

On Russia-Africa Matters and the Emerging Multipolar World

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In the last decades, great power rivalries and competition have characterised contemporary Africa, popularly termed as the new scramble for Africa. Within the context of the emerging multipolar world and the current Russia-Ukraine crisis, majority of African States are seemingly maintaining their strategic autonomy.

Most of them are now choosing their external partners with solution-based, practical and pragmatic policy which are considered very significant and useful for their economic development. With Africa increasingly becoming the world's largest geographic free trade area, this creates grounds for concrete and transparent economic partnerships.

While the outlook for Africa in the near future is far from smooth, taking into account their own internal roadblocks and combined with efforts at strengthening bilateral relations and cooperation with external players, leaders of African States and policy-makers must exercise more agency in determining their own affairs.

Samir Bhattacharya, Senior Research Associate at Vivekananda International Foundation and Doctoral Candidate at Jawaharlal Nehru University, in this insightful interview, has further expressed his expert views on the current changing geopolitical situation, with particular reference to Africa, its external relations and key global players. Here are the excerpts.

Kester Kenn Klomegah (KKK): How do you assess the key questions discussed at the Valdai

Discussion Club in mid-July?

Samir Bhattacharya (SB): The key questions appear to be well thought-out and timely. However, some new ideas must emerge from the forum. If we keep repeating what has already been thought or said, we cannot solve the current problems. Hence, it will be crucial to think of some out-of-the-box ideas and then brainstorm around them to select the best alternative.

For example, the topic of de-dollarisation and what is the alternative is doing the round in multiple forums. My question is, why do we need a single solution? A unipolar world was maintained using a unique currency for the whole world. As the world is getting multipolar, let's resolve this at a micro level, bilaterally or sometimes regionally.

The idea of BRICS currency and considering it as a replacement of the dollar sounds theoretically perfect, but it won't be easy to implement. If that were the case, Euro would have become, at least, equivalent to the dollar. Again, the African continent is talking of a common currency. Yet, after almost a decade of discussion, even the West African block ECOWAS or even smaller block WAEMU couldn't come up of their own. Therefore, the arguments need to be solution-based, practical and pragmatic.

KKK: In your expert view, what are some of Russia's policy weaknesses toward Africa?

SB: The biggest policy weakness of Russia in its Africa policy is its near absence in Africa for over three decades. During that time, multiple countries, based on their respective strengths, got engaged with Africa. Immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was not in a position to assist Africa in any way. This was mostly owing to Russia's faltering economy and international sanctions imposed by the United States and Europe. Meanwhile, the USA was too busy or too happy as Fukuyama declared the "end of history", and Africa fell from its policy priority. Around that time, only China slowly and steadily made inroads and assisted Africa. Whether China works ethically or if its debt-trap diplomacy is for another debate. The fact remains that China helped Africa when no one did.

The good thing, Russia realised where it went wrong. Concerning the action to rectify its mistake, it may be too little, too late. But these things are evaluated in the longer term. Hence, from 2019, when Russia-Africa relations got another life with its institutionalisation, auditing the performance would be tough, especially in the backdrop of Covid when the whole world came to a pause.

Another policy weakness of Russia is its attempt to work alone. Russia has a good relationship with both India and China. Russia must work in Africa with both of them based on complementarity. The only problem with an equal Russia-China-Africa partnership, China would be more equal than the other two. On the other hand, the Russia-India-Africa partnership could actually be grounded in equality. However, Russia must be clear what it wants to do in Africa, how it will help Africa and what Russia would gain out of it. And to get the right answer, it is important to ask the right questions, which are still elusive.

KKK: What is admirable about the policy approaches adopted toward Africa, for instance, by China and India?

SB: About China, I have already talked briefly. Being an Indian, I am better positioned to speak on India's approach to Africa. The key pillars of India's development partnership with

Africa have been capacity-building initiatives, lines of credit, grant support, small development projects, technical consultation, disaster relief and humanitarian help, and military cooperation. Similar to Russia, India also had policy paralysis for nearly two decades, up to its economic liberalisation in 1991. Due to its domestic realities, India almost had to pull itself out of the African equation.

Since India is slowly coming back to Africa, and the current dispensation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken it to a new level as his administration has been showing a remarkable determination to fortify India's historical bonding with the continent. Since his government came to power, there have been over 35 outbound trips to various African nations at the levels of President, Vice President, and Prime Minister. This is unprecedented in the history of India-Africa relations.

The India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) has been instrumental in formalising this partnership. Since its inception in 2008, the IAFS has emerged as one of the largest regular diplomatic gatherings of African leaders. There have been three editions of IAFS, held in India in 2008, Ethiopia in 2011, and India again in 2015. Although it is a cause of concern as India has had only three IAFS so far, however, India's Africa policy is much more than just IAFS.

The principal mode of India's development relationship with Africa has been capacity building and skill development, and ITEC played a significant role in it. Introduced in 1964, the India Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme has been an essential aspect of the India-Africa collaboration. In fact, the African continent is now the largest recipient of the ITEC program.

In 2019, India introduced the first pilot e-ITEC course for two African countries. And since the outbreak of the pandemic, the e-ITEC has become the new normal. To respond to the needs of changing times, new and innovative courses such as Big Data Analytics, urban infrastructure management, WTO-related topics, and solar technology were introduced organically.

In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, 25 African countries received medical assistance from India. Also, India offered an e-ITEC course on "COVID-19 Pandemic: Prevention and Management Guidelines for Healthcare Professionals" to healthcare workers in Africa. Although, much more can be done, the India-Africa relationship today constitutes a vibrant partnership between the two continents, animated by the spirit of developing together as equals, devoid of colonial or neocolonial baggage. And I think that recognising the African agency is the biggest strength in India's Africa policy.

KKK: Do you think Russia-Ukraine crisis has impacted on Russia's relation with Africa?

SB: Following the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the United States and European nations imposed a slew of sanctions on Russia. Despite being geographically distant from the conflict, the African continent is concerned about the spill-over effect and subsequent economic sanctions, which will significantly impact different African countries. The surge in oil, gas, and wheat prices is the war's most visible and tangible result.

On 2nd March, the United Nations General Assembly in New York voted on a resolution calling for the withdrawal of the Russian military from Ukraine. To the shock of United States and many Western nations, only 27 African countries participated in the United Nations General Assembly vote on the resolution. Several rounds of elections took place in the

United Nations. Russia is aware of which are the countries that always stood behind it and going forward, would become the core of Russia's Africa strategy. Russia is also aware of the countries that never supported it. These votes would actually help Russia to recalibrate its Africa strategy.

On the other hand, the pattern of these votes also indicates that Africans do not see their foreign relationships as a zero-sum game and do not want to become dependent on any foreign power. They have gone hybrid, choosing and mixing from among the various outside parties, be it the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, China, Russia, France, India or Turkey, based on their national interest, and maintaining their strategic autonomy.

KKK: Why Africa is attracting many external players? Is this trend another round of scramble for its resources?

SB: In the last decade, many countries are increasing their presence in Africa: Turkey has opened 16 new missions, Qatar has opened 11 and Japan has opened nine. Brazil, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, Germany and Venezuela have also opened five new embassies. It's like a new Cold War is playing out in Africa, where the rival sides are trying to gain influence. The extent of competition between different traditional and emerging countries to reach out to Africa has made some people term it as new scramble for Africa.

No wonder Africa is heavily rich with natural resources, particularly minerals including cobalt and lithium, essential to the rapidly expanding electric vehicle industry. However, the fight for Africa is much beyond its resources. By 2050, Africa will be home to one-fourth of the world's population; half of them would be under 25, representing an important market. Africa is already the world's largest geographic free trade area, and its gross domestic product has been projected to reach as high as \$29 trillion by 2050. Africa is also essential to global security due to Islamic terrorist groups such as Boko Haram in West Africa and Al-Shabaab in the Horn of Africa.

The value of Africa is also important geostrategically. In the UN and other multilateral bodies, Africa represents the largest block with 28 per cent of the votes compared to Asia's 27 per cent, the Americas' 17 per cent, and Western Europe's 15 per cent. Indeed, African votes were decisive in the United Nations General Assembly debate 1971 that returned Communist China to the United Nations and expelled Taiwan. Therefore, to reshape global institutions and norms that would reflect today's reality, Africa will remain central to geostrategic competition.

Therefore, terming this as "scramble for Africa" would be a limited view that ignores the continent's own agency.

KKK: Can we describe that as neo-colonialism? What do you suggest should be African leaders approach in dealing with external players?

SB: Great power rivalries characterise contemporary Africa, termed the new scramble for Africa. The contest between the three major global powers will increase in the upcoming year as China, the United States and the European Union try to enhance their economic, political, and security ties with Africa. However, as explained earlier, although it has much resemblance with neocolonialism, terming it neocolonialism would be too simplistic.

I'll explain this with one recent example. The West was alarmed when Africa refused to

condemn Russian aggression in Ukraine at the UNGA. However, what West forgot to consider is that despite the worsening humanitarian crisis in Africa, how much help West has extended. Instead of assisting Africa in overcoming the disastrous consequences of food scarcity and price increases, their focus appeared to be on countering Russian influence in Africa. And therefore, the African reaction to the West's call to condemn Russia demonstrates the emergence of African realpolitik, quite rightfully.

Going forward, African leaders must think strategically, removing emotions and personal gain from policy decisions. Transparency and good governance are going to be paramount for any good to come out of the continent's bargaining with rich and powerful foreigners or for any good to trickle down to those who need it most.

KKK: What could be the role of Africa in this new reconfiguration often referred to as multipolar world?

SB: The outlook for Africa in the near future is far from smooth. It is not difficult to list the concerns. Issues, including debt, civil war, internal strife, and climate change, present considerable difficulties. The instability brought on by election cycles, geopolitics, war, and the continuing threat of food shortages will remain significant causes for concern. But it also offers opportunities for African nations to rise to the occasion.

Undoubtedly, the world is in the throes of tremendous change. The Breton Woods arrangement and the Pax Americana are slowly but surely declining. And therefore, African countries now have an opportunity to redefine their role in the world order. It is palpable from the fact that they are increasingly looking east to emerging and re-emerging powers for partnerships. But as they do so, they need to ensure they do not move from one unhappy partnership to another.

African policymakers have begun to attend periodic summit-level meetings with new centres of power such as China, India, Russia, and Turkey. They have done so, of course, while continuing to participate in summits with the European Union, the United States, France, and Japan. The countries of the continent must exercise more agency in determining their own affairs.

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