensions, spurred on by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, have challenged Africa's relationship with Moscow. Africa's divided response to the conflict is seen by stakeholders across geopolitical divides as either an indication of its commitment to the international rules-based order, or lack thereof. This report assesses Russia–Africa relations against this backdrop. It argues that Africa requires a coherent strategy to both manage its relations with global powers and pursue its developmental and human security agenda.

Key findings

- ▶ After its influence in Africa waned for much of the 1990s, Moscow has made a concerted effort to expand its political and economic footprint across the continent since the mid-2000s.
- ▶ Russian economic engagements with African countries primarily involve arms exports and military cooperation mostly with North African states, as well as energy exploration, mining and trade. Except for arms exports, most of Africa's economic activities with Russia are much smaller than with other international partners.
- ▶ Moscow has attempted to deepen its political ties with African countries by appealing to the continent's anti-colonial, anti-imperialist worldview, and positioning itself as an alternative partner to the West.
- ▶ Russia has prioritised its political outreach to Africa in the post-2014 period as part of its efforts to reduce the impact of Western sanctions and growing isolation.
- ▶ African states are, on the whole, more closely aligned to Western partners on international peace and security matters.
- ▶ Africa's divided response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine is informed by political, economic and developmental concerns, both ideological and pragmatic, which do not neatly align with a Western worldview of the international order.
- ▶ Africa will become a site of greater geopolitical rivalry over the coming years, which will exacerbate the continent's crises and conflicts.
- ▶ Global geopolitical fractures are likely to deepen, necessitating a coherent strategy by African countries to leverage their collective weight and agency on the world stage.

Recommendations

- ▶ African leaders should better recognise how the continent's collective peace and security interests are affected by conflicts caused by geopolitical contestations among the major world powers (who occupy the five permanent seats on the UN Security Council), no matter how distant these may be.
- ▶ African countries need to better coordinate and cohere their positions on Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and other international peace and security matters stemming from geopolitical contestations amongst major powers.
- ▶ Africa's major international partners should recognise that Africa does not share their worldview of the international order (be it those of Western or revisionist powers). Rather, greater attention should be paid to specific points of convergence and divergence to inform their strategic policymaking toward the continent.
- ▶ Western powers need to acknowledge that the current international order has not delivered the economic or developmental dividends needed for African countries to improve on their marginal place in the international system. African states are naturally poised as revisionist actors, pushing them closer to the political orbit of countries such as China and Russia.
- ▶ More meaningful compromises are needed by Western powers to address the continent's marginal place in the international system, particularly in terms of restructuring the global governance system, which needs to become far more equitable and representative.

Introduction

In the period following Russian President Vladimir Putin's first visit to the African continent in 2006, relations between Russia and African states have grown considerably. Following a prolonged period of waning Russian influence in Africa, in the wake of the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991, there has been a concerted push toward political and economic re-engagement, which became particularly pronounced throughout the 2010s.

These efforts have often been anchored within a handful of selected African countries and within a few key areas of cooperation relating to arms, energy, military cooperation and expanding trade networks. Russia's political and economic footprint has, however, remained fairly marginal across the continent, when compared to African states' other major international partners. These include China, the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), the European Union (EU), individual EU member states, and, increasingly, other emerging powers including India, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar.

Russia has often been understood, particularly by Western actors, as having a comparatively outsized degree of political influence across Africa

Given the scale, scope and complexity of these relations (from trade and investment to development cooperation initiatives) Russia–Africa ties have often been outpaced by the continent's more varied and comprehensive activities with other external partners. In spite of this, Russia has often been understood, particularly by Western actors, as maintaining a comparatively outsized degree of political influence across the continent.

These views have become especially clear following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022 and the positions adopted by many African countries in response to this aggression within the United Nations General Assembly's (UNGA) 11th Emergency Special Session. In addition, numerous official statements and actions from African states in response to the conflict have reinforced Western concerns that Africa – much like the Asia-Pacific UNGA regional bloc – does not share Western powers' worldview, which inform its responses to Russia's aggression in Ukraine.

While Western leaders quickly and universally framed the invasion as a direct attack on the international rules-based, institutional, multilateral order, African states' positions have been divided, ambiguous and often framed against the backdrop of lessons learned during the Cold War era. Countries like South Africa, for example, view the ongoing conflict through an international balance-of-power prism. The government focuses on what it perceives as normative double standards and historical abuses of power by dominant



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global actors like the US — working through instruments like the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

Kenya, on the other hand, has been one of the early, most outspoken, African voices explicitly condemning Russian aggression, reflecting the way in which the conflict has been framed by Western leaders. While Kenya's posturing has subsequently become more muted, African countries remain divided. Their positions are based on varied, nuanced foreign policy considerations, specific to the circumstances of each individual country.

Despite this, the positions of many African states in response to the conflict has surprised many, and has been interpreted as an indictment of African multilateralism and the continent's lack of commitment to the international, rules-based, institutional order. The positions adopted so far are perhaps even more surprising given the high priority developing countries normally attach to international norms respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity. These views are particularly pronounced given the West's¹ overwhelming display of unity in condemning Russian aggression since the invasion of Ukraine.

While diplomatic relations between African and Western actors have remained fairly consistent so far, tensions have manifested in public debate, and in official and unofficial engagements between state actors during 2022. These have generally revolved around:

- Confusion and misunderstanding over the positioning of African states in multilateral bodies like the UNGA and the UN Security Council
- Ambiguities surrounding the positions of African countries as contained in statements made by official government representatives
- Veiled accusations of double standards and hypocrisy made not only by African governments against the West but also by Western actors against African countries
- Non-alignment being perceived as indifference, primarily by Western governments in trying to understand Africa's general positioning on the conflict

However, these tensions, while being precipitated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, are merely symptomatic of

longer-standing global geopolitical dynamics that have formed the backdrop against which this conflict has played out. At the centre of this is the growing divide and competition for influence among global powers including the US (and its Western allies), China and Russia.

Within this context, Africa is caught in an increasingly volatile tug of war between status quo and revisionist powers, each with their own particular worldviews, global aspirations, political agendas and ideas concerning the future of the international system. Accordingly, African countries may once again come to be seen primarily through the lens of this global geopolitical rivalry. This scenario would likely undermine the continent's collective agency in the international system, and set back attempts to pursue a common, coherent, developmental and peace and security agenda on the world stage.

Africa is caught in an increasingly volatile tug of war between status quo and revisionist powers

African leaders will therefore need to redouble their efforts in forging common approaches, based on clear strategic foresight, in pre-empting and responding to these overarching dynamics in the years to come. To achieve this, the continent will require robust and predictable working relations with committed partners on both sides of prevailing geopolitical divides. These partners should understand that Africa's position on Ukraine, for example, and its broader relations with Russia, are based on complex considerations, which do not simply imply support for one worldview (or set of partners) over another.

Without this understanding of the continent's position on the Ukraine conflict, and its contemporary relations with Russia, Africa's major international peace and security partners could reorient or scale back their cooperation with Africa in the years to come. Considering the myriad conflicts plaguing the continent, the results could be dire if Africa's peace and security agenda falls victim to these global geopolitical developments.

This report aims to provide a basis upon which contemporary Russia–Africa relations could be

understood and assessed by the continent's key international peace and security partners. It begins with a contextual, historical overview of African relations with the former USSR, before delving into some of the major substantive areas of interaction between African countries and Russia in modern times.

Following this, the report assesses multilateral positioning, particularly on global peace and security matters, between Russia and African states as another major substantive site of interaction. An overview of bilateral Russian engagements in four select African countries is then discussed before a case is made highlighting the necessity for African countries to develop a more coordinated and strategic approach toward Russia and other global powers. The report concludes by considering some of the long-term implications for Africa in managing its relations with global powers, across prevailing geopolitical divides, in pursuit of its collective developmental and peace and security agenda on the world stage.

Historical background

Relations between Russia and African states are generally understood within three distinct periods. The first relates to the significant political, economic and military cooperation that characterised relations between the USSR and newly independent African countries following the wave of decolonisation across the continent in the mid-20th century up until the dissolution of the USSR in 1991.

It is important to note that Africa's relations with the USSR extended to other Soviet Socialist Republics beyond the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic; however, as the legal successor to the USSR, the modern state of Russia has effectively laid claim to most of this shared history. The basis for much of this early cooperation between Africa and the USSR is often traced back to the adoption of the UN General Assembly's Declaration on Granting Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples (UNGA resolution 1514

Chart 1: Map of the USSR, 1989



Source: <https://maps.lib.utexas>

(XV) in 1960, which had been championed by Moscow.² This declaration coincided with the watershed 'Year of Africa' in which growing pan-Africanist sentiment, and pressures levelled against colonial powers, led to the independence of 17 African nations.³

Soviet support for this movement contributed to setting the stage for more substantial engagement with various African countries, which came to be based on the former's strategic, geopolitical ambitions in its ongoing ideological confrontation with the West.⁴ As argued by Ramani:

Moscow's influence on the continent was peripheral until Joseph Stalin's death in 1953. ... 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.⁵

Against this backdrop, the USSR came to be a vital partner to numerous liberation movements, providing material resources, educational exchanges and military training. Accordingly, throughout this period, Africa was seen by the Soviets as a vital site to contest and undercut Western influence. The USSR, on the other hand, was seen as a key African partner in not only supporting the pressing material needs of colonial-era and post-colonial liberation movements but also as a genuine international ally given its ideological and symbolic appeal in challenging an international order dominated by Western imperialist powers.

In Southern Africa, for example, South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) received more aid from the USSR than from any other international partner for close to a decade beginning in 1960 (the year of the party's official banning by the Apartheid government), after which this was surpassed by support from Scandinavian countries.⁶ However, as argued by Gottschalk: 'Scandinavian aid remained limited to peaceful aid only. Only the Soviet Union provided weapons and other military aid to the ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe.'⁷

Similar Soviet support during this period was directed at the South-West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) in

Namibia, the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), and the Liberation Front of Mozambique (FRELIMO).⁸ More broadly, during this period: 37 economic cooperation treaties were signed between the Soviet Union and African states, direct Soviet military assistance was provided in three conflicts (namely Angola, Mozambique and Ethiopia–Somalia), and approximately 250 000 Africans travelled to the USSR to study.⁹ As highlighted by El-Badawy et al:

[Of the many African students to study in the former Soviet Union] prominent African leaders were to emerge, including the post-apartheid South African Presidents Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma, who undertook military training in the Soviet Union, and Chad's Youssouf Saleh Abbas and the Central African Republic's Michel Djotodia, who, among other politicians, studied at Moscow's Patrice Lumumba Peoples' Friendship University.¹⁰

Consequently, a number of substantial interpersonal relations between Soviet officials and African liberation movement leaders were established during this period, a number of which have been sustained up until the present day (as seen in the case of South Africa under the ruling ANC government¹¹), or are being resuscitated against the backdrop of Russia's most recent re-engagement with the continent.

SA's ANC received more aid from the USSR than any other international partner for nearly a decade after 1960

The second distinct period in Russia–Africa relations can generally be seen in the years following the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 until the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The post-Cold War period, and the effective end of superpower rivalry, dramatically transformed the international system. Following the collapse of the USSR, Moscow naturally turned inwards, foregoing its socialist internationalist agenda to focus on economic recovery and other pressing domestic priorities, as well as those within its more immediate regional neighbourhood. Many African states lost their inherited geostrategic significance

on account of these global dynamics, and Russian influence in Africa (as the de facto successor to the USSR) declined significantly.

This decline and disengagement were seen most acutely throughout the 1990s, when the Russian economy's gross domestic product (GDP) stagnated at around US\$500 billion (in current value) between 1988 and 1992 before contracting, year-on-year, to just under US\$200 billion in 1999.¹² This volatile transitional period was further marked by skyrocketing inflation, a withered rouble and shortages of basic goods.¹³ As argued by Bangura, these economic troubles coupled with 'the loss of the Soviet republics ... and dependence on Western institutions for finance profoundly weakened Russia's status as a global power and provoked a conservative and neo-nationalist turn in domestic politics.'¹⁴ Tellingly, former Russian president Boris Yeltsin did not make a single visit to any African state throughout his terms in office from 1991 to 1999.¹⁵

While 1999 marked a turning point for the Russian economy, it took another five years before it recovered to the levels seen in the late 1980s, before steadily growing, year-on-year, until the 2008 global financial crisis. The domestic economic and political stresses associated with Russia's transition throughout the early 1990s overrode Africa as a site of any meaningful strategic interaction for much of the decade. Consequently, the material aid and support once provided to many of the continent's former liberation movements was scaled down considerably, including cooperation on infrastructure, health, agriculture and security.¹⁶ A notable exception, however, was military cooperation (primarily centred on arms sales and maintenance), given the technical and systemic dependencies created on military hardware established during the Cold War.

The turn of the millennium was a watershed moment in Russia's post-Cold War economic recovery. The election of President Vladimir Putin in 2000 saw sustained economic growth for more than a decade (with the exception of the 2008/09 period) on the back of soaring global commodity prices and the consolidation of major Russian state-owned enterprises (SOEs).¹⁷ The stabilisation of the country's domestic situation allowed Moscow to once again look outward in order to focus on broader geopolitical concerns.

While Africa still remained a fairly marginal consideration to Moscow during the early to mid-2000s, the decade did see a consistent year-on-year rise in the value of Russia–Africa trade, marking a ten-fold increase in trade volume seen, for example, in 1994.¹⁸ The decade also witnessed a number of substantial inward foreign direct investments from Russian SOEs (including Rosatom, Alrosa, Gazprom, Lukoil, among others) focused in the mining, energy and oil exploration sectors in South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, Liberia, Algeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Egypt.¹⁹

This nascent re-engagement with Africa was accompanied by a more clearly articulated foreign policy that factored in a handful of African states in the country's posturing and pursuit of greater multipolarity in the international system. This was signified, for example, by official visits by Putin to Egypt, South Africa, Algeria, Morocco and Libya in the 2005/06 period.²⁰ These were followed by visits to Egypt, Nigeria, Namibia and Angola by President Dmitry Medvedev in the 2008 to 2012 period.²¹

Domestic stresses linked to Russia's transition overrode interactions with Africa for much of the 1990s

These activities primarily focused on deepening commercial ties between Russia and selected African countries by exploring and facilitating Russian SOEs' activities on the continent — with particular regard to the energy, mining, arms and telecommunications sectors.²² Beyond this commercial focus, South Africa stood out as a notable exception, given the country's role within the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) grouping. This afforded South Africa a somewhat greater degree of attention and prioritisation by Russia (particularly in sub-Saharan Africa) as it was viewed as a key political partner to collectively contest, and potentially reshape, the US-dominated international order.

Throughout this period, however, political developments in Europe and across the Caucasus began to erode and reorient relations between Russia and Europe. Primarily

based on Moscow's perceived threat of EU and NATO expansionism that occurred throughout the 2000s, coupled with its stated concerns surrounding the plight of ethnic Russians in former Soviet Republics (a claim that has remained unsubstantiated by the UN²³), the Putin administration came to define its foreign policy toward the West in an increasingly hostile manner. This reorientation was perhaps most clearly elucidated in a 2007 speech by the Russian leader in Munich, which took aim at the US and NATO and provided a '[definitive rejection of] the European security order many in his audience had spent years trying to build.'²⁴

Deteriorating relations between Russia and the West came to a head in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea

This foreign policy reorientation was framed directly as a response to, or consequence of, the West's failure to establish its collective security arrangements without due consideration of Russian interests.²⁵ As argued by Milosevich:

The war in Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea, and the beginning of the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014 were key events that changed Russia's status as a 'strategic partner' of the European Union to a 'key strategic challenge' in 2016. ... [Coupled with later crises in Belarus and Nagorno-Karabakh] [t]hese events produced the greatest challenge to European security since the Cold War and have intensified the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West.²⁶

The deterioration in relations between Russia, the EU (and its member states) as well as the US (and other Western allies) came to a head in 2014 following the annexation of Crimea and the imposition of sanctions against Russia by the EU and the US, among others. In hindsight, these measures were largely ineffectual and did not go far enough.

The imposition of sanctions was not followed up by other necessary political interventions to restore the status of Crimea in the years following the annexation, nor to undertake meaningful conflict resolution. Moreover, much

of the West's core commercial relations with Moscow continued, particularly in terms of the import of oil and natural gas, to satisfy Western Europe's dependency on these vital strategic resources.

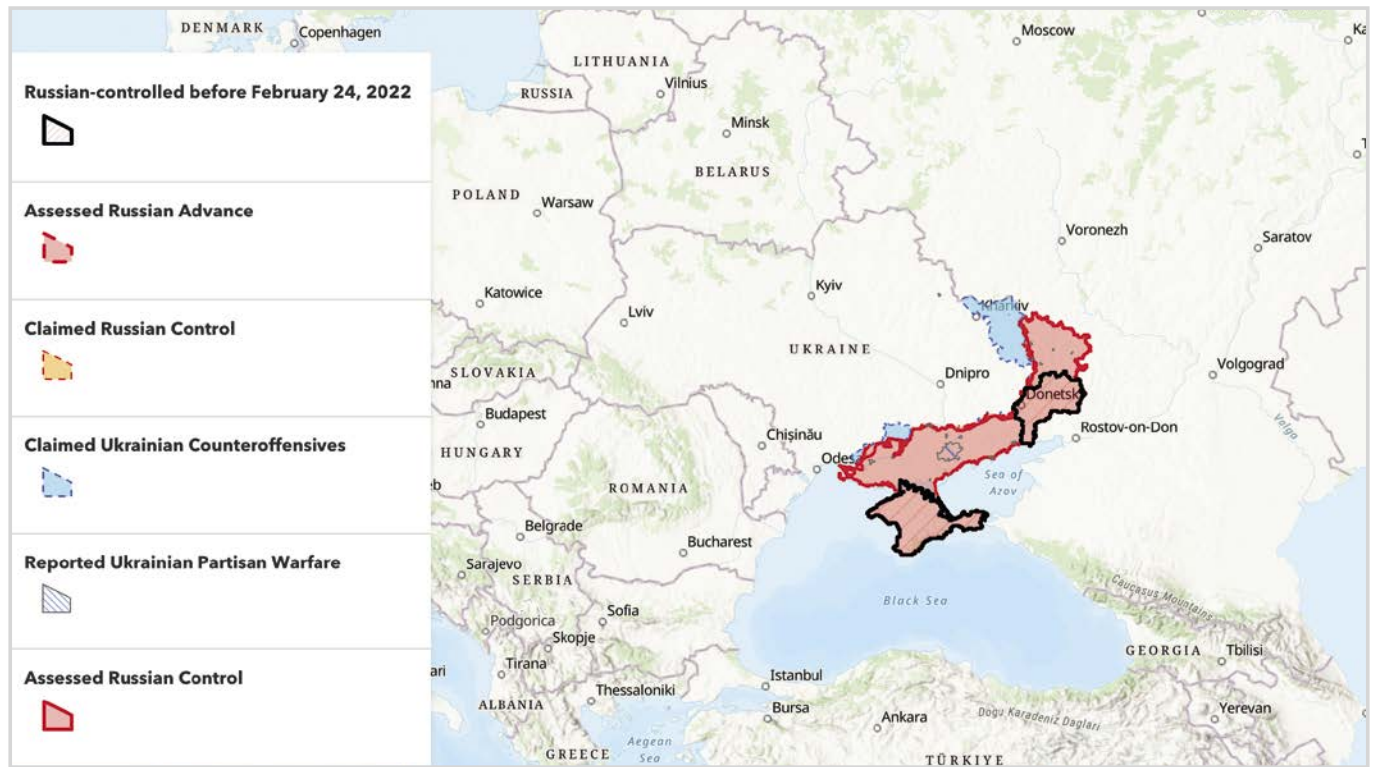
Regardless, the imposition of sanctions did indicate a new, more contested phase in relations between Russia and Western actors. EU measures, for example, focused on weakening Moscow's ability to finance war in Ukraine and punishing the country's elite responsible for the 2014 invasion. These included a mix of:²⁷

- Asset freezes and travel restrictions imposed on key Russian political and military figures.
- Economic sanctions focused on Russia's financial, energy, transport, defence, raw materials and luxury goods sectors. These include a range of measures such as restricting access to EU markets, prohibitions on various Russian imports and trade, the closure of EU airspace to Russian registered aircraft, and SWIFT bans for certain Russian banks, among many others.
- Restrictions on media, particularly focusing on the activities of Russian state-owned broadcasters, for instance *Sputnik* and *Russia Today*.
- Diplomatic measures seeking to punish political elites responsible for violating international laws, as well as the adoption of various other punitive measures relating to existing economic cooperation with Moscow.

Similarly, in the wake of the Crimean invasion in 2014, the US imposed a number of sanctions against Moscow, detailed through the issuance of four key executive orders by former US president Barack Obama. Collectively, these measures focused on various travel restrictions, targeted economic sanctions against certain banks, defence and energy companies, and the suspension of credit finance (previously directed toward encouraging development projects and exports to Russia), among others.²⁸

Taken together, the measures imposed by the EU, the US and other Western actors worked toward straining the Russian economy (which coincided with the collapse in oil prices during this period) and led to countersanctions by Moscow against the EU and other international actors.²⁹ The International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicted, at the time, that the cumulative effect of these measures would contribute to a drop in Russian GDP by

Chart 2: Russian occupied territories in Ukraine



Source: Institute for Study of War

3.4% in 2015, driven by ‘a contraction in domestic demand weighed down by falling real wages, higher cost of capital, and weakened confidence.’³⁰

While the Russian economy’s contraction was not as severe during the 2014/15 period (at 2%), its recovery over the subsequent years has struggled to break past the 5% annual GDP growth mark, witnessed between 1999 and 2008.³¹

These developments have defined the third (and current) distinct period in Russia–Africa relations, characterised by a much more overt turn toward the continent in Moscow’s attempts to circumvent Western political isolation and to alleviate the economic impact of Western sanctions. While Africa remains an under-appreciated strategic consideration in existing official Russian foreign policy documents with only seven references made in the country’s 2016 Foreign Policy Concept³² (most of these referring to the Middle East and North Africa), Russia–Africa relations have nonetheless grown considerably (and garnered much greater attention) in recent years.

Against this backdrop, Africa has come to represent an increasingly prominent place in Russian attempts to

re-establish itself as a major power and its growing contestations with the West. So much so that Moscow has indicated that the continent will feature more prominently in the country’s upcoming new version of its official Foreign Policy Concept.³³ Its relations with a range of African countries since 2014 have highlighted how Moscow, despite its comparatively limited material capabilities and power-projection toolkit, is indeed capable of deploying a frugal and transactional foreign policy that manages to pay outsized dividends with respect to political influence and short-term economic benefit.³⁴ These interactions can be categorised into a number of broad thematic areas and are detailed in the following section.

Key areas of engagement

Russia–Africa relations grew considerably in the latter half of the 2010s, in spite of rising international tensions following the annexation of Crimea. As highlighted by Kachur, ‘Since the imposition of Western sanctions, Africa has become the only region in the world to consistently increase imports from Russia.’³⁵ Despite

lagging far behind most other international partners on the continent, there has accordingly been considerable political momentum built over this period to signal some form of accelerated cooperation moving forward.

This revived relationship was built on the back of at least 16 official visits by African heads of state to Moscow in the 2015 to 2019 period,³⁶ a doubling in trade in the 2014 to 2019 period,³⁷ and culminating in the 2019 Russia–Africa Summit hosted in Sochi and attended by 43 African heads of state. The 2019 summit signalled Moscow’s intent to bolster trade and non-conditional financial assistance to African states over the coming years while underscoring the value of the Russia–Africa partnership within the areas of energy, arms and military cooperation.³⁸ These are detailed below.

Trade in arms

Russia’s contemporary economic and political footprint across Africa is most clearly visible in terms of the sale of arms. Whereas the country lags far behind the continent’s other international partners in various other areas, Russia has maintained its position as one of the continent’s leading partners for arms sales — with state-owned arms companies, like Rosoboronexport, establishing a more substantial foothold across the continent in recent years.³⁹

Arms sales are often seen as a key avenue leveraged by Russia to establish, sustain and expand its political influence within African states

Data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) highlights that Russia was the continent’s largest arms supplier in the 2017 to 2021 period (and the second largest globally), constituting 44% of all arms imports to the continent — far ahead of the US, China and France at 17%, 10%, and 6%, respectively.⁴⁰ Despite an overall drop in arms exports to the continent over the prior 2012 to 2016 period, Russia clearly sees Africa as a major long-term export market for its military hardware — and a vital market to secure foreign revenues as its export economy becomes increasingly strained as a result of Western sanctions.

Perhaps more importantly, however, Russian arms sales are often seen as a key avenue that is leveraged by Russia in order to establish, sustain and expand its political influence within African states. As argued by Stronski, ‘Guns have opened many more doors for the Kremlin in Africa than butter.’⁴¹ This is most starkly seen, in recent years, in the Central African Republic (CAR), in which the delivery of weapons to the country in 2017 facilitated more substantial cooperation: from the deployment of Russian military advisors (and presidential guards), to the issuing of licences to numerous Russian mining companies, to the growing, controversial, operations of the quasi-private Russian military company, Wagner Group.⁴²



RUSSIA WAS AFRICA'S
LARGEST ARMS SUPPLIER
FROM 2017–2021

Moreover, Russia's sale of arms, as a political avenue to expand its influence, is further exploited to capitalise on the conditionalities imposed on African countries by Western actors on the continent. El-Badawy et al highlight the cases of Nigeria and Egypt in this regard, in which Russia effectively stepped into the vacuum left behind by the US over human rights concerns in supplying the Nigerian government with attack helicopters in 2014 and the souring in US–Egypt relations since the country's military coup in 2013.⁴³

Similarly, in Mali, deteriorating relations with France following the country's 2020 coup⁴⁴ have seen Russia step into the void left behind by French forces, through the provision of military hardware and the entrance of Wagner Group personnel.⁴⁵ While there had been cooperation with Moscow prior to the coup, this has been intensified more recently as previous agreements have come into force under the current military junta.⁴⁶

Much of this trade is, however, primarily concentrated in North Africa and confined to just two major countries, namely Egypt and Algeria. This makes arms sales, in isolation, a poor quantitative indicator of Russian activity and influence across the breadth of the continent's 54 states. It is worth mentioning that three African countries feature in the top 30 arms import markets for this period, namely Egypt (third place), Algeria (11th place) and Morocco (25th place), with Russia being the primary arms supplier to both Egypt and Algeria.⁴⁷

Egypt particularly stands out in this regard given that it was also the third largest global recipient of Russian arms exports for the 2017 to 2021 period (behind India and China), while further being the third largest global import market for arms in this period (behind India and Saudi Arabia).⁴⁸ Broader political considerations have also bolstered relations between Cairo and Moscow in more recent years, primarily centred around regime change and converging interests following the 2011 NATO-led military intervention in Libya.⁴⁹

Taken together, North African states skew Russia's perceived influence on the continent as a function of its role as a key arms exporter. Accordingly, it may be more useful to qualitatively assess this influence within smaller sub-Saharan African countries (like the CAR and Mali), in order to determine how the sale of arms may facilitate broader political and economic relations

between Russia, African states and African political elites, more specifically.

Military cooperation

Russian military cooperation with African countries (beyond the trade in arms) mirrored the country's comparatively marginal place on the continent throughout much of the 2000s and early 2010s. However, this changed in 2014 with Moscow's strategic pivot toward the continent — again primarily in response to Western sanctions. Between 2014 and 2018, it is reported that at least 19 military cooperation deals were signed between Moscow and sub-Saharan African states, broadly covering issues such as counterterrorism, peacekeeping, piracy, training, technical assistance and the provision of military hardware.⁵⁰ In more recent years, additional agreements have been signed with the governments of Mali (in 2019),⁵¹ as well as Nigeria and Ethiopia (in mid-2021).⁵²

From 2014–18, 19 military deals were reportedly signed between Russia and sub-Saharan African states

In a similar fashion to Russia's trade in arms with the continent, these military cooperation agreements are generally understood as another vital political avenue used by Moscow to grow its influence on the continent, circumvent Western isolation, and challenge the dominance of the US and European countries in Africa. This approach is particularly clear in certain African settings in which Moscow has sought to exploit and capitalise on cases in which relations with the West have frayed on account of active, ongoing conflicts.

For example, this was seen in the recent case of Nigeria, in which Moscow signed a military cooperation deal with the country following the stalling of a US\$1 billion weapons sale in light of concerns over human rights abuses.⁵³ Similarly, in Ethiopia, Russia has stepped up its support of the government through the supply of weapons, following increasing tensions between Addis Ababa and the US over the country's military response to the conflict in the Tigray region.⁵⁴

And in Mali, a deterioration in French relations with the interim government in Bamako, particularly following President Macron's condemnation of the coup in May 2021, has led to a much more pronounced Russian presence in the country in support of Colonel Goïta's regime.⁵⁵ These cases highlight the fact that while Russia may see African states in conflict as a strategic opportunity to embed itself with ruling political elites, and expand its political footprint on the continent as part of its broader global geopolitical contestation with the West, African political elites, too, view Russia as a vital partner to counteract Western pressures and concerns surrounding their own internal affairs.

Undoubtedly, the most controversial dimension of Moscow's recent re-engagement with the continent, within the indistinct realm of military cooperation, is the growing reports and concerns surrounding the activities of the Russian quasi-private military company the Wagner Group. Founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin,⁵⁶ a close associate of President Putin, the Wagner Group rose to prominence in the 2014 annexation of Crimea before surfacing in other conflicts in which Moscow maintained a vested interest, such as in Syria.⁵⁷

From the first reports of Wagner Group operatives working in the CAR in 2017 in aid of the stability of the Touadéra administration, concerns about the group's operations have proliferated in recent years across a number of other conflict-affected African states, including Mozambique, Mali, Libya and Sudan.⁵⁸ The group's efforts have primarily centred around safeguarding the interests of ruling political elites, often under the guise of advisory services, particularly focusing on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations.⁵⁹ Consequently, it is believed that Moscow leverages the Wagner Group and other private military companies in Africa in order to embed itself among political elites, grow its political influence and seek out mining concessions and commercial opportunities.

While Moscow has denied official relations with the activities of the group, there is mounting evidence that points to the Wagner Group as the sharp end of the covert stick employed by Moscow to pursue opportunistic, predatory behaviour. This is done in concert with African political elites across the continent's conflict zones, with the major added advantage of

plausible deniability. These concerns are highlighted in recent reports of the UN Human Rights Council's special working group on mercenaries, who have documented and expressed concern about connections between Wagner Group (and other mercenary) activities in the CAR and violence against civilians and other human rights abuses.⁶⁰

Equally concerning are the reports by the working group on the close connections between the UN's peacekeeping operation in the country (MINUSCA) with Wagner Group operatives and the governments of CAR and Russia.⁶¹ In particular, the group highlighted coordinated meetings that had taken place between MINUSCA officials and Russian 'advisors' linked to the Wagner Group among other Russian security services in the country.⁶² In a press release from March 2021, the experts group argued that the 'blurring of the lines between civil, military and peacekeeping operations during [ongoing hostilities in the CAR] creates confusion about legitimate targets and increases the risks for widespread human rights and humanitarian law abuses.'⁶³

Evidence suggests the Wagner Group is the sharp end of the covert stick used by Moscow for predatory purposes

Similar concerns have been raised by the working group with regard to Libya, in which the activities of mercenaries were said to have contributed to the escalation of the country's conflict in 2020.⁶⁴ And, more recently, reports of human rights abuses levelled against the Wagner Group, in conjunction with Malian soldiers, have come to the fore, with a major spike in civilian deaths in the first quarter of 2022 surpassing the total number of recorded deaths in all of 2021.⁶⁵

Energy and mining

Another major area of Russia–Africa economic relations concern energy and mining-related activities. Given Africa's vast mineral wealth, its current and future energy and developmental needs, and Russia's technical expertise in these sectors, greater cooperation is an easy political sell for all parties involved — based on mutual

benefit. As highlighted by Ramani, ‘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.’⁶⁶

For Russia, Africa’s mineral wealth and energy demands provide a strategically important arena in which to circumvent Western sanctions once again in order to dually shore up its supplies of precious metals and rare earths, as well as to secure foreign revenues for energy-related projects. For African countries, and particularly those ruled by regimes under Western sanctions themselves, Russia is an appealing partner given its wealth of technical expertise, non-conditional approach to cooperation, and its global position as a counterweight to the West.

While arms sales are Russia’s avenue for political and economic influence, energy and mining deals are the result of these transactional ties

The latter consideration may gain greater attention over the coming years as Africa’s energy needs, and green energy transition, have become increasingly politicised and framed in opposition to Western double standards, and lack of urgency. These contradictions are highlighted by Auth and Moss who point attention to the scramble among developed states to secure natural gas supplies following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, whereas ‘when Africans have articulated their own need for a mix of transitional energy resources (including gas), they have been met with hesitation, denial, and a decided lack of urgency.’⁶⁷

Building on the momentum established in the early 2000s, a number of Russian state-owned companies have led the charge in the country’s broader re-engagement with the African continent in more recent years. These include: Alrosa, focused on diamond mining operations in Angola and Zimbabwe; Rosneft, focusing on oil and gas exploration in Nigeria and various other African countries; as well as Rosatom, focusing on nuclear energy development across the continent (most notably in Egypt).⁶⁸

While these efforts have not all led to tangible projects or investments yet, there is considerable symbolic value in the potential of this cooperation, as set out in various memoranda of understanding and cooperation agreements. Other Russian energy companies such as Gazprom and Lukoil have also bolstered their presence in Africa in recent years with significant investments across Angola, Uganda, Egypt and Algeria.⁶⁹

Whereas Russia’s sale of arms in Africa is often viewed as a political avenue to anchor and grow broader political and economic influence, energy and mining, on the other hand, are often understood to be the end result of these kinds of transactional relationships. The case of Sudan and the CAR



AFRICA’S MINERAL WEALTH
& ENERGY NEEDS ENABLE
RUSSIA TO CIRCUMVENT
WESTERN SANCTIONS

particularly stand out in this regard, where prior Russian interactions (in the form of arms sales, military support and the operations of Wagner Group operatives) set the stage for subsequent mining operations, focusing primarily on gold in Sudan and diamonds in the CAR.⁷⁰

Trade and development assistance

Russia–Africa trade, in general terms, still lags far behind the continent’s other major international partners, including the EU, China, the US and India.⁷¹ By most accounts, Africa remains a marginal player in the Russian economy and vice versa. This marginal position becomes even starker when viewing Russian trade relations, specifically with sub-Saharan African countries, given the disproportionate overall share of trade concentrated between Russia and the North African states of Egypt, Algeria and Morocco.⁷² In sub-Saharan Africa, relations are further skewed by the disproportionate concentration of trade in goods and services between Moscow and South Africa, with imports from Russia (totalling just over R9 billion in 2021) exceeding South African exports to the country (at just over R6 billion).⁷³

Russian imports from Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, South Africa and Tunisia (generally the country’s largest trade partners on the continent) are primarily composed of a diverse mix of vegetables, raw materials, consumer goods, intermediate goods, capital goods, chemicals, machinery and electronics, textiles and clothing, and minerals.⁷⁴ Based on this, there is clear political momentum, from Moscow at the very least, to accelerate growth in trade with African countries.

This follows from the 2019 Russia–Africa Summit, as well as more recent reports indicating plans to increase the number of Russian trade missions in Africa (which currently total four in South Africa, Egypt, Algeria and Morocco) to counteract the effect of Western sanctions, as well as Russian countersanctions against the West.⁷⁵

In terms of the provision of development assistance, Russia is again a comparatively marginal actor across Africa when viewed against the continent’s other major international partners. In sharp contrast to the role played by the USSR, particularly between 1960 and 1991, Russia’s more recent development assistance initiatives in Africa have not focused on any significant large-scale

infrastructural projects or technical assistance programmes. Rather, debt forgiveness has often taken centre stage in Moscow’s attempts to bolster and rekindle relations with African states. Following the 2019 Russia–Africa Summit, for example, President Putin underscored the fact that Moscow had effectively written off a total debt exceeding US\$20 billion owed by African countries.⁷⁶

The role played by the former Soviet Union in rolling out large-scale development assistance and infrastructural projects in Africa has come to be supplanted by the roles of other emerging powers mainly driven by China as well as the EU and the US. Moreover, Russia’s provision of development assistance initiatives in Africa remains ad hoc and uncoordinated due to the lack of a dedicated aid agency, with its overall aid budget spent in Africa averaging just 4.4% for the 2012 to 2017 period.⁷⁷

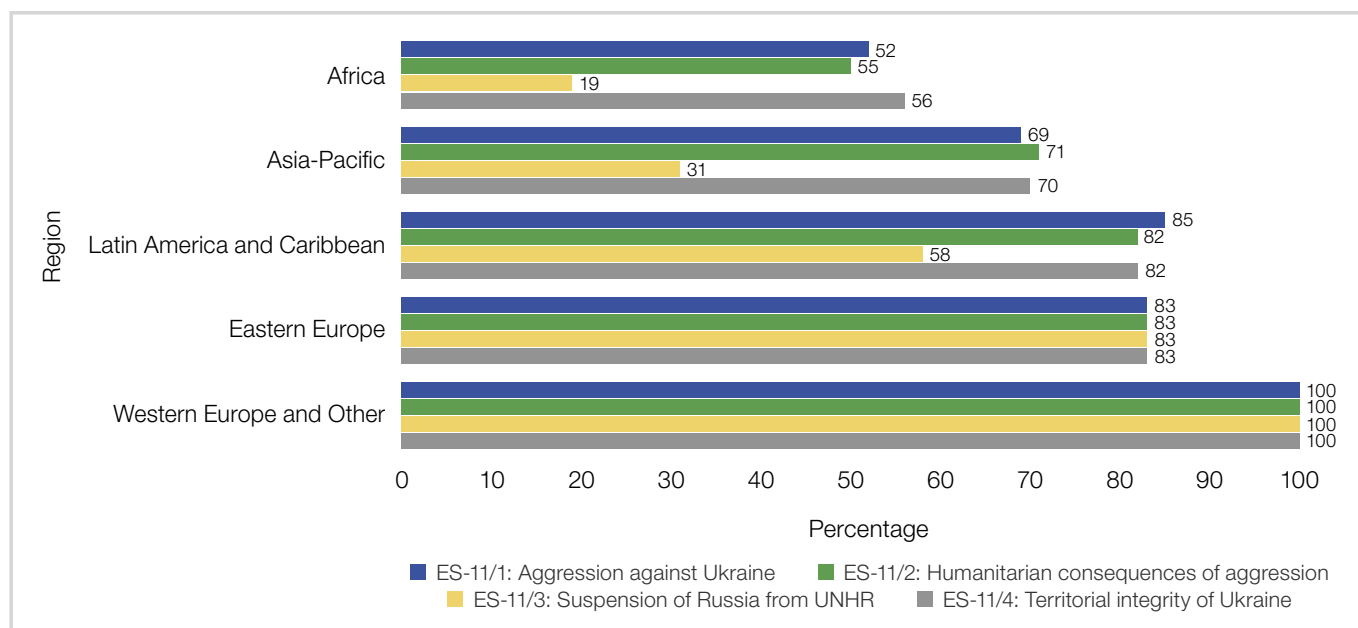
African positions against the backdrop of rising global divisions

Based on the various areas of engagement detailed in the previous section, the relationship between Russia and Africa is generally viewed as one that has grown consistently over the last two or so decades, supporting the notion of a kind of grand Russian re-engagement with the continent. While Russia still lags behind the continent’s other major international partners on various fronts, the Russia–Africa relationship has nonetheless become far more substantial, particularly since 2014.

Additionally, against the backdrop of rising global geopolitical tensions, the political considerations underpinning Moscow’s relations with particular African states and political elites show no signs of abating any time soon. This may potentially lead to an even more accelerated drive by Russia to anchor and grow its political influence across the continent in order to circumvent and counteract Western sanctions and subsequently ease the domestic economic fallout of its ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

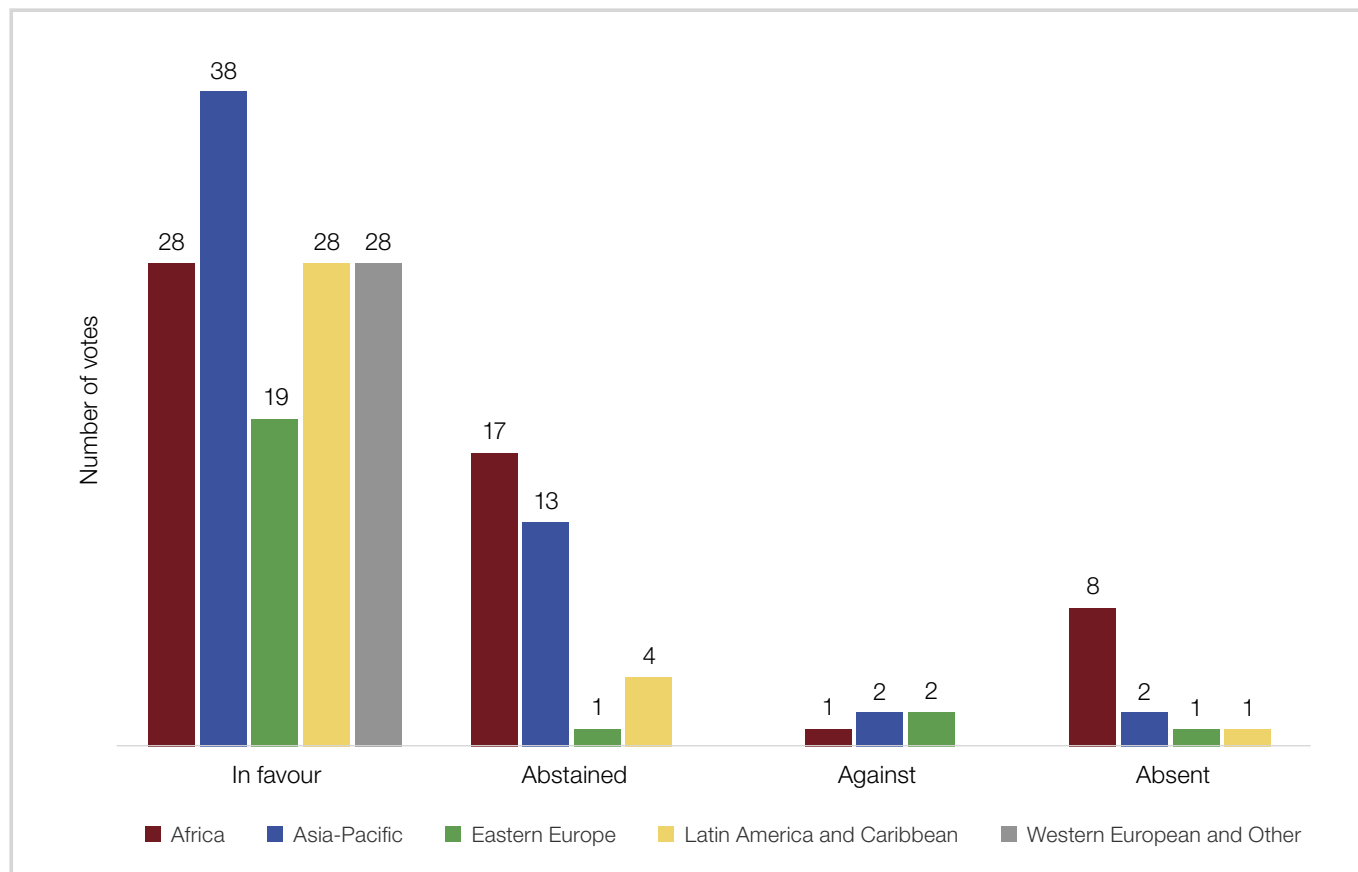
Somewhat perversely, rising global tensions between Western countries (and others, notably from Eastern Europe) and Russia have conferred a greater degree of geostrategic significance among African countries. This is due to the continent not only being viewed as an ideological testing ground between competing

Chart 3: Percentage of states in each UNGA voting region voting in favour of tabled resolutions of the 11th Emergency Special Session on Ukraine



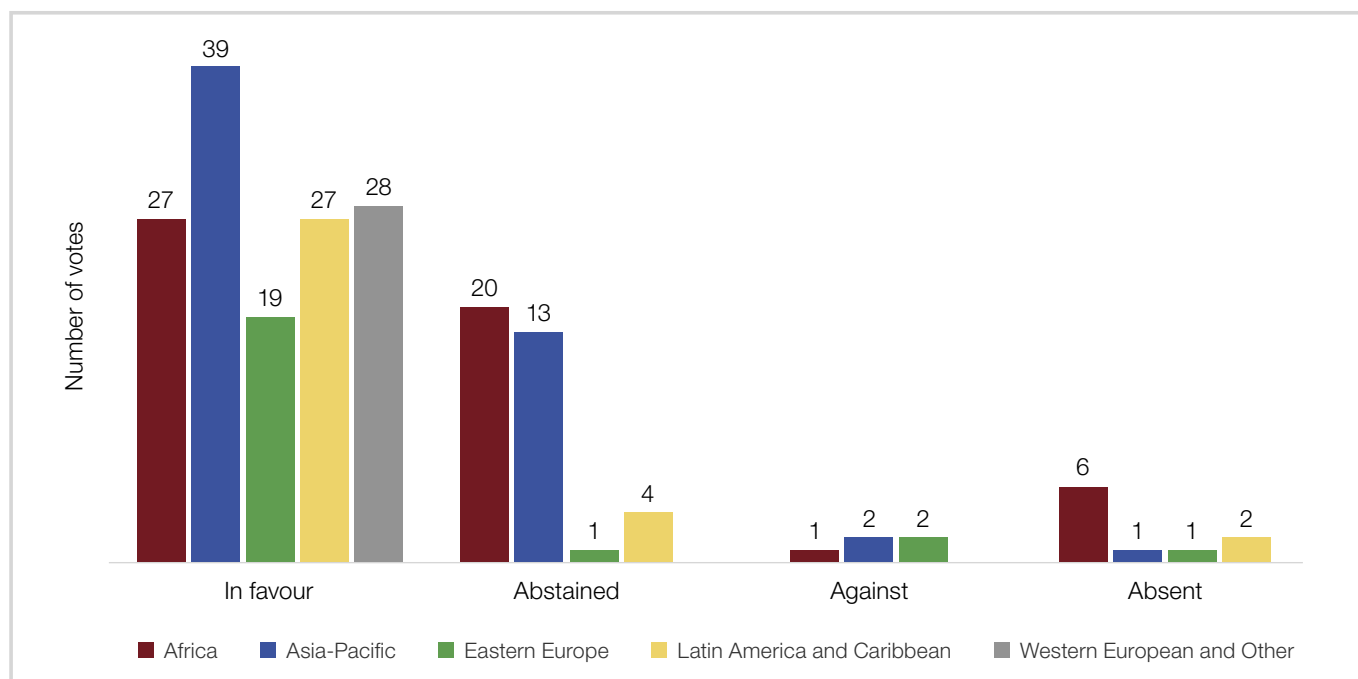
Source: Author

Chart 4: Total number of votes across regions and categories for UNGA resolution ES-11/1 on aggression against Ukraine (adopted on 2 March 2022)



Source: Author

Chart 5: Total number of votes across regions and categories for UNGA resolution ES-11/2 on the humanitarian consequences of aggression against Ukraine (adopted on 24 March 2022)



Source: Author

worldviews between East and West but also as an increasingly contested space by world powers to secure the continent’s vast mineral wealth and growing commercial markets.

Accordingly, significant global attention has centred around the continent’s collective positioning on the ongoing conflict in Ukraine in order to determine where African states effectively situate themselves across prevailing global geopolitical divides, as well as African countries’ broader commitment to the upkeep of current international rules-based order.

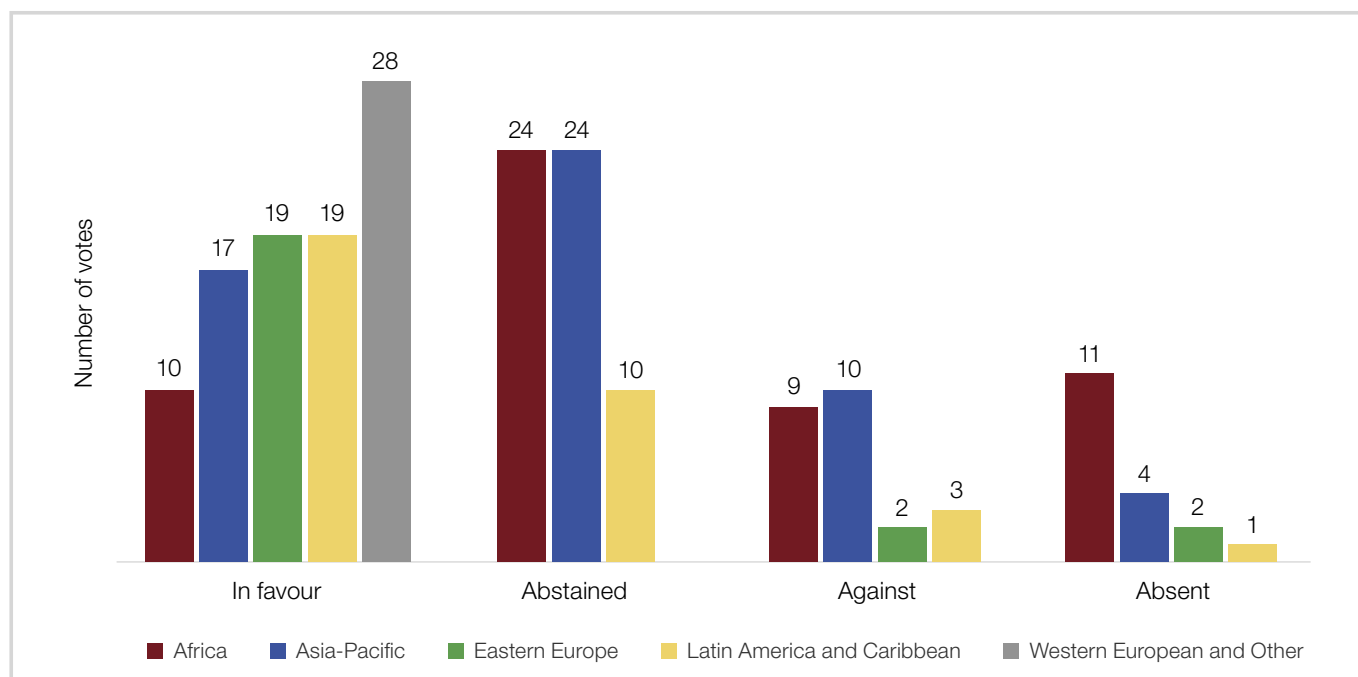
The major questions raised by the continent’s international partners to this effect have generally been twofold. Firstly, do African governments regard recent Russian aggression against Ukraine as an attack on the fundamental normative bedrock of the international, institutional rules-based order? And, secondly, are African states moving closer to the political orbit of Russia and thereby undermining the West’s attempts to isolate Moscow? A comparison of regional voting outcomes stemming from the UNGA’s 11th Emergency Special Session is useful in attempting to answer these questions. These are illustrated in Charts 3 to 6.

This ongoing Emergency Special Session of the UNGA was convened following the adoption UN Security Council resolution 2623 (2022)⁷⁸ in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the lack of unanimity of the Council’s five permanent members. This led to the adoption of resolution ES-11/1,⁷⁹ which, among other things, condemned, in the strongest terms, Russian aggression against Ukraine, in violation of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter.

As seen in Chart 4, the resolution passed with 141 votes in favour, with five against, and 35 abstentions. What stood out from this voting outcome was that African states by far constituted the largest number of abstentions (17 in total), while the continent was also the least supportive regional bloc in favour of the resolution’s adoption (with only 52% of African countries voting in favour).

African states once again represented the highest number of abstentions (20 in total) in the passage of resolution ES-11/2,⁸⁰ focusing on the humanitarian consequences of Russian aggression against Ukraine in March 2022 — with 50% of the African group voting in favour of its adoption. African support for the

Chart 6: Total number of votes across regions and categories for UNGA resolution ES-11/3 on the suspension of Russia in the Human Rights Council (adopted on 7 April 2022)



Source: Author

session's subsequent resolution, ES-11/3,⁸¹ calling for the suspension of Russia from the Human Rights Council, fell precipitously with just ten African countries supporting its adoption (down from an average of 28 across the two prior resolutions). Similarly, the number of African abstentions rose to 24 (up from an average of 19), as well as votes against the adoption of the resolution rising to nine states (up from the singular case of Eritrea across the two prior resolutions).

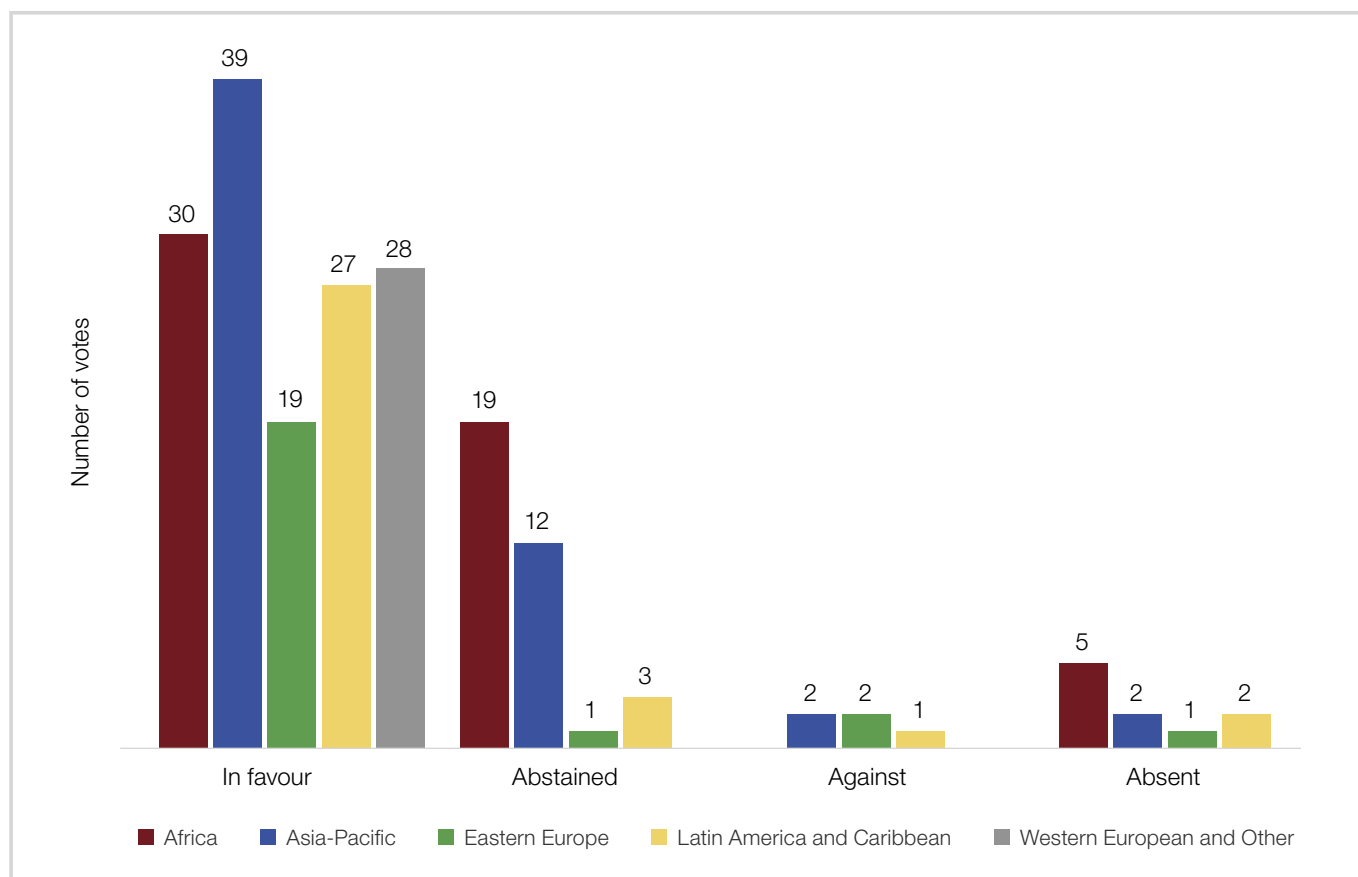
The Emergency Session's most recent resolution, ES-11/4,⁸² focused on the territorial integrity of Ukraine following Moscow's holding of referendums to annex four occupied Ukrainian territories, which have been widely seen by international actors as a sham.⁸³ Again, on this resolution, Africa was the least supportive regional bloc that supported its adoption with only 56% of African countries voting in favour. However, more African states voted in favour of ES-11/4 than any of the previous resolutions stemming from the 11th Emergency Special Session. This vote also signalled the continent's lowest rate of abstentions when compared to previous votes in the session, as well as the first instance in which no African state voted against the adoption of a resolution.

Africa's divided voting outcomes stand in very sharp contrast to the Western European grouping on the UNGA (which includes the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Turkey and Israel), which maintained an extraordinarily high degree of unity in consistently condemning Moscow and universally supporting the adoption of all three resolutions.

Consequently, a number of African countries which abstained from voting were criticised for their failure to outrightly condemn Russian aggression, as seen in the case of South Africa for example,⁸⁴ which was further seen as an indictment of the continent's collective commitment to upholding common values and principles in support of the international, rules-based, institutional order. These voting outcomes further spurred on greater debate concerning whether the continent was in fact pivoting closer toward Moscow, which in turn led to an even greater Western preoccupation on the areas of Russia–Africa engagement detailed in the previous section.

However, the UNGA's 11th Emergency Special Session represents a very limited sample with which to assess the continent's multilateral positioning

Chart 7: Total number of votes across regions and categories for UNGA resolution ES-11/4 on the territorial integrity of Ukraine (adopted on 12 October 2022)



Source: Author

against global geopolitical dynamics between the West and revisionist powers like Russia. To better appreciate this, all UN Security Council resolution voting outcomes, from January 2000 to resolution 2635 in June 2022, were compiled and analysed, covering a total of 1 424 tabled resolutions (or 21 360 observations) over the last 22 and half years.

This data was compiled for all tabled resolutions during this period (including both adopted and failed resolutions). Member states were assigned categorical values for each of the 1 424 tabled resolutions based on their voting outcomes falling into three categories, namely: i) in favour, ii) against, or iii) abstained.

Contingency tables (frequency counts) were then developed for each year, based on the observed coincidences in common voting outcomes between the annual configurations of the three African (A3)

member states in relation to each of the UNSC's five permanent members. The percentage of common voting alignment between the annual A3 configurations with respect to each permanent (P5) member was then averaged and plotted over the 22-and-a-half-year period under consideration.

This allowed for a descriptive comparative analysis to be undertaken, in order to visually inspect the coincidences in common voting outcomes between African member states on the UNSC in relation to each of the P5 members. The findings are presented in charts 8 and 9 below.

It is important to note here that the African Union (AU) is the only regional organisation that specifically endorses its member states to serve as elected members on the UN Security Council, and further mandates its members to the continent's collective interests within this preeminent institution responsible

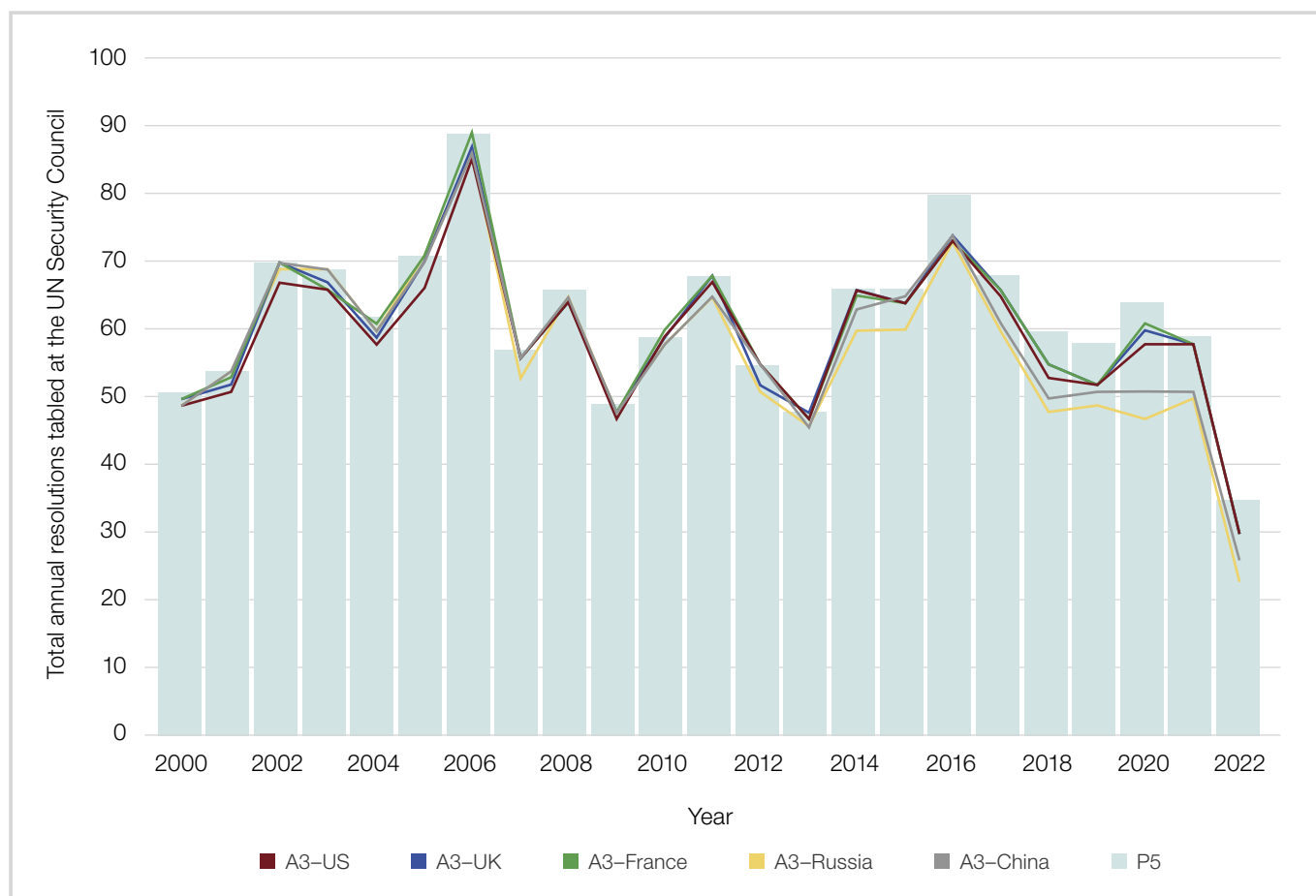
for the maintenance of international peace and security. Accordingly, while African countries serving within different annual A3 configurations will not always vote as a collective bloc, it can be assumed that the A3 is nonetheless more representative of its collective regional interests when compared to other regional groupings on the Council (such as Asia-Pacific or Latin America and the Caribbean).

As can be seen in charts 6 and 7, the 2000s saw a very high degree of alignment in the positions of all P5 and A3 members on the UNSC. The coincidences in common voting outcomes (either in favour of, against, or abstaining from tabled resolutions), between A3 and P5 members, regularly applied to between 95% and 100% of all tabled resolutions. The only P5 members to drop below the 95% threshold in their common alignment with the A3 during this period were the US (in 2001 and 2004) and Russia (in 2007). However,

there is a noticeable divergence in common alignment between the A3 and Russia, vis-à-vis the A3 and other P5 members, in the 2011 to 2015 period.

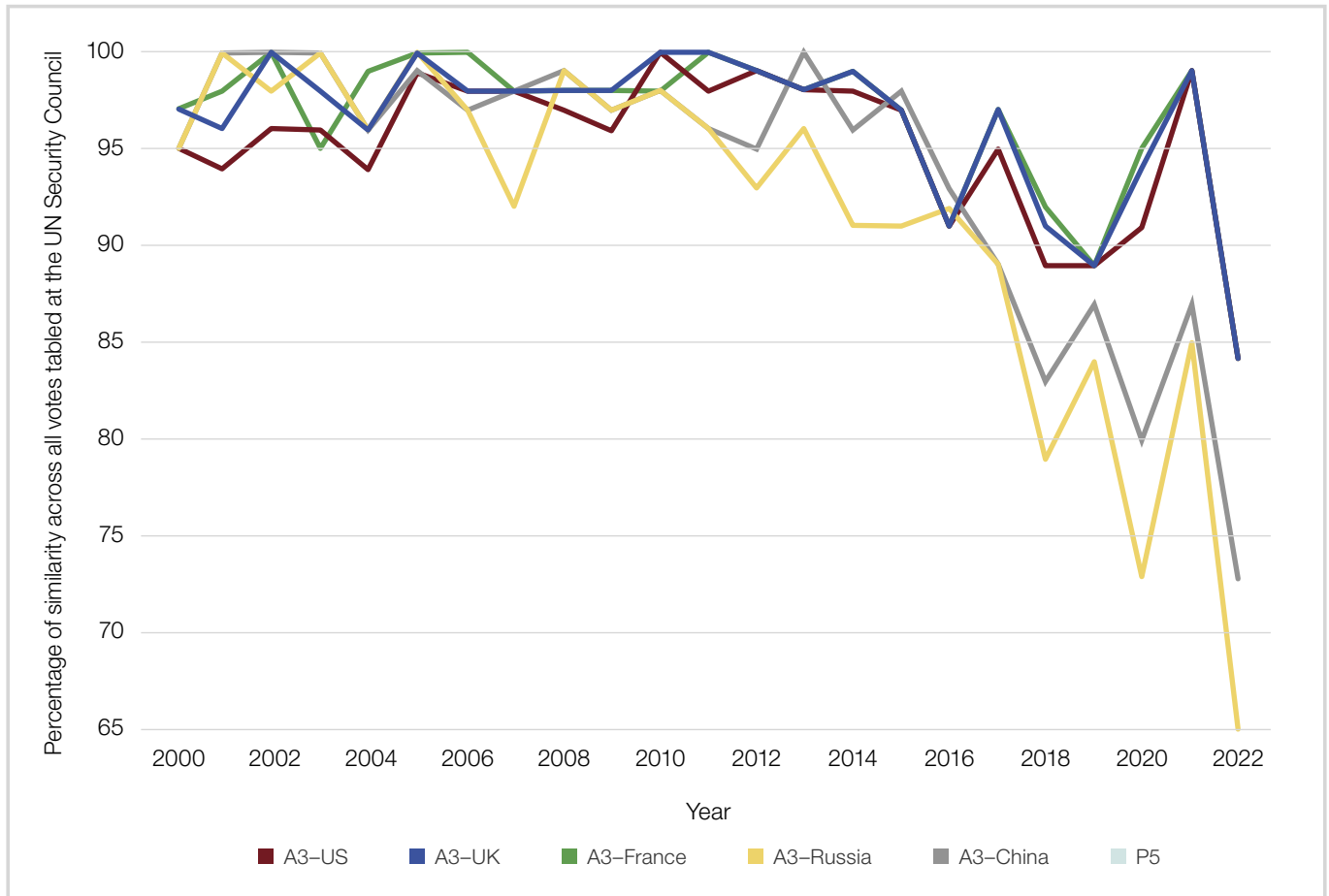
In 2016, this deteriorating common alignment came to apply to the A3's positions with all P5 members, hovering just above the 90% mark. This marked a significant point for A3 alignment among P5 members. Where alignment between the A3 and France, the UK and the US managed to effectively stabilise between the 90% to 100% mark in subsequent years (with some exceptions in 2018 and 2019), A3 alignment with Russia and China has fallen to considerable lows – most notably in 2018 and 2020, in which common Russian alignment with the A3 stood at 73%. Voting record data for 2022 so far also indicates that this year may prove to yield a similar outcome for overall A3 alignment with these countries.

Chart 8: Coincidence of similar voting outcomes between A3 and P5 members (total votes)



Source: Author

Chart 9: Coincidence of similar voting outcomes between A3 and P5 members (percentage of total votes)



Source: Author

By focusing on the substance of these divergent positions between the A3 and Russia in 2020 (marking the year of the lowest common alignment in the last two decades), two notable trends stand out. Firstly, on Council files relating to Africa, a surprisingly high number of Russian abstentions coincided with A3 positions in support of tabled resolutions. This was seen, for example, in resolutions 2556, 2551 and 2507, which focus on conflicts in the DRC, Somalia and CAR, respectively, as well as resolutions 2542, 2510 and 2509, which all focus on Libya. In all of these cases, the A3 unanimously supported the adoption of these resolutions (as did most other Council members), yet in each case Russia abstained.

In addition, two other resolutions in 2020 relating to conflicts on the continent, namely resolutions 2548 and 2521, which focus on Western Sahara and Sudan and South Sudan respectively, saw South African abstentions coinciding with those of Russia, whereas

the two other African member states (Tunisia and Niger) supported their adoption.

Secondly, on Council files relating to the Middle East, a similar trend is apparent as this relates to Russian abstentions on resolutions 2533, 2511 and 2504, which the A3 unanimously supported the adoption of. A greater divergence in A3–Russia positions in 2020 on Council files relating to the Middle East can be seen with regard to two failed resolutions (namely S/2020/667 and S/2020/654), which were vetoed by Russia, while the A3 again unanimously supported their adoption.

South Africa again stood out from the two other African member states in these cases, given its support, alongside Russia, for the adoption of two failed resolutions (namely S/2020/683 and S/2020/658) which were both vetoed by the US, the UK and France, and which saw Tunisia and Niger abstaining. Beyond

Council files relating to Africa and the Middle East, 2020 also saw divergent A3–Russia positions with respect to resolution 2547, which focuses on Haiti, in which Russia abstained and the A3 supported, as well as draft resolution S/2020/797, which focuses on nuclear non-proliferation and which was vetoed by Russia whereas the A3 abstained.

Trends in the alignment between the A3 and P5 on the UNSC are further reflective of broader, widening rifts in and among P5 members themselves — particularly between the US, the UK and France on the one hand, and China and Russia on the other. Assessing the P5’s internal cohesion over the same period highlights the extent of these entrenched geopolitical divisions between the two groupings. As can be seen in Chart 10, counts in the coincidence of common voting outcomes between the two groupings point to a clear divide.

This is seen, for example, in the fact that whereas Russia and China have abstained on the same resolutions 42 times, both countries have not coincidentally abstained on the same resolutions with either France, the UK or the US more than three times over this period. More tellingly, perhaps, is the fact that Russian and Chinese vetoes have never once coincided with those of France, the UK and the US, whereas they have coincided on 15 occasions between themselves. Prior research by the Institute for Security Studies further highlights that the use of P5 vetoes (followed by alternative draft resolutions) has considerably increased in more recent years, particularly since 2016.⁸⁵

As a result of this growing multilateral malaise, the positions adopted by African countries on the UNSC (and other global institutions) are understood not simply in terms of the substance of particular resolutions, but as increasingly symbolic of where the continent collectively stands in relation to geopolitical divides between the West and states such as Russia and China.

UNSC voting outcomes, particularly since the mid-2010s, do clearly indicate greater A3 alignment to the US, the UK and France. In other words, different annual A3 member state configurations have, on average, more consistently voted in a similar manner to the US, the UK and France than they have with China, and especially with Russia.

Accordingly, it could be argued, given the A3’s efforts to represent collective African interests on the UNSC, that the continent, as a whole, shares a similar set of values and principles (which inform its positioning on global peace and security matters on the agenda of the UNSC) that are more closely attuned to Western actors such as the US, the UK and France.

It is also important to note here that these countries in general draft the most resolutions and are penholders on almost all UNSC files relating to conflicts and crises in Africa. In spite of this, however, the continent’s positioning within the General Assembly’s 11th Emergency Special Session is still largely framed in narrow, binary, terms by its Western partners, which speak to the idea that Africa’s attempts to define a new non-alignment (as indicated by the high number of abstentions) may conceal an underlying indifference to the plight of international rules-based order.

Chart 10: Counts in the coincidence of similar voting outcomes among P5 members (for the period from resolution 1334 (2000) to resolution 2635 (2022))

	US			UK			France			Russia			China		
	Abs.	For	Against	Abs.	For	Against	Abs.	For	Against	Abs.	For	Against	Abs.	For	Against
US	-	-	-	7	1 379	11	7	1 376	11	2	1 273	0	2	1 302	0
UK	7	1 379	11	-	-	-	10	1 389	11	3	1 287	0	2	1 314	0
France	7	1 376	11	10	1 389	11	-	-	-	2	1 292	0	1	1 319	0
Russia	2	1 273	0	3	1 287	0	2	1 292	0	-	-	-	42	1 304	15
China	2	1 302	0	2	1 314	0	1	1 319	0	42	1 304	15	-	-	-

Source: Author

African perspectives from the ground

In order to better understand and contextualise the multilateral positioning of certain African states, a number of interviews were conducted with prominent African civil society voices across the continent. This section provides a synopsis of these views, focusing on perspectives from Senegal, Ethiopia and South Africa. In light of the disproportionate significance attached to North African countries by Moscow, highlighted by the disparate volume of trade⁸⁶ with Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco compared to sub-Saharan Africa (with the notable exception of South Africa), these case countries were focused on in order to provide a broader appreciation of Russia–Africa relations across other regions.

African countries' positions on the UNSC aren't based on just the substance of the resolution, but symbolise the continent's stand on geopolitical divides

While these countries certainly do not represent any coordinated regional approaches toward Russia, their unique experiences do nonetheless provide a basis with which the continent's varied collective interactions with Moscow can be qualified. These choices were further informed by each country's relatively varied voting outcomes in the UNGA's 11th Emergency Special Session, South Africa's unique contemporary political engagements with Russia through the BRICS grouping, Ethiopia's extensive historical ties to Moscow, and Senegal's general approach to Russia as a Francophone country (given perceptions of the strength of French influence in the region).

Senegal

Perspectives from Senegal generally frame the country's ties with Russia as a fairly transactional relationship, focused on the commercial benefits of Russian imports, relating primarily to wheat and fertilisers. While the volume of trade between the two countries does not compare at all to Moscow's commercial relations with North African states and South Africa, for example, the maintenance of this relationship was nonetheless highlighted as important in order for Dakar to benefit from a wider array of international markets.

The development of the country's energy sector (through the exploration of oil and gas) is viewed as another potential avenue with which economic relations between Dakar and Moscow could deepen over the coming years. However, the extent of the country's relations with Moscow is difficult to gauge, given the general lack of any significant coverage of these issues by Senegalese media. Interviewees pointed to the fact that in its relatively recent re-engagement with African countries, Russia has a lot of catching up to do, as the continent's set of international partners has become much more diversified since the 2000s.

Whereas African states were once caught between the rivalry of two major poles in the international system, they now have many more options to



UN Security Council

SINCE MID-2010s, A3 VOTES
ALIGNED TO US, UK AND
FRANCE MORE THAN TO
CHINA AND RUSSIA

pursue their interests on the world stage — with partners such as China, Turkey, Brazil, India, and Gulf countries like the UAE and Qatar, who have been ‘knocking on the continent’s doors’ for many years. Consequently, interviewees pointed to the gradually shifting balance of power in the international system and argued that the West would now be foolish in still attempting to strong-arm African governments to support their worldview. Western double standards with regard to breaches of international law were also highlighted to this effect — the case of Libya often being referenced.

Moreover, the missteps of France’s foreign policy in West Africa and the failure of the international community to assist in the Sahel were highlighted as other major issues contributing to greater scepticism of Western responses to the continent’s peace and security concerns.

Accordingly, Senegal’s recent multilateral positioning with respect to Russia, the Ukraine conflict and rising global geopolitical tensions are generally seen to be based on an appreciation of a guarded international pragmatism. These are reflected in the country’s voting outcomes in the UNGA’s 11th Emergency Special Session, in which Senegal abstained from voting on resolutions ES-11/1 and ES-11/3 but supported the adoption of resolution ES-11/2, which focuses on the humanitarian consequences of Russian aggression against Ukraine.

With partners such as China, Turkey, Brazil, India and Gulf countries, Africa now has more options

While some views pointed to the country’s strong democratic values, active intervention and management in the region’s peace and security and independent media (making it a natural friend to the West and other democracies around the world), it was also argued that Western sanctions imposed on Moscow would not affect Dakar’s relationship with Russia in any significant way. This was due to the country’s own economic and developmental needs, which are eased by Russian imports. Interviewees argued that this posturing was more than justified, given that its own plight as a result of the economic fallout of a potential global conflict would most likely be an afterthought to the world’s major powers.

Ethiopia

Similar to Senegal, Ethiopia’s commercial relations with Russia pale in comparison to those of North African countries and South Africa. Despite this, contemporary relations between Moscow and Addis Ababa are generally seen to be politically robust, with a number of Ethiopian interviewees highlighting the strategic appeal of maintaining positive relations with Russia for the current government. References were made to both countries’ long-standing historical relations that date back far beyond Moscow’s ties with other African states. Where most newly independent African countries established relations with Moscow roughly around the 1960s, early formative engagements between Ethiopia and Russia were established in the 1800s during the period of the Ethiopian and Russian Empires.

Consequently, diplomatic relations, cultural ties through orthodox religion and people-to-people interactions for more than a century have cemented bilateral relations between the two countries. More recently, an emerging recognition of Russia’s invaluable political support of the current government, primarily within the context of the ongoing Tigray war, has deepened relations between Moscow and Addis Ababa. Russia is seen as a key multilateral partner in this regard, especially within the UN Security Council, as Moscow’s positions have often run counter to the West, which have sought to impose punitive measures targeting the current government in response to the ongoing conflict in Tigray.

It was seen that Moscow had managed to navigate a fine line between supporting Ethiopia’s strategic interests in multilateral institutions while not appearing to be a partisan actor in the process. This was evident in the case of the political roles played by Moscow in the intervening years following the Eritrean–Ethiopian war, as well as more recently in offering to mediate regional contestations concerning the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).

Ethiopian appreciation of this political support is further bolstered by long-standing historical ties between the country and the former Soviet Union, which was a major partner to the former Derg regime, providing considerable military, financial and technical support. Consequently, close ideological ties were established and strengthened during this period, much of which persists up until the

present day, further informing the close fraternal relations between Moscow and Addis Ababa.

Beyond this political support, Moscow is also viewed as a vital partner in terms of the provision of arms (and, more recently, air defence equipment) as well as technical military support. Moscow has also made recent overtures highlighting its support for the re-establishment of the Ethiopian navy.⁸⁷ Ethiopia's ongoing conflict in the Tigray region, coupled with various internal security challenges and border tensions, have all worked toward increasing the strategic value of Russia as a partner – especially as pressures from the West persist over the government's responses to these challenges.

Ethiopia's posturing within the UNGA's 11th Emergency Special Session is seemingly based on these various considerations and the current strategic appeal of Moscow to the government in Addis Ababa. While absent from the vote on resolution ES-11/1, Ethiopia subsequently abstained on resolution ES-11/2 and voted against the adoption of resolution ES-11/3, which suspended Moscow's membership to the Human Rights Council.

South Africa

Views from South Africa on the government's position on the Russia–Ukraine conflict have been particularly divided. Almost all interviewees understand the contemporary relations between Pretoria and Moscow in much the same way: grounded upon significant historical ties formed between the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and the former Soviet Union, as well as both countries being unified around a common agenda to bring about greater multipolarity and a more representative international order (less dominated by the West). However, South Africa's positioning within the UNGA's 11th Emergency Special Session (in which it abstained from all resolutions), coupled with ambiguous official foreign policy statements in subsequent months, have led to particularly divided views among South Africans.

Some interviewees point to the very limited economic, political or strategic appeal of Moscow for South Africa, based primarily on comparative readings of the country's relationships with other major international partners. While there are considerable commercial relations between Moscow and Pretoria (certainly the most sizable in sub-Saharan Africa), these pale in

comparison with the volume of trade and investment between South Africa and Western powers, including the US, the UK and EU members.

Similarly, South Africa does not depend on military support or imports of staple foods from Russia to the extent that a number of other African states do. Moreover, Pretoria is not facing any current or imminent form of Western isolation or pressure to the extent that a handful of other African countries do, which may necessitate maintaining a robust working relationship with Moscow. These factors, coupled with South Africa's clear liberal, democratic and progressive values enshrined in its constitution, have made its recent positioning on the ongoing Ukraine conflict difficult to understand.

The Tigray conflict and other security challenges have increased Russia's strategic value to Ethiopia

These views highlighted South Africa's lack of any meaningful reference to the plight of Ukrainians as a direct result of Russian aggression or the illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory, despite the country calling for all parties to respect international humanitarian and human rights law and while reaffirming that it views the territorial integrity of all states sacrosanct.

On the other hand, a number of interviewees highlighted South Africa's broader appreciation for the context underpinning the conflict: focusing instead on the abuses of US hegemony, as well as NATO and EU expansionism as factors that effectively pushed Moscow into a corner. From this perspective, a much more critical view is taken of the West's response to the ongoing conflict, in which overt condemnation and isolation of Moscow (coupled with the adoption of economic sanctions) is seen as uncompromising and which highlights yet another instance of Western powers abusing their dominant positions in the international system.

These views pointed to long-standing fraternal relations between South Africa (and the ruling ANC, in particular) with Moscow and the importance of maintaining relations with countries that can aid in fostering a multipolar world order.

Need for a more coordinated African approach

As the conflict in Ukraine continues, and global tensions escalate, Africa will undoubtedly become a site of greater geopolitical rivalry and competition among major world powers. While the conflict in Ukraine may have thrown these global divisions into much sharper relief since early 2022, international volatility spurred on by this competition had been on the rise for a number of years, primarily due to the shifting global balance of power between the West and China (among other emerging powers). While Russia does not neatly fit this categorisation, it is nonetheless a revisionist power, with a worldview at odds with that represented by US hegemony and the Western status quo.

Against this backdrop, African states will be increasingly subjected to the many exogenous factors stemming from this competition, which may include greater food and energy insecurity, more volatile international markets, disruption in global supply chains, the ever-looming threat of a nuclear disaster, and a growing disregard among major powers of the impact of climate change (to pursue more immediate energy security needs). Beyond these factors, African countries may increasingly come to be direct sites for the contestation of competing worldviews wherein major powers tussle to secure political influence and exclusive access to resources.

In this scenario, new security assurances and arrangements would need to emerge on the continent in the absence of much more robust peace and security frameworks among African states themselves. International attention and resources may be diverted away from the continent's conflict-affected regions, or may rather become more politicised and transactional in nature. Read together, heightened global geopolitical rivalry and competition will inevitably exacerbate the myriad of ongoing and emerging crises and conflicts across the continent. And, ultimately, these factors will go on to undermine the achievement of the continent's shared long-term developmental and human security agenda, as encapsulated, for example, in the AU's Agenda 2063.

It is therefore vital for African leaders to recognise that, beyond immediate food and energy security

concerns, the continent's collective peace and security interests are intricately interwoven into the kinds of conflicts caused by the jostling for power and influence among major world powers. As divisions deepen between Russia and the West, Africa will require a much more coordinated and coherent collective strategy toward engaging with Russia and its other major international partners. This will not be an easy task, as evidenced by the clear existing divisions and approaches among African states with respect to their multilateral positions, historical ties and ongoing areas of cooperation with Russia.

However, no African state, in isolation, can meaningfully contest or obstruct the global ambitions of any of the major powers, given the significant disparity in hard power among them. Accordingly, a common strategy geared toward engaging with actors such as Russia, China, the US and EU members would allow for the continent to leverage its collective weight and agency on the international stage, and to safeguard and to pursue its own developmental and human security agenda across prevailing geopolitical rifts. This is, however, an optimistic outcome.

Africa may increasingly become a site for major powers' contests over influence and access to resources

In reality, a coherent continent-wide strategy may be unlikely given the significant varying interests and agendas of all 54 countries in Africa. At the very least, African leaders will need to better manage this diversity of interests and views with respect to deepening global geopolitical contestations such that common principles are not completely lost or diluted.

On the other hand, the continent's major international partners need to better recognise that the persistent marginal position of Africa within the current international system, coupled with the historical experiences of African states, have informed the development of a worldview that is not necessarily compatible with that of the West or any of the other revisionist powers such as Russia and China.

While the multilateral positions of African countries, viewed over the last two decades, do point to a closer normative alignment with Western powers, specifically on international peace and security policy, African states are nonetheless much more acutely aware of (and remain guarded against) the abuses of US hegemony, double standards and the Western status quo that has underpinned the international order since the end of the Second World War.

From an economic and development perspective, the current international order has simply not paid the kinds of dividends necessary for the continent to close the gap between itself and the rest of the world. In fact, the opposite is true. Research by the Institute for Security Studies' African Futures Programme highlights the significantly widening disparity between Africa and the rest of the world since 1960 when taking into consideration comparative measures of GDP per capita, as well as the continent's relative share of the world economy and global population.⁸⁸

African countries are naturally more revisionist, pushing them into China, India and Russia's political orbit

Based on the world's current developmental trajectory, Africa's marginal position is further forecasted to worsen at an increasing rate in relation to the rest of the world until 2043 (marking the conclusion of the AU's second ten-year implementation plan for Agenda 2063).⁸⁹ This is illustrated in Charts 11 and 12.

While domestic politics and challenges of course contribute to the widening disparity between African states and the rest of the world, African countries are nonetheless naturally poised as revisionist actors, pushing them into a closer political orbit with major powers such as China, India and Russia, among others. African states maintain a vested interest in seeking out a different, more equitable and representative international order — one that pays the kind of developmental dividends that have not been forthcoming by the Western status quo. Thus, while many African governments naturally support the normative underpinnings of the current rules-based

international institutional system, they do not recognise the inherent advantages or value of this system in the same way Western actors do.

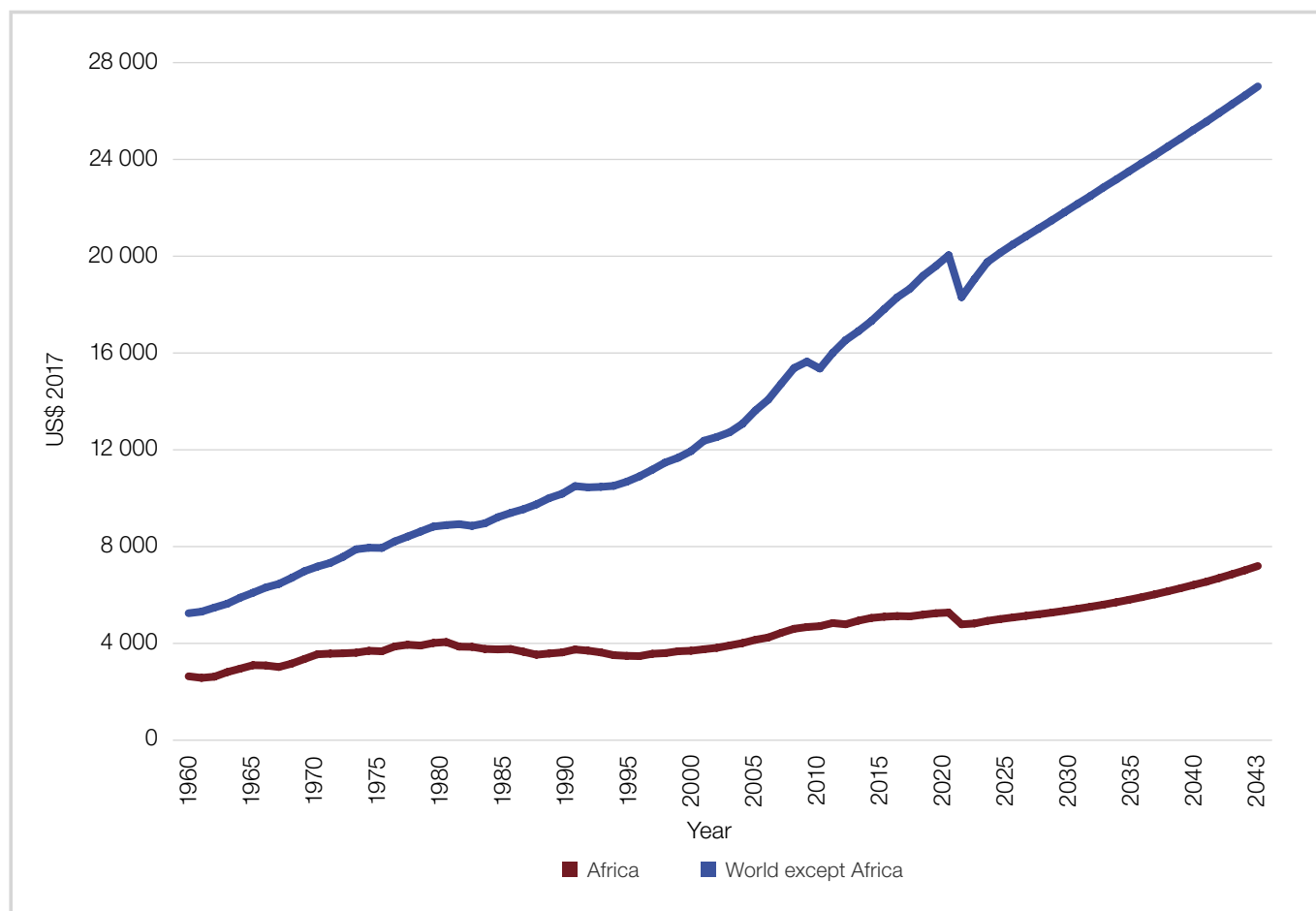
This explains to some degree why some African states within the UNGA's 11th Emergency Special Session did not frame their understanding, or justify their positioning, in similar terms to the universally shared Western conviction that Russian aggression against Ukraine was a direct attack on the international order itself. Moreover, the broader common understanding among Western actors that Moscow's re-engagement with the continent is exploitative (by preying on political elites to undermine development and good governance in pursuit of its own parochial interests) is similarly not shared by many African states due to their own worldview, which frames a number of Western powers in similar terms.

Accordingly, the continent's international partners will need to reorient their strategic policy thinking toward the continent over the coming years. This would need to be based not on whose side Africa is on, or whether African countries support a Western worldview over those of revisionist powers, but rather: who is on the side of Africa? Given the gradually shifting balance of power in the international system, African states now have a much wider range of international partners with which to pursue their own collective interests.

Consequently, Western powers will be required to make much more meaningful compromises and concessions toward the reform of the global governance system, such that it becomes more equitable and representative, in order for it to pay the kinds of dividends needed for the continent to close its developmental gap with the rest of the world.

In order to achieve this, the continent's Western partners will need to double down on their commitments toward fostering meaningful and consistent dialogue with African stakeholders. These should lead to tangible changes attached to realistic timeframes focusing on, for example, reform of the international governance system — and particularly the UN Security Council. More consistent and predictable financing arrangements for African-led peace and security processes should be considered, as well as other economic policy interventions to bolster the continent's developmental and human security agenda.

Chart 11: GDP per capita for Africa and the rest of the world, 1960–2043



Source: IFs 7.63 initialising from World Development Indicators data

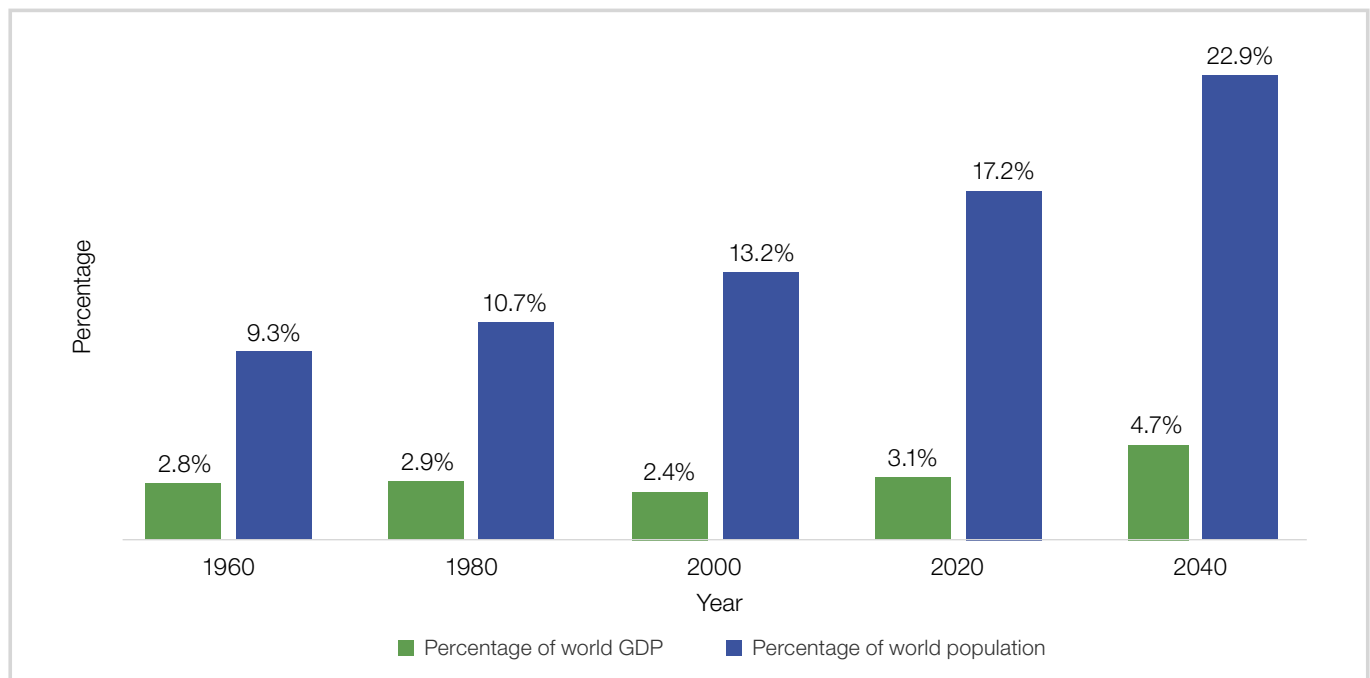
Punitive measures imposed against African governments also need to be reconsidered in concert with other avenues to support good governance, the strengthening of civil society, and the promotion of democracy and economic development. Additionally, the continent's Western partners must consider more greatly the implications of the political and economic fallout of armed conflicts, stemming from global geopolitical contestations, on Africa. This particularly relates to considerations around food security, energy security and the impact of climate change.

At the same time, African states must work on strengthening internal cohesion, specifically in developing common approaches toward upholding international norms, principles and values. Similarly, internal cohesion is vital in order to collectively advocate for practicable conflict resolution interventions geared toward conflicts and crises in other distant parts of the world. To achieve

this, consistent dialogue and bilateral engagements must be prioritised over the coming years in order to ensure some measure of foreign policy coherence, at sub-regional levels at the very least. The growing list of Africa+1 Summits with international partners provides an ideal platform in which these common approaches could be better leveraged, beyond the continent's ongoing efforts in global multilateral institutions.

African governments also need to better recognise and account for the fact that a failure to coordinate and cohere clear positions on pressing international peace and security matters may come to be increasingly seen as indifference — despite the best efforts of some countries to justify non-aligned positions. Accordingly, African states will need to grapple with resolving the contradictions in highlighting Western double standards on violations of international law or human rights abuses on the one hand, while also clearly taking a stand on

Chart 12: Size of African economy and population as a percentage of the world's, 1960–2040



Source: IFs 7.63 initialising from International Monetary Fund and UN Population Division data

violations of international law and human rights abuses by other international actors on the other. These are not, and should never be seen, as mutually exclusive foreign policy considerations.

Conclusion

Contemporary relations between Russia and African states have grown considerably over the last two decades. Following from the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Moscow's re-engagement with the continent since the early 2000s has been primarily centred around a handful of key areas, including the export of arms, the exploration of commercial opportunities (particularly in terms of energy and mining), military cooperation, and growing trade and investment.

While Russia still remains a fairly marginal actor across the continent when compared to the scale and scope of Africa's relations with its other major international partners, Moscow is nonetheless perceived as maintaining an outsized degree of political influence. This is due to its robust historical and ideological ties with many African countries, which are now being rekindled against the backdrop of its broader geopolitical contestations with the West.

The continent's growing relations with Moscow are viewed, however, with increasing concern by its other major Western partners. This is based on the view that Moscow's recent aggression against Ukraine represents a direct attack on the international, rules-based institutional order, in direct violation of international law and the norms respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity.

More generally, Russia's cosy relationship with African states in more recent years is seen as opportunistic and predatory, and ultimately serving to undermine democracy and good governance across the continent. Accordingly, Africa's divided multilateral response to Russian aggression over the course of 2022 has raised further concerns about the continent's collective commitment, and waning support, toward the upkeep of the international, rules-based order.

Africa's collective positioning on these dynamics is, however, far more complex and nuanced — informed by a range of historical experiences, current realities and an appreciation of the changing balance of power in the international system, which do not fit neatly into the worldviews of other major international actors. African governments are therefore caught

between an increasingly fraught tug of war between competing worldviews, and contestations for power and influence, among Western and revisionist global powers.

Against this backdrop, Africa needs to define a coherent strategy toward engaging with international partners, which leverages the collective weight and agency of

African states on the world stage, in pursuit of its own developmental and human security agenda. In so doing, African governments can present an alternative, united, continental approach that cuts across prevailing global geopolitical divides between Western and revisionist powers and which safeguards its own interests in the turbulent years to come.

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Notes

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