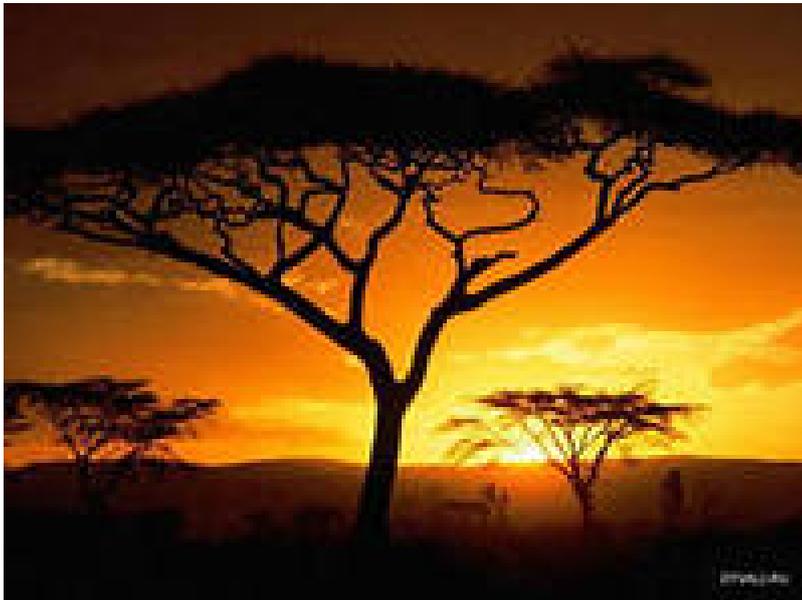


## Russia And Africa: Measured Re-Engagement



By George F. Ward

**WASHINGTON, July 29, 2015 (IDA – Africa Watch)** -- The end of the Cold War marked the beginning of the end of a period of intense Russian engagement with the continent of Africa. By the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union had signed hundreds of agreements with African countries. Moscow had offered training in the Soviet Union to around 25,000 African civilians at the university level, and thousands more had graduated from Soviet military and political schools. Soviet training programs on the continent had reached at least 200,000 Africans.

The Soviet Union had concluded technical and economic assistance agreements with 37 African countries and trade agreements with 42. By the end of the 1990s, this dense network of relationships had deteriorated markedly. Newly democratic Russia closed embassies and cultural centers in Africa and terminated development projects. Trade atrophied.

During the current decade, indications of increased Russian interest in Africa have appeared, and researchers are examining “Russia’s Return to Africa.” In assessing this reported trend, several questions need to be addressed. How extensive is Russian re-engagement? Why is

Russia focusing anew on Africa? What does Russia bring to the table in its engagements with Africa? Where will re-engagement lead?

### Current Russia-Africa Relations - A Varied Picture

In looking at the facts and figures that describe Russia's engagement with Africa, two caveats are in order.

First, significant proportions of Russia's international commercial relationships are carried out through offshore entities and therefore may not be counted as Russian in international trade statistics.

Second, statistics related to Africa are notoriously inaccurate. Keeping these factors in mind, it is worth looking at the reported statistics regarding Russian re-engagement in several areas.

- **Trade is growing, but is still modest.** In 2000, Russia's overall trade with Africa was reported to have been about \$1 billion. Over roughly a decade, trade expanded more than tenfold, reaching \$11 billion annually in 2012. These numbers were dwarfed by U.S. trade with Africa (\$93.2 billion in 2012) and Chinese trade (\$163.9 billion in just the first 10 months of 2012).

Russia's bilateral trade relationship with Africa is the smallest of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). The Russian-African trade relationship is relatively modest for straightforward reasons - Russia does not enjoy comparative advantage in the manufactured consumer and industrial goods that Africa needs, and Russia itself does not need the oil and gas exports that Africa offers.

- **Russian investment is significant.** According to a study by the African Development Bank (ADB) published in 2011, Russian investment flows to Africa peaked at \$20 billion in 2008. Even recognizing that annual investment numbers are volatile, Russian investments in Africa compare favorably to those of China. For example, The Economist reported that Chinese direct investment in Africa in 2012 amounted to only \$2.5 billion. Russian investments in Africa have been heavily focused in the mining and oil and gas sectors.

According to the ADB study, these investments are motivated by the depletion of resource bases for key minerals in Russia itself. The ADB cites zinc, diamonds, gold, uranium, copper, nickel, manganese, bauxite, oil, and coal among the resources that are close to exhaustion in Russia. Russian investments, which have been heavily concentrated in northern, southern, and western Africa, are focused on production of these materials.

- **Arms sales—Strictly business.** During the Cold War, the Soviet Union generously supplied its African clients with military hardware. Like other elements of the Russia-Africa relationship, arms sales fell precipitously.

By 2003, Russia decided to revive its military cooperation with Africa. In fact, Russian exports of major weapons have increased worldwide, from 22 percent of the total in the 2005–2009 period to 27 percent in the 2010–2014 period. Russia is now the world's second largest exporter of major weapons, after the United States.

As a region, Africa accounted for 12 percent of Russian arms exports in the 2010–2014 period. The motivations for Russia's arms sales seem to be mainly commercial rather than political. Some Russian arms sales have gone to former Soviet client states, but other sales have been to countries with close ties to the West. Thus, Moscow has sold over \$100 million worth of jet fighter aircraft to both Sudan and Uganda, states that are military rivals.

- **Soft power is still soft.** If investment through private and state-controlled companies is the leading edge of Russian engagement in Africa, Russian government efforts appear to be trailing. During the 1990s, Russia closed nine embassies, most of its trade missions, and 13 of 20 cultural centers in Africa. Most, if not all, of those embassies appear to remain closed. Apart from a reported \$20 billion in debt relief, Russia has not provided significant development assistance to the countries of Africa.

Even Russian Federation participation in United Nations peacekeeping missions in Africa has declined. In May 2007, 202 Russian personnel were serving in those UN missions. Eight years later, that number has been reduced to 60. The limited nature of official Russian representation in Africa and the lack of resources for assistance would appear to be a factor restricting

Russia's ability to exert influence.

**Where Will Re-engagement Lead?** As the above review demonstrates, Russian re-engagement with Africa has been up to now relatively modest. This does not mean that the revival of relationships is without significance. Growing Russian investment in Africa's mining and energy sectors may produce needed raw materials for Russian industries while also providing a source of capital for African industry.

In geopolitical terms, the rekindling of military relationships with former client states such as Angola and Sudan and the development of new relationships with countries like Uganda may help Russia counter perceived U.S. military dominance. Although trading relationships will probably remain modest for some time, they could increase in a meaningful way as Russian investments in the African mining sector mature.

Finally, the revived commercial and financial relationships with African countries may become more important to Russia as counterweights to Western economic sanctions. For all of these reasons, we can expect Russia to continue to strive to expand its presence on the African continent.

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