



## INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL FOR SECURITY FORCES RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION CENTER

# INSIGHTS

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### II Russia-Africa Summit, 27-28 July 2023: towards a diversified international cooperation

Seventeen African Heads of State attended the second Russia-Africa Economic and Humanitarian Forum for Peace, Security and Development summit in St Petersburg on 27-28 July 2023. Although this high-level attendance was lower than at the first summit of this kind in Sochi (forty-five African Heads of State present) on 23-24 October 2019, it nevertheless reflects a deep-seated desire to diversify the partnerships linking the continent to the rest of the world. It is also of great significance for Russia, which has been somewhat isolated on the international scene since the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in February 2022, but which, under President Vladimir Putin, ambitions to rebuild its position as a world power. Described by some observers as Russia's "charm offensive" towards Africa, this major event was presented by Russia as an opportunity to develop a strategic partnership with African countries. Moreover, in a symbolic way, this second summit was intended to mark the continuation of the diplomatic forum between Moscow and African countries, as some observers had doubted the ability of the Russian authorities to ensure the presence of African Heads of State at this meeting initially scheduled for October 2022 (Kohnert, 2023: 5).

Photo 1: Heads of delegations attending the second Russia-Africa summit



Source: Roscongress Photo Bank.

Indeed, even in the context of Russia's international policy, such meetings with Africa come late in the day, as they are already taking place with the European Union, China and Central Asia. In the new race for Africa, Russia's offensive, *as an outsider*, ensures that the latter does not fall behind the other industrialized nations.

For some years now, Africa has been at the heart of the global agenda. Indeed, the Final Declaration of this meeting describes "Africa as an essential pillar of the multipolar world". More and more multilateral meetings are being devoted to Africa, a sign that it is a space where international influence of nations from the rest of the world is being built up and expressed. In addition to the traditional France-Africa summits (since 1973), there have been meetings between Japan and Africa (since 1993) and between China and Africa (since 2000). New players have entered the diplomatic arena, including Turkey (2008, 2014, 2021), the United States (2014, 2022) and the United Kingdom (2020).

This paper aims to show that relations between Africa and Russia are not new. It also decodes the new directions in the light of the positions and declarations set out at the St Petersburg Summit, and outlines a number of lessons that Africa should draw from them in order to build an equitable and lasting relationship.

### **Africa and Russia: a long-standing relationship**

Relations between Russia and Africa began late in the 15th century against a backdrop of the spread of Christianity and Islam (Arkhangelskaya, 2013: 62). As Cameroonian President Paul Biya recalled at the summit, the Russian Federation has a "long-standing interest" in Africa, which was vigorously expressed during the struggle for independence. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union played an active role in Africa, providing financial and military support to a number of national liberation movements<sup>1</sup>. It also maintained a significant ideological influence in Senegal, Mali, Guinea Conakry and Côte d'Ivoire, among other countries. Following the independence days, the Soviet Union became involved in the economic development of a number of African countries, financing the construction of infrastructure such as roads, hospitals and schools, and providing technical assistance in various fields. The Soviet Union also made a significant contribution to the training of around a hundred thousand Africans in its universities and military academies (Fidan and Aras, 2010: 56). However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 reduced the intensity of Russian-African relations, without putting an end to Russian interest in Africa (Birgersson et al., 1996).

Indeed, since the mid-2000s, Russia has been seeking to strengthen its bilateral relations with many African countries, particularly in the economic, military and political spheres. By drawing on the memory of this shared past, Russia is seeking to win the sympathy of African countries. As a result, it has succeeded in establishing diplomatic relations with all the

countries on the continent. Undoubtedly, the revival of relations between these two parties dates back to the official visit of Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to Moscow in 2001. This was followed by a series of exchanges of envoys, including visits by President Putin to South Africa, Egypt, Algeria and Morocco in 2006, and by President Medvedev to Angola, Namibia and Nigeria in 2009. In this new context of relations, Russia first established privileged links with North Africa (mainly Egypt and Libya) before extending its influence to the south of the Sahara. Having shed its previous ideological objectives, Russia is now pursuing a *realpolitik* in Africa, marked by economic pragmatism. Economic and strategic objectives are therefore essential. Unlike Western nations, Russia's presence in Africa does not involve political conditions such as the holding of free and transparent elections or respect for human rights. It is based on the principle of "African solutions to African problems", which has led to fierce Western criticism of its support for autocratic and authoritarian regimes.

Russia's presence in Africa is therefore also linked to its geo-economic and geopolitical interests, especially to counteract Western and mainly French influence in the region. The Kremlin has been active in offering military assistance to the Central African Republic and Mali, following the end of the Sangaris (2016) and Barkhane (2022) operations conducted by France in these countries, giving it access to the exploitation of mineral resources in these territories. For a long time, France has been careful not to present an aggressive face, avoiding direct competition with the interests of European nations, the United States and even China in Africa. Africa is also a potential ally for Russia in multilateral discussions, which justifies the Kremlin's plea for a permanent seat or seats for Africa.

### **New avenues of cooperation**

The final declaration<sup>2</sup> adopted at the end of the St Petersburg Summit provides a framework for

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<sup>1</sup>The African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Algeria, the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO), the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), etc.

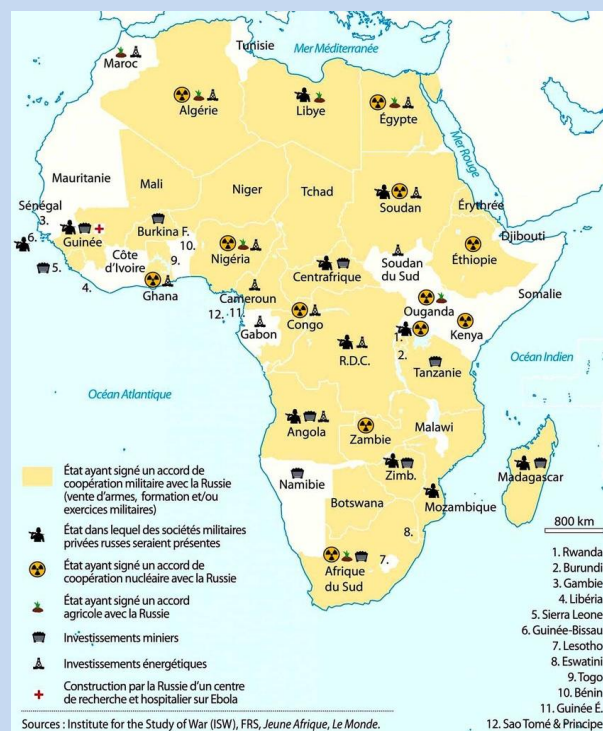
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<sup>2</sup> Declaration of the Second Russia-Africa Summit, July 28, 2023, URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5972>, accessed August 15, 2023. This declaration is supplemented by a declaration on the prevention of an arms

future relations between Russia and African countries. With its 74 points, it aims to cover a wide range of areas, including the implementation of partnership and dialogue mechanisms, political and legal cooperation, security cooperation, trade and economic cooperation, and scientific, technical, humanitarian, educational, cultural, sporting, health, youth and information cooperation.

Cooperation on peace and security is obviously central to these relations. Accordingly, the Summit participants intend to "pursue close cooperation to resolve and prevent conflicts in Africa. The principle of 'African solutions to African problems' must continue to serve as the basis for conflict resolution". Since the Sochi summit in 2019, agreements have been signed in this context with 21 African countries, including Cameroon in April 2022. Russia also aims to establish its military bases on the continent, notably in the Central African Republic, Egypt, Eritrea, Madagascar, Mozambique and Sudan. It is also providing military assistance and equipment to certain countries, such as the Central African Republic and Mozambique, to combat terrorist groups. In general, it is involved in anti-terrorist training in several African countries, in addition to its contribution to peacekeeping operations. The most significant of these is the presence of the private military company Wagner (Klen, 2023: 53-58) in Mali, the Central African Republic, Libya and Mozambique, and even in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Madagascar, Zimbabwe and Sudan, according to some sources. In the military sphere too, armaments are a key focus, with an emphasis on North Africa. Between 2014 and 2019, Russia supplied 49% of the arms sold in Africa (Ronzon, 2022).

Map 1: Russia in Africa in 2019



In terms of trade, Russian President Vladimir Putin praised the progress of trade between Russia and Africa, which reached 18 billion US dollars in 2022. Russian companies are involved in transport, geological exploration, mining, chemical industry, agriculture and fishing in various African countries. However, this progress fails to highlight the large trade deficit in Africa: in 2020, it stood at US\$10.8 billion, or US\$12.4 billion in imports from Russia and only US\$1.6 billion in exports.

In terms of information, it is impossible to ignore or underestimate the deployment of Russian soft power in Africa, through media such as Russia Today and Sputnik, but also on the Internet with the influence of African public figures in favour of Russia, and therefore against the interests of traditional partners such as France (Le Cam, 2023).

The African Union's participation in the second Russia-Africa Summit also made it possible to identify the continent's expectations in terms of energy, food security, closer cooperation on peace and security, and the fight against terrorism.

In terms of energy, Russia potentially has an important role to play, insofar as it is a net exporter of energy. Indeed, it has no plans to import energy resources, and has on several occasions stated its willingness to invest in energy production in Africa, including through

race in space, another on cooperation in the field of international information security and yet another on strengthening cooperation in the fight against terrorism, and by the action plan of the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum 2023-2026.



nuclear power. In terms of food security, Africa's dependence on Russian and Ukrainian cereals is real. The concern raised by the Chair of the African Union Commission stems from the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war, with its consequences in terms of soaring prices and restrictions on exports, and from Russia's withdrawal from the "cereals market" on 18 July 2023. This situation is fuelling fears about Ukrainian supplies to African countries. Even before the summit opened, President Putin was keen to reassure African importing countries that Russia "is capable of replacing Ukrainian grain on a commercial basis and at no cost". This statement was followed by a promise to deliver up to 50,000 tons of cereals free of charge to six African countries (Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Mali, Central African Republic, Somalia and Zimbabwe). In terms of security, peace and the fight against terrorism, Russia's contribution to securing the continent is vital, just like that of all Africa's partners. Through its military presence and its role in supplying arms to the African continent, Russia is a key player in peace and security initiatives.

Furthermore, the Russian-Ukrainian war was not one of the main issues at the Summit, as it was discussed on the sidelines. This contributed to reducing interest in African mediation. As Abdelhak Bassou (2023: 10) points out, "Africa seems to disapprove of Russia's actions in Ukraine, but is not unanimous in its condemnation of Moscow". For the most part, it has chosen the path of non-alignment and advocated a diplomatic solution to the conflict. Moreover, African mediation, supported by the African Peace Initiative, is not an inter-state action. It began on 16 and 17 June 2023 in Kiev and Moscow. It proposed de-escalation on both sides, recognition of the sovereignty of the countries as recognized by the United Nations, security guarantees for all parties, the lifting of barriers to the export of grain via the Black Sea, the release of prisoners of war, and reconstruction. These solutions were deemed very difficult to implement by Russia. On 28 July 2023 in St Petersburg, on the sidelines of the summit, the leaders of the seven countries behind the African Peace Initiative<sup>3</sup> and the

Russian president continued their discussions. They focused on humanitarian issues, including the rights of children in hostile areas and prisoner exchanges between Russia and Ukraine. Nevertheless, while Russia has expressed its interest in this mediation, the chances of it leading to a cessation of hostilities and a settlement of the conflict are slim.

The summit also exposed African dissent over the political transitions underway: some leaders, including Presidents Azali Assoumani (Comoros and current Chair of the African Union), Macky Sall (Senegal), Denis Sassou Nguesso (Congo) and Umaro Sissoco Embaló (Guinea-Bissau), as well as the Chair of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, did not wish to appear in the official photo alongside putschists Assimi Goïta (Mali) and Ibrahim Traoré (Burkina Faso).

## Conclusion

With this other summit, Africa is developing a new form of cooperation with an industrialized nation. This stance remains guided by the imperative of mobilizing the resources needed for sustainable growth, peace and social progress on the continent. Africa, coveted for its natural resources but bound by complex mechanisms of dependence, has another opportunity to promote its position on its future and its priorities. From this point of view, the diversification of development partners makes it possible to hasten the advent of a multipolar, fairer and more balanced world order. But this diversification requires a combination of voluntarism and realism to overcome the obstacles that try to keep Africa dependent on its historic relationship with the West. Russian officials have spoken of "unprecedented pressure" being exerted on African leaders to dissuade them from taking part in the summit with Russia. The Congolese President Denis Sassou Nguesso illustrated this attitude during the bilateral meeting between the Congolese delegation and that of the Russian Federation by stating that "Many forces have worked to prevent the success of this summit" by refusing to ensure the flight of his delegation or to grant overflight authorizations for their airspace to

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<sup>3</sup>Presidents Azali Assoumani of Comoros, Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa, Denis Sassou Nguesso of Congo, Abdel Fattah al-Sissi of Egypt, Macky Sall of

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Senegal, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and Zambian Foreign Minister Stanley Kakubo.

aircraft chartered by other participants from Africa.

It is therefore important that Africa's commitment to this Russian initiative bears fruit. The Chairman of the Commission of the African Union was keen to remind the Kremlin authorities that Africa was counting on its participation in this meeting, which was why it had to produce facts, concrete results and an impact on the daily lives of Africans: "The functionality of such a partnership cannot be measured in any other way than by assessing its results, in other words by identifying the activities carried out between two summits in relation to the agreed objectives"<sup>4</sup>. It is then a question of identifying the obstacles and working on possible adjustments. For example, the ambition expressed in Sochi in 2019 to double trade between Russia and Africa in five years is far from being achieved, partly due to the combined effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the outbreak of war in Ukraine. The next Russia-Africa summit will therefore be decisive, depending on what is achieved, in assessing the extent of Russia's influence on the continent.

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<sup>4</sup> Speech by HE Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairman of the African Union Commission, at the Russia-Africa Summit in St Petersburg, July 28, 2023, URL: <https://au.int/en/speeches/20230730/discours-au-sommet-russie-afrique-saint-petersburg-28-juillet-2023>, accessed on August 14, 2023.

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