

Russia and Nigeria: Turning a New Page in Their Relationship?

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On March 6, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov held talks with Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Nigeria Yusuf Maitama Tuggar, who was in Moscow on an official two-day working visit. The visit, at the invitation of the Russian Foreign Ministry, which has a lot of distinctive implications and strategic interpretations, was a conscious follow up to review and discuss Russian-Nigerian partnership issues that were raised long ago and during the second Russia-Africa summit held last July 2023.

Vice President Kashim Shettima headed the Nigerian delegation to attend that second Russia-Africa summit in St Petersburg. Foreign Minister Yusuf Maitama Tuggar was among the group. Often reiterated that Nigeria is one of Africa's biggest countries and Russia's priority partner in the West African region.

In the opening remarks and with historical precision, Lavrov mentioned the frequency Nigeria delegations visiting Moscow and added:

"This meeting reflects the long-term friendship between our nations and good prospects for the development of our relations at this stage. We consider Nigeria a priority partner on the African continent."

In practical terms, Russia has maintained 'cordial relationship' with Nigeria these several years after the collapse of the Soviet era. The greatest achievement, of course, is sustaining the political consultations and frequent dialoguing several economic issues which have not been effectively implemented in the country.

At the media conference after their 'behind-the-scene' discussions on March 6, Sergey Lavrov and Yusuf Maitama Tuggar [re]affirmed their commitment to the Russian-Nigerian

cooperation in political, trade, economic, humanitarian and other areas. It also included the prospects for expanding business contacts and implementing joint projects in energy, mining and mineral processing, construction and modernising infrastructure and agriculture.

“With this aim in view we have agreed to stimulate the activities of the Intergovernmental Commission for Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technological Cooperation and to make use of the capabilities of the Russia-Nigeria Business Council. We need to improve our legal framework for implementing projects of mutual interest. We have an interest in implementing the agreement on military-technical cooperation, which has recently been extended. Our Nigerian friends are interested in this too,” Lavrov emphasized.

Both Ministers Sergey Lavrov and Yusuf Maitama Tuggar, during the joint media conference, inevitably never pointed to a single project implemented, undertaken and successfully completed during these several years. The ministry’s website says Lavrov has held his position as foreign minister for two decades, since 2004, and has been dealing with Nigeria and African countries.

More than 15 years ago, Foreign Minister Lavrov held a review meeting with his Nigerian counterpart Minister Chief Ojo Mbila Maduekwe who paid a three-day working visit to Moscow. After that closed-door bilateral talks held in March 2009, both ministers, as always, held a brief media conference and emphatically noted that Moscow was prepared to offer trade preferences to the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

They also agreed on a broad range of bilateral economic issues, many of which have still not been implemented. Until today, Russia has never honoured its promise of extending trade preferences, in practical terms, to Nigeria. Extending trade preferences was interpreted as an integral part of strengthening bilateral economic and trade cooperation between the two countries.

For trade relations between Russia and Nigeria and other African states to improve appreciably, Professor Dmitri Bondarenko, deputy director of the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute for African Studies, suggested “Russia gives some trade preferences to African countries – for example, tax exceptions or reduction among other measures. This can become an effective political step to strengthen economic cooperation with African countries.”

Today, Nigeria is Russia’s second largest trade partner, only in theory, among sub-Saharan African countries. Russian business circles show an ever greater interest, with sweet rhetorics, in entering the promising market of that large country. The volume of trade should be in the billions of dollars, even without military hardware. One of the major hindrances to free trade and a significant increase in trade transactions between Nigeria and Russia is the lack of direct air flights. This makes it more inconvenient and expensive for potential investors to travel easily to both countries. Besides, there are no adequate economic and social information available to potential Russian and Nigerian investors.

Russian and Nigerian ambassadors have come forth and back over the years. In May 2022, the Nigerian Ambassador to the Russian Federation, Professor Abdullahi Shehu, gave an inspiring lecture at the Diplomatic Academy of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Most of the points he raised in that lecture included decades of Moscow’s economic failures in

Nigeria and in many African countries despite the boast of several years of cordial relationship with Africa.

Professor Shehu's lecture script points to the fact that President Vladimir Putin considers Africa a so-called second frontier, after Eastern Europe for encircling Western Europe...these reasons may sound strategic yet they remain largely speculative and conjectural. Understandably, the perceived geopolitical irrelevance of Africa by Russia has changed only a little and new dynamics have beckoned on both sides of subsisting opportunities for increased collaboration between Africa and Russia.

Despite the tidal surge in the new Africa-Russia relations and given the strategic role played by the defunct Soviet Union, now succeeded by Russia, in the attainment of the independence of many African countries, both parties must accept the constraints posed on the former [Russia] by the new economic cum geopolitical realities. The acceptance of these new realities is important in order to properly assist in the management of Africa's expectations from Russia particularly in the short term.

Today, for instance, Nigeria offers Russia the advantage of cheap and robust labour. Given Russia's recent experience of sanctions by America and its western allies, a new model of doing business with Africa through investment has become, not only sustainable but also imperative. Perhaps, one of the sectors where this model of doing business can be symbiotically harnessed is in the field of agriculture and its value chain as a result of the steep rise in the large African market and the projected certainty of huge returns on investment in this sector, according to Ambassador Shehu.

Part of the major essence of this lecture was to look at the past with a view to charting a course for the future, inhaling the fresh aroma of the beauty of the 'rose' in Africa-Russia relationship, weeding out the thorns of inconvenience on which Africa and Russia have marched and straighten any crooked path along which both have passed so as to arrive faster to the desired destination. While Africa cherishes the important MOUs and agreements Russia has with Africa, there is need to translate such agreements and MOUs into concrete realities. Additionally, balancing of Russia's commercial interests of arms sales to Africa will ensure that the latter enjoys relative stability and peace so vital for its own development.

Without doubts, Russia has had a long chequered history of post-Soviet diplomacy. Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo visited Russia in 2001. That year, Russia and Nigeria signed the fundamental document for interstate cooperation, the Declaration on Principles of Friendly Relations and Partnership. According to President Vladimir Putin, the Russian Federation, like the former Soviet Union, has always attached great significance to promoting its relations with the African continent. Nigeria occupies a special place among African countries. It is one of the largest and most powerful countries in Africa. Its head of state is a recognised leader not only on the continent, but in the whole world.

Discussions ended with the administrative long list of projects, and on top was joint activities in the sphere of high technology and the launching of several satellites to be used by Nigeria for environmental monitoring and remote sensing of the Earth are being contemplated. That was on March 6, 2001.

Since then, there had been a number of deals and business proposals that have never seen the bright sunlight. As far back in June 2009, Dmitry Medvedev as president visited Nigeria

for the first time, held topmost state level talks on possible nuclear energy, oil exploration and military cooperation. There were talks also focusing on the establishment of petrochemical plant in Nigeria. Alongside there was also a declaration on principles of friendly relations and partnership between Nigeria and the Russian Federation.

Russian investors had wanted to revamp the Ajeokuta Iron and Steel Complex that was abandoned after the collapse of the Soviet Union more than three decades ago, and further take up energy, oil and gas projects in Nigeria, as well as facilitate trade between Nigeria and Russia. In addition, Russia has been prospecting for its nuclear-power ambitions down the years. The promise was to build two nuclear plants estimated cost at US\$20 billion – the bulk of it by Russia, is to boost Nigeria's electricity supply.

Russia's second-largest oil company, and privately controlled Lukoil, has gone back and forth these several years with plans to expand its operations in Nigeria, and in a number of West African countries. There has been a long-dead silence after Gazprom, the Russian energy giant, signed an agreement with the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation [NNPC] on the exploration and exploitation of gas reserves with a new joint venture company known as NiGaz Energy Company.

Some experts argue that there are many other aspects of the bilateral relations. With high interest, Russian officials are pushing for military-technical cooperation. The supply of Russian military equipment could play a high value addition to the fight against notorious Boko Haram. In most of the economic deals, the Nigerian political elites are under strong influence of Paris, London and Washington.

South African Institute of International Affairs [SAIIA], a Johannesburg based foreign policy think tank, put out a report titled "Russia's Military Diplomacy in Africa: High Risk, Low Reward and Limited Impact" in part says that "Russia's growing assertiveness in Africa is a driver of instability, its approach to governance encourages pernicious practices, such as kleptocracy and autocracy in Africa." Worse is that Russia's strengths expressed through military partnerships fall short of what is needed to address the complexities and scale of the problems facing those African countries. Russia encourages the military regimes [Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger] to hold onto political power, instead of returning to constitutional democracy.

Nigeria is an economic powerhouse in West African region. As well known, Nigeria is one of the Africa's fastest growing economies and it boasts the largest population. Russia and Nigeria have some sort of economic relations, but these are not consistent with the long-standing cordial relations between both countries.

In addition, Nigeria is a vast market with huge potentials for prospective foreign investors and so is Russia. Regrettably, investors from both sides appear to know little about these opportunities. This is, usually attributed to the apparent inadequate knowledge of the many investment opportunities in both countries. Despite criticisms, reports show that majority prefer traditional markets – the United States and Europe, and now Asian region. The African political elite and business people choose the United States and Europe for their holidays and as tourism destinations.

Least we forget that Vladimir Putin held discussions with President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria Muhammadu Buhari, who went to Sochi to take part in the first Russia-Africa summit in October 2019. Putin reminded during talks that priority to joint search for opportunities to

broaden trade, economic and investment cooperation were assigned to the Intergovernmental Commission for Economic Cooperation and the Russia – Nigeria and Nigeria – Russia Business councils set up in 2006–2007.

In response, Muhammadu Buhari said in part:

“Mr President, there are many similarities between Russia under your leadership and Nigeria’s aspirations for the future. We can learn a lot from the experience of Russia’s ongoing reforms, of transitioning from oil-dependent economy to a modern, diversified and inclusive economy. Russia has through these reforms successfully privatised a number of state-owned entities, which have now become global household names. This is especially so in the energy, manufacturing, defence and the metallurgical sectors.”

So it continues, without the least interruption, that Russia and Nigeria share experiences, exchange views on national and international platforms, maintain political dialogues, discuss economic cooperation and humanitarian issues. Russia and Nigeria shares similar position at the United Nations. Russia and Nigeria continue to keep cordial and mutually beneficial relationship in these past years since 1991 after Soviet’s collapse.

The term – bilateral relations – seen as a two-way street, Nigeria’s presence in the Russian Federation is only the diplomatic representative office. Public outreach diplomacy is generally ineffective, both ways between Russia and Africa. Compared, for example, to American Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) and a number of trade preferences granted by Europe, Russians hardly encourage African presence in the Russian Federation. On the other hand, Russia hardly in speeches make reference to the African continental single market (AfCFTA). With an estimated 1.4 billion people, the market is potentially the largest, Africa – is the continent of the future.

As a matter of fact, in order to be part of this geopolitical arena, Russia has to take practical steps to move beyond AK-47 in raising its economic influence in Africa. It has to crack the local socio-cultural barriers and, in particular, the deep-seated bureaucracy too. In a continent beleaguered by the ravages of ethnic and political conflicts, Russian officials have to thoroughly study the local conditions before imposing the strategic economic initiatives and engaging local African partners and stakeholders.

In summary, the Russian strategic policy interest generally in Africa and specifically in Nigeria, given the strong limitation of its current capability and it’s re-emergence in Africa, is an earnest attempt to regain part of Soviet-era influence. But this current relations, within the context of geopolitical changes, must necessarily be conducted with consistency and in a concrete manner, but not with mere rhetorics. It is about time to act, aim at noticeable results. According to various narratives inside the continent, Russia appears only as an advocate of emerging multipolar order and as a reliable virtual investor in Africa.

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