

Ukraine Crisis and its Impact on Africa

Samir Bhattacharya

Abstract

While the conflict in Ukraine rages and threatens to morph into a wider global war, Africa remains a divided house. Most African countries seem to be wary of taking any partisan position on the Ukraine crisis and are reacting in keeping with their national interests. Nevertheless, the post-pandemic, and the post-Ukraine war world situation would be turbulent for Africa. Public health and the economy in Africa were already suffering from the negative impacts of the pandemic. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has given rise to fresh challenges that can further stifle the growth and development of the continent. The Russia-Ukraine war has four interrelated dimensions with profound implications for Africa: food, energy, finance and defence. As the deteriorating humanitarian crisis unfolds in Africa, the Western response to the African suffering only exposes its neglect. Instead of supporting Africa to overcome the catastrophic consequences of the pandemic, the food shortage and inflation caused by sanctions, their focus seems to be to counter Russian influence in Africa. The African reaction to the West's appeal to condemn Russia underlines that sanctions and paternalism are inadequate policies to convince African leaders to change their positions on Russia.

The ruinous repercussions of the Russia-Ukraine war are being felt well beyond the boundaries of Europe, particularly in Africa. Africa was already suffering from the scarring effects of the pandemic. And now, as the war in Europe drags on, its calamitous impact is palpable in Africa. Rising food and energy prices, disruption in

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trade, shifting of green transition targets, and decreased flow of development finance are compounding the humanitarian crisis that followed the onset of the pandemic. In the last two years, soaring energy prices have more than doubled the prices of food items and fertilisers. As a result, many farmers have reduced their production as crop cultivation has become more expensive than the value they can fetch at the market. This has created a vicious cycle of supply and price volatility, making the lives of the most vulnerable more precarious. In essence, the war not only derailed the continent's slow recovery process, but it may also reverse many development gains achieved so far.

One particular consequence of the Ukraine crisis is that there has been a paradigm shift in Africa's perception of the rest of the world. The continent is becoming increasingly conscious of the stark disparity between the resources that traditional development partners are mobilising to support Ukraine and those they are providing to combat hunger, security concerns, and COVID-19 in Africa. In the short term, deprioritising crises affecting Africa in favour of Ukraine may seem logical to the industrialised world. But in the long run, it will only worsen things, resulting in more inequality and increased poverty.

In effect, the Ukraine conflict may have a more mobilising influence internationally than the humanitarian crisis in Africa as a result of the Covid pandemic, climate disasters and civil wars. Certainly, the humanitarian situation brought about by Ethiopia's ongoing civil conflict is considerably more severe. Yet, the western world has paid far less attention to and provided much less support to the Ethiopian victims. As a consequence, African nations are more willing than ever to collaborate with countries like Russia and India and do so out of more profound concern for their national interests and a desire for a fair global collaboration.

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African Position on Russia

On 21st February 2022, President Vladimir Putin declared the two breakaway regions of Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk, independent. This was followed by the launch of military action in favour of these separatists backed by Moscow.¹ Russia began its

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air and missile assaults in the Donbas region of Ukraine three days later.² Most Western nations strongly condemned the attack, followed by several economic sanctions. As the economic sanctions imposed by the US and the EU failed to stop Russia from retreating its soldiers, the US and 94 other nations called the UN General Assembly's first emergency session in 40 years on 27th February to adopt a resolution denouncing Russia's military action in Ukraine.³

On 2nd March, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York voted on a resolution demanding that the Russian military leave Ukraine.⁴ During the summit, 141 of the 193 participating nations backed the resolution denouncing Russia.⁵ In all 46 African countries participated in the UN General Assembly vote on the resolution with 28 voting in favour, 1 against, 17 abstained, and 8 did not participate at all, underlining the missing consensus among African nations. The three UN Security Council rotating seats for Africa, known as the "A3," are now occupied by Ghana, Kenya, and Gabon. Indeed, all three of them supported the UNSC resolution denouncing Russia.⁶ Of the 17 who abstained, Sudan, Mali, and the Central African Republic are Russia's long-time allies in Africa. Among the others were South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, Algeria, Madagascar, Namibia, Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi, and Zimbabwe. Despite opposing the NATO intervention in Libya and Israel's occupation of Palestine, South Africa chose to remain silent against Russia.⁷ Cameroon and Ethiopia were absent from the voting room. Eritrea was the single African country to vote against the resolution. By doing so, Eritrea joined Russia and three other ardent Russian supporters: Syria, Belarus, and North Korea.⁸ In the end, as a permanent member of the body, Russia vetoed the resolution.

As many African states refrained from denouncing Russian aggression in Ukraine at the UNGA, it alarmed the West. For them, Russia's African policy is a recent development and a work-in-progress. However, a strong historical bond has existed between Russia/Soviet Union and Africa through the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles, as well as the post-colonial Cold War years. The historic Sochi summit of 2019 only re-established the Soviet-era ties. Many in Africa are aware that the transition from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation was a gradual and difficult one and that Russia now has the ability to assist Africa in multiple ways.

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Indeed, throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union played a significant role in Africa as an ideological role model, and a source of aid and influence for many African nations. In order to acquire an ideological edge over the West, the Soviet Union supported several post-colonial African movements for freedom and self-determination. Following their independence, many also received military help from the Soviet Union and technological, financial, and educational assistance. Last but not the least, Soviet leaders also opposed and distanced themselves from Western-backed military dictatorships such as those of Idi Amin in Uganda, Jean-Bédél Bokassa in the Central African Republic, Mobutu Sese Seko in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Samuel Doe in Liberia.⁹

The Soviet Union advocated transformative social changes in Africa and positioned itself as a viable alternative to Western colonial and neo-colonial role and socialism was a beacon for many in the continent. Later, the Soviet Union provided several friendly African countries with economic assistance, including the development of infrastructure and agriculture, and collaboration in the security and health sectors. The Soviets left behind a lasting legacy as a result of their security support, particularly in the form of equipment and knowledge. This tradition has endured through the past decades in some countries. The Soviet Union also endorsed the fight against apartheid in South Africa.¹⁰

The Evolution of Russia's Africa Policy

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the decline of Russia-Africa bonhomie. The period from 1991 to 2001, when President Boris Yeltsin oversaw Russia's internal and international affairs, including its connections with Africa, has been referred to as a lost decade.¹¹ During his time, Russia's outreach to Africa remained woefully low, jeopardising the legacy of the Soviet Union. This occurred principally due to domestic issues in Russia, including a faltering economy and the dislocations caused by the break-up of the Soviet Union and a difficult systemic transition from socialism. But in recent years, Russia has increased its influence in Africa by using a unique combination of diplomacy, guns, and mercenaries. In fact, the severe sanctions imposed after the 2014 annexation of Crimea may have fuelled Russia's most recent engagements in Africa. Following the sanctions, Russia was desperate for new markets and diplomatic support. As a response, the Putin

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government turned toward Africa and increased its involvement. Russia has built significant trade with important African economies, including South Africa, Egypt, Nigeria, and Sudan. Additionally, Russia currently has diplomatic missions in 40 African nations.

The Russia-Africa rapprochement reached its peak in 2019 when Russia convened the first-ever Russia-Africa Summit. The event was held in the Russian city of Sochi. As the inaugural summit attracted 50 African nations and 43 African Heads of State, the event became a huge diplomatic success.¹² Through this watershed event, Russia announced its return to the continent in a majestic way. Following the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit, President Putin announced plans to quadruple Russia's commercial activity with Africa to US\$ 40 billion annually and write off US\$ 20 billion in debt due to Russia by African nations.¹³ This year 2022 has been dubbed as the 'Year of Africa', and a second Russia-Africa Summit is scheduled to take place in Ethiopia around November-December 2022.¹⁴

In a statement made in mid-June, the Foreign Minister of Russia Sergey Lavrov said that strategic cooperation with Africa has become a priority of Russia's foreign policy. He expressed his gratitude toward Africa for the growing intensification of its economic relationship with Russia. He called for the expansion of mutually advantageous trade and investment ties. The number of new contracts to be signed during the upcoming second Russia-Africa summit, scheduled to be held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, will prove the effectiveness of Russia's Africa policy.¹⁵

And as per Oleg Ozerov, the Russian Foreign Ministry's ambassador-at-large, food security will be the prime object of discussion during the summit this year.¹⁶

Given this revival of Russian connection with Africa, it was expected that Moscow would maintain its soft power and influence in Mozambique, Angola and Sudan, with whom relations have remained intact despite the end of the Cold War. The rise of coups throughout the continent has put Russia and its private military contractors squarely in the spotlight. They are currently known to be present in Mali, Libya, Burkina Faso, and the Central African Republic. The pro-Russia position of these countries can also be understood due to their dependence on Russia for providing security.

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Coincidentally, on the very first day of the Ukraine war, a sizable delegation led by the senior paramilitary commander of Sudan, Gen. Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, went to Russia.¹⁷ In the Central African Republic capital Bangui, a memorial service for Russian paramilitaries who assisted in putting down insurgents a year prior, was also held on the same day.¹⁸ Russian flags soared over Ethiopia during a ceremony honouring Russian volunteers who fought with Ethiopian soldiers in a memorable 19th-century fight against Italian invaders.¹⁹ Even Morocco, a long-time ally of the United States, responded lukewarmly, reiterating its allegiance to the territorial integrity and unity of all states.²⁰

Ukraine Crisis and its Severe Impact on Africa

Until the fourth quarter of 2020, notwithstanding the disparities and some systemic issues, such as poverty, malnutrition and inequality, Africa's economic development was the second-fastest in the world. However, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically slowed the development in Sub-Saharan Africa to the point of undoing years of social and economic advancement. The Russia-Ukraine war has exacerbated Africa's existing challenges. Some of them are economic, such as the difficulties of debt repayment for several low-income countries and finding substitutes for their unsustainable reliance on raw material exports. Africa also faces significant political challenges. Many parts of the continent, such as the Sahel, the Lake Chad region, East Africa, and, more recently, the West African coastline region, continue to be threatened by political instability and terrorism. The adverse effects of climate change and food insecurity are also making the lives of ordinary Africans more difficult. To make matters worse, just as the pandemic started to recede, the war in Ukraine broke out.

The Russia-Ukraine war has exacerbated Africa's existing challenges.

The United States and many European countries have imposed severe sanctions on Russia to counter Russian aggression. Even though the impact will vary across countries, the four key sectors that will be most impacted by the war and associated sanctions are security, energy, food and the financial market.

Defence and Military Interests

Russia is one of the most significant defence partners and a major arms supplier to Africa. SIPRI data shows that between 2016 and 2020, sub-Saharan Africa sourced 30 percent of its weapons from Russia. China contributed 20 percent, France contributed

9.5 percent, and the US contributed 5.4 percent.²¹ Any sanctions banning transactions with the Russian government or connected entities will severely impact those African nations which depend on Russia for military equipment.

Ethiopia, Uganda, and Angola are among the African nations excessively dependent on Russian military equipment. The militaries of Ethiopia and Uganda are particularly susceptible to Moscow-related restrictions due to their over-reliance on Russian aircraft. Both Ethiopia and Uganda are presently involved in active military operations. Uganda is fighting the Allied Democratic Forces rebels in the neighbouring eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Ethiopia is fighting rebel forces in the Tigray region. Therefore, they need an uninterrupted supply from Russia in order to defeat the rebel forces. Many other countries, including Burundi, the DRC, Eritrea, Kenya, and Rwanda, depend on Russian arms to varying degrees. UN missions in the Darfur region of Sudan and DRC use Russian helicopters for transportation, and these missions will also certainly be impacted.

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In addition to importing weapons, many African nations have hired Russian mercenaries. These Russian mercenaries in Africa work under the Wagner Group, a company connected to Yevgeny Prigozhin, a personal friend of Vladimir Putin.²³ Wagner mercenaries have recently participated in quelling civil battles in Mozambique and Libya. Currently, 2000 Wagner mercenaries are in charge of protecting the President of the Central African Republic (CAR).²³ In 2016, France, despite its three-year military operation in the CAR “Operation Sangaris”, failed to disarm militia groups. During that time, Russia filled the void. It led to a huge influx of humanitarian aid and facilitated a democratic transition. Similar to CAR, as part of an agreement to counter Islamist terrorists, Wagner soldiers first appeared in Mali in January. Angered by the Russian presence, France, the former colonial power, decided to remove its forces from Mali in February 2022, putting the whole region’s security at risk and under Russian discretion.²⁴

In Africa, the Russians have accumulated vast assets, including preferred shares in the nation’s gold and diamond reserves, through a combination of economic investment and counterinsurgency aid. A squad of private military contractors arrived in 2018 to protect these mining assets and establish a security environment that would permit extensive mineral extraction. And the entire Russian operation was carried out by the

Wagner Group. Africa's growing dependence on Russia can be understood from the fact that from 2016 to 2019, Nigeria, Chad, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Sierra Leone all signed a military cooperation agreement with Russia. In Guinea, the Wagner Group sent private military contractors to guard mines after Guinean President Alpha Condé's announcement that he would run for a third term in 2020 led to international criticism. Rusal, a major producer of aluminium in Russia, increased its presence in the country's bauxite mines and the Wagner Group used private military contractors to protect the nation's mines.

The interest of the Wagner Group in providing security services to African countries is simple. African nations use military equipment and receive training in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency from the Wagner Group. In return, Russia gains commercial contracts, access to ports, and concessions to mine resources. Today, Russian hard power influence in Africa may not be as strong as it was during the Soviet era, but Russia is coming back and slowly carving its space. The impacts of the Ukraine crisis on Russia's current security policy in Africa will be a decisive factor for the continent.

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Fuel Shortage and Energy Security

The availability of gas and oil is crucial to maintain growth and counter the negative impacts of the pandemic. In the wake of the Ukraine crisis, Europe's need for alternative gas sources presents an opportunity for some resource-rich African nations. Many African countries, such as Algeria and Libya, may profit from the rise in oil prices and take advantage of the circumstances to renegotiate their strategic alliance with Europe and pursue political objectives. Algeria is among the African nations best positioned to profit from the scenario because of its geopolitical location and extensive hydrocarbon reserves. The surge in oil prices is expected to improve state earnings in many other oil-producing nations, including Nigeria, Angola, Gabon, Libya, Algeria, the Republic of Congo, Ghana, Equatorial Guinea, and Chad. Likewise, countries that produce gas, such as Nigeria, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Senegal, and Tanzania, stand to gain notably if they can boost their output.²⁵

Some are also optimistic that the European conflict might finally bring the necessary investment to many parts of Africa, particularly those related to hydrocarbons. For example, Tanzania has been seeking a US\$ 30 billion investment to explore further a significant potential source of gas in the Indian Ocean. Samia Suluhu Hassan, the President of Tanzania, believes that as Europe seeks to reduce its dependency on Russian gas, foreign investment will pour into Tanzania towards developing this block.²⁶ Nigeria, Niger, and Algeria were already discussing the development of a Trans-Saharan Gas Pipeline route just before the war. This crisis is expected to accelerate the discussion and its implementation. As a matter of fact, all three countries recently ratified the “Declaration of Niamey” to enhance their natural gas exports to European markets.²⁷ However, the majority of African nations don’t produce gas or oil. For these nations, the increase in the oil price will also lead to rising prices for fuel and related goods as well as a significant increase in transportation costs.

In 2017, during the visit of President Putin to Egypt, an agreement was reached where Rosatom, Russia’s state-owned nuclear conglomerate, won the contract to develop the El Dabaa nuclear power plant in Egypt. Towards that goal, Russia offered Egypt a US\$ 25 billion loan covering 85 percent of the project cost.²⁸ In 2019, Rwanda also signed a deal with Rosatom to build a nuclear research centre and reactor in the capital, Kigali.²⁹ Countries like Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Zambia have all signed similar agreements with Russia.³⁰ Some other countries like Ghana, Uganda, Sudan, and the DRC have less comprehensive agreements of collaboration with Russia for nuclear programmes. Taking the Ukraine crisis into consideration, the future of these plants is uncertain. Due to the prevailing situation, these projects may be delayed or abandoned, raising serious concerns about the continent’s energy security.

Food Security

The food market in Africa was badly impacted by the post-pandemic disruptions in food production and supplies, extreme weather, and export restrictions in several countries. The majority of the African population was already suffering from climate change and the Covid-19 outbreak. This has been made even worse by the conflict. As the current crisis continues to increase the cost of importing oil and natural gas for oil-importing African countries, this will raise the prices of almost all commodities. Price rise, particularly in food items, will hit the continent’s poor. In the words of the executive

director of the UN World Food Program, David Beasley, the crisis in Ukraine has caused a catastrophe on top of catastrophe and compared its deadly impact with that of World War II.³¹

Russia and Ukraine, often referred to as the world's breadbasket, are both significant suppliers of wheat and fertiliser to Africa. In fact, 30 percent of the world's wheat, 20 percent of its corn, and 75–80 percent of the world's sunflower seed oil are produced in Ukraine and Russia.³²

The increase in food prices, especially wheat, would likely be the war's most significant and definite impact on the average African. Even in 2020, African countries imported US\$ 4 billion of agricultural products from Russia and US\$ 2.9 billion from Ukraine.³³ Corn represented 31 percent of this imported product list, while wheat accounted for 48 percent.³⁴

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The importance of Russia for Africa's food security can be understood from the recent Russia visit of Senegalese President Macky Sall, who is also the chair of the African Union. He travelled to Russia in early June and met Russian President Putin to discuss the food shortages resulting from the Ukraine crisis.³⁵ During the meeting, he was assured that Russia is keen to resume its grain export to Africa. Rather, it is the Western sanctions that are making the export difficult. A similar effort was visible when Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov made a four-nation tour to Africa in late July.³⁶ The principal objective of his visit was to counter the western narrative that the food shortage is caused by Russia. He also condemned the Western attempt to impose a unipolar world order. The warm welcome received by the Minister during his visit demonstrates the diplomatic clout possessed by Russia among the African countries.

Financial Collapse

The ongoing crisis in Ukraine has caused turbulence in the financial markets, which is reflected in the growing scepticism about the future of the world economy. As many governments around the world prioritise investing domestically, global capital flows towards Africa may shrink further. The growing economic nationalism and disruption of financial markets due to various sanctions will significantly affect several investment-starved African economies. The persistent uncertainty coupled

with higher commodity prices will likely result in high inflation, leading to stagflation and societal instability.

Africa's growth and development depend on the effectiveness of global value chain integration, which is fuelled by globalisation. The Russia-Ukraine war is creating the speculations that the major companies of the world will significantly reduce their dependence on global supply chains. Indeed, many companies, such as the motorbike and electric bicycle manufacturer Pierer Mobility, German suit maker Hugo Boss, etc., are reshoring their production.³⁷ Africa faces significant challenges from a de-globalising world. Remaining connected to the global economy is essential to the continent's growth and development.

Finally, concerns over humanitarian aid, an essential contributor to food security for the continent, particularly for the already fragile nations, are also growing in the continent. Concerns have been raised that essential humanitarian assistance may be diverted from Sub-Saharan countries to deal with the effects of the Ukraine crisis, particularly the rising number of Ukrainian refugees and the skyrocketing expenses of post-conflict reconstruction. This would endanger life support for the millions of Somalians, Malians, and other people residing in nations experiencing severe domestic conflicts, catastrophic economic meltdowns, and rising humanitarian needs.

Senegalese President Macky Sall's visit to Russia as chair of the African Union Commission reinforced Western perceptions of Africa's tilt in favour of Russia. Western officials remained unconvinced by Sall's claims that his visit was intended to lessen the conflict's effects on Africa's access to agricultural supplies and fertilisers. Meanwhile, on 27th April 2022, the US House of Representatives passed the Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act by a huge, bipartisan 419-9 majority.³⁸ Once approved by the Senate it will become law. In essence, the bill aims to counter all Russian activities, including the use of hard and soft power that can potentially expand Russia's influence in the continent. Most recently, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken made a three-country tour in order to prepare a strategy to counter Russian influence in Africa.³⁹

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Conclusion

Although the Russia-Ukraine war highlights how heavily the continent depends on grain and fertiliser imported from Russia and Ukraine, it actually pales in comparison to the various Western aid and assistance programmes in Africa. Thus, the African reaction at the UNGA shocked western policymakers. While sanctions imposed on Russia by European nations also have consequences on their own energy imports, they impact much more the African economies, as they are less capable of adapting to these changing realities. Undoubtedly, the fragile states in Africa are being affected the most by the rising cost of hydrocarbons as well as food and fertiliser prices.

However, the rising fuel prices alone don't explain the African position on Russia. Russia's engagement with Africa is multifaceted. In recent years, Russia has employed various strategies to enhance its influence in Africa, which takes cognisance of the strong anti-colonial and anti-Western sentiments among many Africans. Russia was never part of colonialism in Africa. Instead, it supported several liberation struggles. As a result, despite the West's dislike, Africa has a great deal of sympathy for Russia. While Russia is viewed as an alternative to the Western-led world order, Ukraine is frequently considered the West's pawn.

Except for the pandemic's effects, the continent's GDP has tripled over the past two decades, making it the second fastest expanding region behind Asia. Africa has become the new global centre of growth, despite its reputation as a continent beset by poverty, civil unrest, famine, and corruption. This is primarily because of its capacity for consumption, which is supported by the expansion of the middle class and capital inflow. With a median age of 19, it is a young continent. How the region's leaders manage its policies will largely determine whether or not the coming decade will be Africa's decade.

Recent Russian effort has been to proactively engage with Africa. African nations require empathy, parity, and respect, which they believe they can get from their partners such as Russia. Leaving apart a few business transactions and poorly allocated aid, the West's interest in Africa seems to be more driven by their worries about mass migration. Therefore, instead of *schadenfreude* or the vengeful anti-Russian sentiments that seem to guide the Western countries, the Ukraine war should inspire a self-assessment by the West. Western sanctions on the one hand and paternalism on the other cannot

convince African leaders to sever their ties with Russia. Instead, it exposes western paternalism as a new form of colonialism.

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