

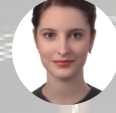
Chapter 25. The Second Russia-Africa Summit and Beyond: Rapprochement is Strategic, not Tactical



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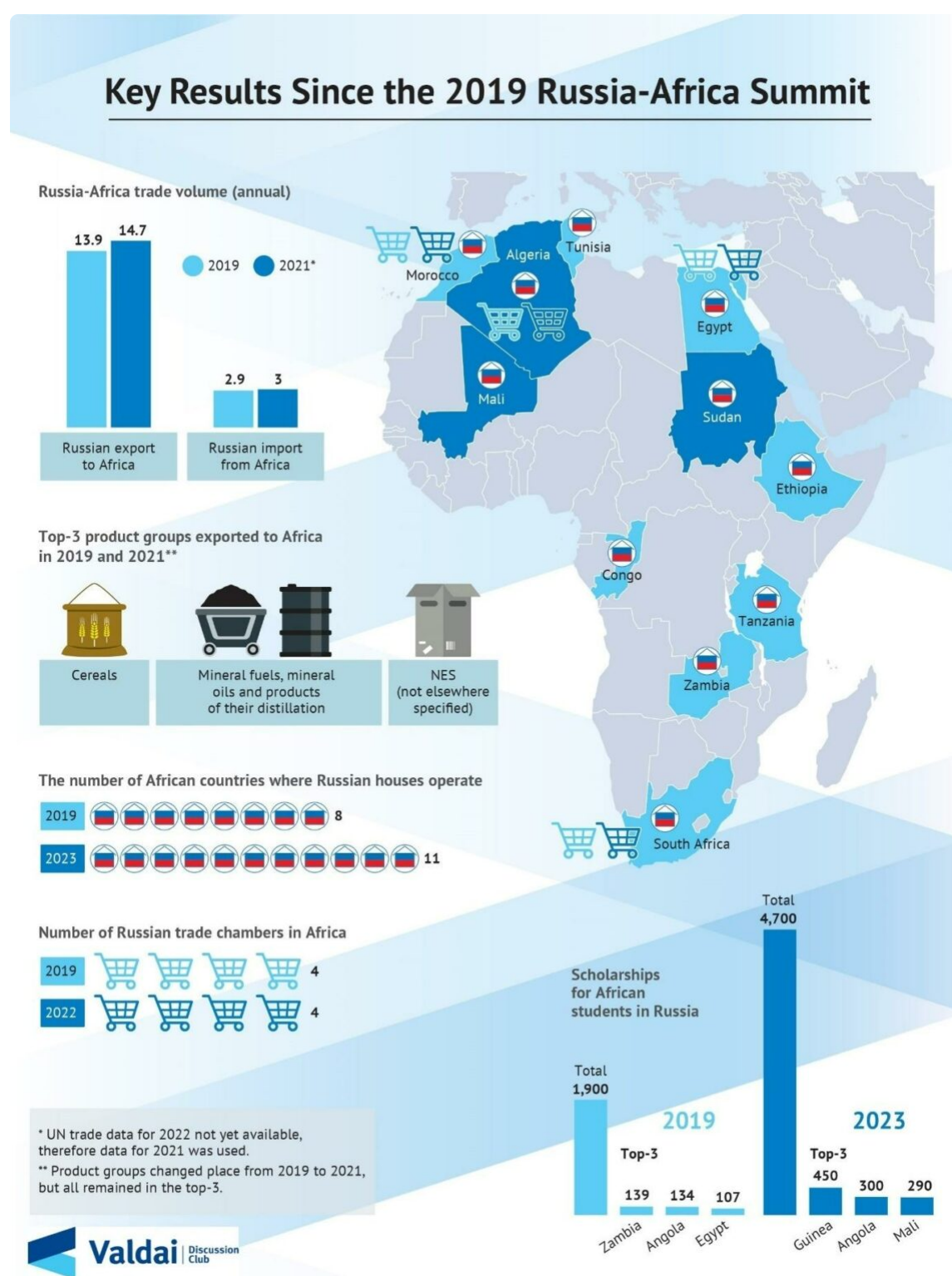
Security Index Yearbook: Russia-Africa summits in 2019 and 2023 resulted in rather ambitious cooperation plans. Have the partners succeeded in implementing all the agreements?

Irina Abramova: I would not say that these summits led to very ambitious plans. Moreover, their outcomes were quite different.

The first Russia-Africa Summit in 2019 was more of a kick-off event. Its purpose was not to try and deliver some ambitious plans, but to show that Russia is serious about coming back to Africa and is there to stay. Africa has long fallen outside of Russia's sphere of strategic interests, initially, because of our *pivot to the West* and then its reversal to the East. We keep pivoting this or that way, without realizing that we need a multi-vector policy, in the good sense of the word.

Instead of putting all the eggs in one basket, we should shape our foreign policy in line with the strategic interests of Russia's development; and Africa fits in really well with these interests for a whole number of reasons. First, it can help us with supplying what we lack in raw materials that the Russian economy needs for its development. Second, Africa is the world's fastest growing market that doubles every four years and is craving for products and services that the Russian Federation has a fairly strong capability to supply. In this respect, Russia's comeback to Africa is very important, even if it's merely on a scale of 2019 when President Vladimir Putin said that our relations must progress to a new strategic level.

At the first Summit, participants discussed some really sweeping plans, including development of economic ties with Africa. But, in fact, the only practical outcome was the signing of an agreement with *Transmashholding JSC* to supply 1,300 railcars to Egypt. No mistake, this was a truly big deal in excess of 1 billion dollars. The remainder of the plans outlined at that Summit had not been followed up for reasons beyond our control: first, the COVID-19 pandemic, when the global trade shrank by 30 percent, then, the beginning of the Special Military Operation in Ukraine, which also forced us to adjust our policy and change our plan. Nevertheless, the objective stated at the first Russia-Africa Summit, including in the remarks of the Russian President, was to double our trade with the African continent over the next three years, which was 20.4 billion dollars in 2018 and was supposed to reach 40 billion dollars in 2023. This has not happened either. In fact, our trade with African countries sagged, but this happened due to external factors, primarily COVID-2019. The volume of trade in 2022 was around 19 billion dollars.



Key Results since the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit.
Source: Valdai Discussion Club (<https://valdaiclub.com/multimedia/infographics/key-results-africa-summits/>)

As for building closer economic ties, unfortunately, this did not happen in the period between the two summits. There was a combination of external and internal factors that made it impossible to set up the right environment for taking our relations to a strategic level. The number of flights between Russia and Africa has not been increased. Now there is only one direct flight to Africa, to Cairo, and even this one was resumed not so long ago. No logistical centers have been built that were needed and promised at the first Russia-Africa Summit. No new embassies were opened and no new trade offices either. Sadly, as it is, we had little to boast about at the second Summit in terms of the work done within the scope that had been set out at the first Russia-Africa Summit.

Ironically, regardless of all this, Africa's positive sentiment towards Russia had actually got stronger rather than otherwise in the time between the summits. The thing is that Russia is seen in a special light, particularly after the Special Military Operation began, and in the context of the objectives it is pursuing on the international arena. It is clear that Russia is actually spearheading the transformation of the old world into a new and fairer one (*fairness* here is probably the key word), polycentric or multicentric. It is fighting not only for its own sovereignty, but for the right of all nations around the world to decide their future. Russia is fighting against all modern forms of oppression that have, in fact, turned into a new kind of colonialism.

The second Russia-Africa Summit, which took place in July 2023, was probably less ambitious but much more specific in its setting the targets. Along with the five adopted declarations, the participants agreed on an action plan for 2023-2026 with a clear set of objectives to be accomplished. And I hope that very much, since this plan is currently being translated into a strategy for our relations with Africa, including their economic dimension, it is going to define not only the objectives but also the people accountable for delivering them and specific deadlines. Besides, Russia and Africa agreed to hold annual ministerial conferences, and not just at the level of foreign ministers, who, of course, will be the leading figures, but also involving ministries in charge of particular areas of our cooperation. I believe it is going to be a very practical and concrete conversation that will help to get things moving at last. Finally, it was the second Summit that revealed a strong interest towards Africa on the part of the Russian business community. While at the first Summit African businessmen were 2.5 times more numerous than their Russian counterparts, the second Summit showed a reverse ratio with twice as many Russian business participants compared to Africans. Surely, the pressure from the West had its effect. There were much fewer heads of state who had been out in force at the first Summit attended by the leaders of 45 states. The second Summit brought together 17 heads of states but joining them were five heads of parliament and five prime ministers. As for the number of delegations, there were quite a few as 45 African countries were represented at the second Russia-Africa Summit.



Considering that I was involved in preparations for the first and second summits, and in all kinds of activities related to Africa that took place between the two events, I feel confident today that we are effectively ready to move from statements to practical results.

Security Index Yearbook: What are the remaining barriers to developing cooperation between Russia and Africa and how to overcome them?

Irina Abramova: I have to admit there are indeed a fair number of barriers to Russian-African cooperation that could be divided into several categories depending on internal and external factors controlling the development of both Russia and African economies.

Clearly, one of the biggest barriers is the Western policy of sanctions and the immense pressure, which is being applied to African countries, among others, in order to turn them away from Russia and prevent them from deepening their engagement with Russia. But it is important to note that, in a strange way, while, on the one hand, this factor does create some difficulties, on the other hand, it forces both African nations and our country to look for new ways of interacting with each other. We are coming up with some alternative mechanisms to settle trade, for example, that is to reduce the role of the dollar.

Map 12. TOP 5 Russia's Trade Partners in Africa (January-August 2023).
© Compiled by PIR Center based on RBC
Source: <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/30/09/2023/6516a0959a79473878cc7d3c>

Of course, there are monumental challenges in finance. This is probably one of the key factors impeding the development of our relations. It should be said that even at the time when we were still able to use dollars in our trade deals, I mean after the first Russia-Africa Summit, no financial framework was established to support cross-border transactions. Most banks had no representatives, which may not be so critical in the modern world, but, still worse, they had no correspondent accounts for making direct payments. Moreover, one of the objectives agreed at the first Summit was to establish an investment fund to support Russian business investments in Africa. The then director of the Russian Export Center said that such a fund would be created totaling 5 billion euros. However, it has not been created. The problem is that most Russian companies, even those willing to do business in Africa, need to have their risks insured and have some guarantees from the government. We discussed the need for a public private partnership mechanism to support Russian business in Africa because given the history of how our business evolved it is not really keen to bear all the risks on its own for a range of reasons, both external and internal. But I fully agree that investing in Africa calls for special conditions and the government must support our business, among other things, by setting up this kind of an investment fund. I hope strongly that it will be created eventually after the second Summit.

There is also another challenge associated with logistics where we face major obstacles that are being thrown in our way. We have to take many intermediary flights in order to go from Russia to other countries by air. This obstacle can, of course, hinder our contacts but it is also an incentive for countries, including Russia, to launch direct flights to African destinations. The solution, of course, is not going to be easy as its execution would involve many technical and financial aspects. But we just have to do it. In order to build proper ties with the 54 African states we must have air links with at least key regions of Africa. Look at Türkiye which has now turned into the top transport hub between Europe and Africa. In 2003, when it started to develop its economic relations with Africa, Türkiye was probably ten times smaller than Russia, even as a regional player. Nevertheless, it was not afraid of launching these flights without reassurances that Russia's Federal Air Transport Agency is currently seeking: "You first show what is in it for us and then we will think and may be try and do something". Today, Türkiye's air carriers are pocketing huge profits from their business with the African continent. All flights are overbooked, and Turkish Airlines offer flights to 45 countries. Thus, they have proven in practice that it is worth a while to establish proper logistical routes including air travel.

Another important issue is the shipping our goods and cargos by sea. Today, many of our companies, including FESCO Group, our biggest container carrier which has its own fleet, are ready to do the job. And, again, for this we will need to build our own ships and restore our merchant fleet to trade not only with Africa but other regions as well which, most importantly, would stimulate our industrial growth.

Of course, there are some problems linked to instability of political regimes in Africa, with many government coups, conflicts, etc. but they have always been there. Now Russia positions itself, among other things, as a guarantor of security in Africa. What Russia has been doing on the African continent to actually strengthen security, in my view, could be linked to our economic interests, that is we could reach an arrangement where we provide security for African countries, including security for our business and with this guarantee in place we could bring in our companies, run investment projects and make sure cargos can be ship in safely. This is also very important. The risk of instability is being stoked from outside because any trouble in Africa is always driven by some internal and external forces. Take the example of Libya where a practically thriving country was wrecked and is still struggling with a range of problems, including bitter political relations between the government and parliament. And the external factor clearly played a huge role in this.

Yet, another challenge is that people in Africa know very little about Russia and vice versa. Of course, now the newsfeed covers more African matters than even in 2021-2022. Most of our entrepreneurs and government actors have little notion of the modern Africa and how to do business and how to network and build relations there. In this respect, there is a need for robust expertise, including Africanists who, unfortunately, are very few and far between. Most of them work at our Institute of African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and there are also Africa specialists at MGIMO University, Institute of Asian and African Countries (part of Lomonosov Moscow State University), Higher School of Economics, Saint Petersburg University, and also in Kazan and Yaroslavl. They are very scarce, and it is hard to provide adequate analytical support for promoting Russian interests. We surely need to expand our African studies programs to train more regional specialists. This will take time, but there is no escaping that. Until then, we will have to make do with whatever resources we have. Right now, we should be hiring as many graduates as possible from our TOP universities to work on Africa-related projects. Our media, too, should focus more on African topics so that Russian business community had a better understanding of Africa.

In Africa ordinary people and business folk get most of the information about Russia from Western sources. It is usually distorted and there is next to nothing coming through directly. Indeed, many imagine our country just as something big, northern and unfathomable. Although there are plenty of people in Africa who graduated from Russian universities and know Russia for what it really is, we need to be more active in engaging with these people. As far as I know, we have not maintained close and strong ties with them for a long time. Now the situation is changing. There is a program in place to bring these alumni together and take them on a tour of Russia to show them how we live today. They go to universities and cities where they studied before. It is an excellent program to refresh their knowledge about Russia.

Of course, we also need to expand our media presence in Africa. *Sputnik* has become more active as well as other Russian news agencies, like *TASS*, *RIA Novosti* and *Russia Today*, but, yet, this is not good enough. We still make little use of such tools as radio and social networks, especially African ones. We need to be making some headway here too, because we know that such communications are extremely important for cultivating our relations. In the age of information technology, if an event fails to get captured in the media it might as well have never happened, so it is a very important aspect that we must develop.

I think those are the main challenges in the relations between Russia and Africa, but they open up new opportunities and even pathways for building new forms of our cooperation.

Security Index Yearbook: There are fewer African countries who representatives attended the Russia-Africa Summit in 2023 than in 2019. What does it tell us? With what states, in your opinion, Russia has the biggest chances of developing good relations?

Irina Abramova: I have already mentioned that Africa was less represented. While the first Russia-Africa Summit was attended by heads of 45 out of 54 states, there were only 17 at the second Summit. There were also 5 prime ministers and 5 heads of parliament. Quite a few delegations were led by vice presidents, like Nigeria, as well as foreign ministers.

The West raised a hue and cry, for sure, claiming that compared with the 1st Summit, Africa had turned its back on Russia. Of course, you have to consider all the political pressure put on African governments. We know that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had more than once visited Africa in the run-up to the Summit, talking about our country, the upcoming Summit, and the objectives we want to accomplish. The Russian Foreign Minister was promptly followed by diplomatic *landing squads* from the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and France with quite an opposite agenda. They used the carrot-and-stick method and outright threats too.

Nonetheless, the attempts to isolate Russia amid the Special Military Operation have failed altogether. Why? First of all, it should be said that three of the major African players, Egypt, South Africa and Ethiopia, had their TOP leaders at the Summit: President of South Africa Cyril Ramaphosa, President of Egypt Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, and Prime Minister of Ethiopia Abiy Ahmed Ali. As for Nigeria, another big African country, it was represented by its vice-president. Not so bad, given that he came shortly after recent elections. In addition, the Summit participants included heads of all the key states which want to develop relations with Russia: Zimbabwe, Mali and other Sahel countries. It is true that Algeria sent its Prime Minister, but this was because earlier in June we already had Algerian President coming on a state visit to the Russian Federation, during which a whole range of documents was signed; and only month passed after that, so they sent the Prime Minister to follow up on this. On the one hand, it is an important factor, how many heads of state attended the Summit, but, on the other, it can be offset by the fact that the discussions at the second Russia-Africa Summit were more specific and down to business. Incidentally, in spite the immense pressure, only 9 out of 54 African countries ignored the Summit, and those are relatively small economies with which we do not have active relations, except maybe for Botswana or Zambia. What is important is not who came but that the West had failed to isolate Russia. Among the attendees were even countries that took a stance or even made statements at political forums not flatly against Russia but with some disapproval.

Note that in terms of economic sanctions, almost none of African countries, apart from just three or four states, officially joined them, and even those who did so, have not taken any real steps. There is obviously no isolation of Russia to speak of

To be honest, I was astounded by the delegation from Nigeria, which has been under serious pressure from the United States and other Western countries, when they sang the national anthem of the Soviet Union at an informal meeting during the Summit. This made a huge impression on me – the historical memory that African people have kept, knowing well that the USSR did not just help them gain political independence, but also made an enormous contribution in developing their economic sovereignty by laying the foundation of national economies, industry, infrastructure, and culture. They remember all this. And it is not just older generations, but surprisingly young Africans, too, are very sympathetic towards Russia. Right after the Summit, I had young people from the Chad delegation sitting in my office and telling me that, although their government is pro-French, the hearts of the Chadian *street*, so to speak, or the young generation, accounting for nearly 70 percent of the population, belong entirely to Russia.

This sympathy towards Russia, the willingness to engage, in spite of the limited information they have about our country, is simply amazing. And if we fail to take advantage of this now, there will no other chance for us next, that is third, time.

Security Index Yearbook: Representatives of some military governments in Africa were particularly active at the 2023 Summit. How willing is Russia to build ties with the groups that have come to power through military *coup d'états*? Sahel states are the case in point. We see that their governments are engage in lasting dialogue with Russia, especially in Mali and Burkina Faso. What do you think, in this context, of our prospective relations with Niger? What would you recommend, on a broader scale, with regard to Russia's dialogue with the Sahel nations?

Irina Abramova: To begin with, I beg to disagree that the Sahel delegates were overly active at the Summit. They just attracted quite a lot of attention because of the emotional speeches they made at the Summit when they said: "Freedom or Death!"; borrowing Che Guevara's motto. Judging by their appearance, they are quite young and energetic people. But, along with them, there was a lot of participation by fairly moderate traditional African leaders who put forward interesting ideas on our cooperation. The Sahel agenda was largely hyped up and forced through by the Western media because, surely, it was a huge blow to French influence in Africa.

A string of military coups, which began in back in 2021, in Guinea, Gabon and the Sahel, demonstrates that the French neocolonialist model, the model of French influence in Africa has completely failed. Basically, this can be explained by a number of reasons, beginning with even some specific features of the French colonization system. The British colonialism was based on the so-called *indirect rule*, which relied on local elites, princes and tribal chiefs that were allowed to remain in power and actually cooperated with the British administration. The French, on the contrary, removed the local elites altogether, replacing them with French governors, i.e., opted for direct colonial rule. Africans have not forgotten about that, I am sure. Besides, the contemporary relations with France are still based on the same colonial methods, whatever you call them. Take, for instance, uranium that France had been buying in Niger about a hundred times below the market price. The fact that they failed, despite their military contingent, to protect the local population and provide security shows that France had not been really committed to this – they needed just enough security to maintain a continuous supply of resources. The weakening of France's influence, in Europe as well, the incapacity to handle problems in African countries, and the simultaneous preservation of colonial ties, the plundering of these nations, the pegging of local currencies, the safekeeping of African foreign exchange reserves in the Bank of France under the pretext of stabilizing local financial system, and a host of other ways in which France tried to retain its regional clout ultimately provoked the outburst of fury and the political conflagration, setting off the chain reaction across all those countries. Of course, dysfunctional security was the main trigger. It is pretty obvious because terrorists had been running loose in the region and the French contingent, with all the missions and operations it conducted, had been incapable of resolving a single issue that was critical for those states.

Those who are trying to label Russia's policy in Africa exclusively as *the policy*, as the Western media has it, *of supporting military takeovers and setting up loyal regimes* are simply trying to shift the blame because this is exactly what Western governments are notorious for. It is them who go to great lengths to interfere in elections in those countries and plant their stooges in the right offices, mostly through bribes as well as through cultivating pro-Western elites who get educated in Western countries, while their wives get jobs in European and American organizations, and that is also where their children go to college and where the elites keep their money. We do not do that. We did not bankroll any coups in the Sahel, not as much as nudged them. But it would have been stupid not to take advantage of what was going on in the region as well as of the favorable public sentiment in these countries towards Russia. Even the images we saw on television and the Internet showed that people demonstrated in the streets carrying Russian flags too. Why? Well, because they regard Russia as a defender, in the first place, protecting their sovereignty and assisting Africa in assuming the proper role that befits the continent. It will be an independent and thriving Africa instead of the West-colonized territory catering mostly to the needs of the *golden billion* rather than those of its own nations. They have no interest in that.

As for our relations, it clearly will not be merely about military cooperation, though one of Russian Defense Minister's deputies, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, just visited Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, the states which signed a mutual defense pact in September 2023. Of course, we are ready to provide security and assistance to them, but we always position ourselves as something more than just security guarantors. Once the security is guaranteed we are ready to build economic relations with these countries. A short while ago when Mali's government was overthrown, Russia organized diesel and food supplies to this country. We are doing the same thing for Burkina Faso. I think this issue will be discussed with Niger as well.

To be sure, we want to have a bigger influence in this region than France. Why not? We are competitors. We are also interested in developing these territories. We are expanding our sphere of influence, but not by oppressing these peoples. We are prepared to invest in their economies and also to contribute significantly to developing education in Africa. By the way, education was discussed at all Summit venues and also at the recent Primakov Readings Forum. Four representatives of African states, including the President of Uganda, emphasized that education is one of the most important forms of our cooperation that should be developed not only be increasing quotas, but by improving the quality of education, launching pre-admission training courses for high-school students, and opening Russian schools in Africa to select the most talented students for continuing their education in Russia. These people may later make their way to TOP positions in government, politics and business, which is also very important for us. We need to work with children of the elites, like the Americans who run their Young African Leaders Initiative, which helps to bring about a thousand such leaders to the United States every year and put them through training courses. That is absolutely the right thing to do. It is a great practice and we should learn from it too.

I believe our cooperation with these countries is definitely going to be multi-faceted. Security agenda will be important, but other aspects will be important as well, including economic and humanitarian development. It is one of the TOP priorities for Africa to improve the quality of its human capital. 60 percent of African population are aged under 25 and they are in need of education: school, vocational and higher education programs, and this is where Russia can do a lot for these countries.

Security Index Yearbook: There are other players besides Russia promoting different partnership formats with Africa, such as the United States, EU, China, Türkiye, etc. What is the niche that Russia could find for itself in this context? Who can get in ahead of Russia and why?

Irina Abramova: Clearly, it will be tough for us to compete with powerful players who have long established their presence on the African continent. What we see now is in fact a geostrategic battle for Africa.

If you look at the continent, you will see it kind of separates the West from the East and with new emerging blocs, including AUKUS, Africa finds itself in the middle of the triangle between Australia, the United States and Japan. In the geostrategic sense, Africa's involvement in any Western political and security alliances poses a very big threat to Russia. We need to structure our relations with Africa to make sure it keeps its non-bloc status. Here we are sure to face strong resistance, again, from the United States and Europe, but so far the situation has been shaping up in our favor. In spite of their long-established presence and all their military bases, Russia's authority remains quite high, even though we do not have a single military base in Africa.

The European Union's bet is mostly on various investment projects and trade expansion. The EU is Africa's biggest trade partner with a turnover in excess of 400 billion euros a year. European states have very different policies vis-à-vis Africa. France, for example, link security with development. The UK after Brexit has regarded Africa as an important region for its investment programs. Germany relies on public private partnerships so that German private businesses take initiative in entering African markets while the government backs them up with certain conditions. Italy has traditionally cooperated with North Africa, primarily Libya, which today has unfortunately collapsed into chaos, but, yet, they do a lot of business together, especially in the oil sector.

As for the new players, China is surely the biggest new entrant. It has its own specially designed strategy for Africa, which borrowed a lot from the Soviet Union, the lessons that we chose to give up. Africa is getting its biggest loans from China, especially for infrastructure projects. China is also building science and technology parks. And the key thing, which we should learn to do as well, is that China integrates its relations with Africa into the strategy of its own development. This is very important in terms of ensuring the supply of raw materials as well as developing new markets. Competing with them is going to be an uphill fight. India and Brazil are also very active. The most recent player is Türkiye that I mentioned before. Over the last five years, the Gulf monarchies, too, have shown great interest and have been investing heavily in Africa. In summary, this is a fiercely competitive continent.

We should emphasize our capability as the guarantor of sovereignty. What we achieved in Syria, preventing the country from being torn apart and its government from being toppled, is a telling demonstration for African countries where elites are also rather susceptible to deposition. For them, internal and external stabilization is very important, and they understand that Russia can deliver that by virtue of its influence as well as military force.

Why could not we then consider Africa as a prospective armaments market, especially with all that capacity of the military-industrial complex that has been ramped up due to the Special Military Operation? It be eventually completed, and, with factories up and running, Russia, which is already the third biggest supplier of weaponry to the global market, could readily fill this highly competitive niche. And yet, this is not our top priority on the cooperation agenda.

In my view, the relations between Russia and Africa need to have a distinct focus on partnership in science and technology. I mean education in the first place. Africa needs more education capability to train its workforce and a wider access to school and vocational education. We have all forgotten about vocational schools and trade colleges, but building a skilled workforce is critical for African economies. There are not many opportunities in Africa for such industry-specific education. And let's not forget about the higher education. I believe that rather than just increasing intake quotas, we should improve education quality – value instead of volume. We need to pick the best talent and provide a decent allowance to cover their travel expenses, proper accommodation and a scholarship that is more than 3.000 rubles a month, so that they focus on their studies instead of dabbling in small business. We need to offer the right conditions where people can actually study rather than survive, spending most of the time on their education.

There is great interest in training programs for our graduates, i.e., for continued professional development. We could offer great programs for managers, tax and customs specialists, because we have made fantastic progress there. Public administration, particularly digital government and smart city concepts as they have been implemented in Moscow, is what the Africans are really keen to learn because we are at the cutting edge in these areas. And, of course, we need to consider all things related to energy technologies as this is a very urgent issue for Africa. The percentages have changed by now, but still about 50 percent of Africa's population have no access to electricity. Here Russia can offer very high competences, especially in nuclear power under various configurations, ranging from large to small and floating units, a whole family of systems. On this score, we are really number one in the world and it is a priority sector for us.

It is vital for Africa to resolve its problems with food supply. Russia has already become a major grain supplier to Africa, but we need to do better on providing higher added-value products. The Russian Empire was the main supplier of flour, not grain, to the world market, and today we no longer have that position, having lost out to Türkiye. African countries also want to develop their own agriculture through Russian technology transfers rather than simply buy our foodstuffs. We have really achieved a lot in the agricultural sector, and we have valuable expertise to share with the Africans.

The railway construction technologies that we use are, unfortunately, still those developed in the West. I hope that we will have some of our own in a short while. But as for the railways and railway transport themselves, we are quite competitive.

Space industry, exploration and satellite missions are also strategically important for Russia because following our breakup with Europe we stopped seeing the sky above the Southern Hemisphere as we have no ground stations there for receiving satellite downlinks. Cooperation with African countries located in the Southern Hemisphere is therefore our strategic interest. This is important for us even in the military sense.

Africans are very receptive to any digital technologies because they are young, and we all know very well how quickly the young generation gets on top of this game. This is a great opportunity for us since it is a huge market for selling our technologies.

Of course, healthcare and biological security are highly important issues for us because, according to open sources alone, there are 49 American laboratories in Africa that have long been around running a wide range of biological experiments, including those related to bioweapons. The United States has long been building a bank of African genomes to engineer viruses that can target specific ethnic groups. We know that such experiments were conducted in Ukraine, Georgia and other countries near our borders. In Africa such programs have been running for a long time already because the costs there are much lower, and they are easier to hide public scrutiny. But this is a question of survival not only for Russia but for the entire world. As for healthcare and medicine, Africa, sadly, is swarming with infections including 20 most dangerous ones, such as malaria, tuberculosis, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), etc. We have some best practices and technologies to share in terms of providing access to adequate healthcare and training programs for specialists who could work on site to identify viruses, treat patients and produce medications. There's lots of potential in this area.

Our science and technology cooperation will be an opportunity to test our technologies with a large number of users, which is also very important for us as this expands the foundation for developing our own industries, including hi-tech. On the other hand, such collaboration would help the Africans feel as respected members of the new world because we are thinking together with them about the future. We are not just selling something to them, but working together to develop new technologies, and this is highly important for the Africans because the sense of dignity and respect rank really high in their mentality. They have lived too long under the colonial rule and have too long been treated as second-rate citizens. Russia has never treated them like that since the times of the Soviet Union and even before that. We have always viewed them as equals. I think the science and technology cooperation will be necessary to make sure Russia can develop rapidly, gaining access to the fast-transforming markets of Africa.

Security Index Yearbook: To continue our conversation about Russia's place on the African continent: we already see that the expanding presence of Russia's high technologies in Africa (biotech, fintech, nuclear power, etc.) is not some utopia or abstract idea but a reality that just need to be cemented into place by making a tentative trend irreversible. But how can we do that?

Irina Abramova: I think we should probably start with some small steps. At one of the sessions of the Russia-Africa Summit devoted to the technology partnership, African participants said that not all of their researchers realized the need for fundamental science and would prefer to invest more effort in applied research. Mikhail Kovalchuk, Director of the Kurchatov Institute (Russia's TOP nuclear research center) responded that all this is understandable, but the fundamental science is what builds the groundwork for the future development of any country. As an illustration he cited Russia's nuclear project and the issues of developing biological weapons. Perhaps, not everyone understands why we need this but, for instance, modification of human genome only sounds like something of high science, but this in fact will result in our ability to create human beings of a new kind. Such meddling with human nature is really scary.

When we discussed cooperation in science and technology, our African counterparts spoke about two major areas: first, conducting joint research projects and, second, creation of joint science centers and laboratories. I believe this is where we need to start. In fact, it's fairly easy to do with some grants from the Russian Ministry of Science and Higher Education or our science foundations. We need to try and launch some collaborative projects that could be later turned into real products, equipment, processes, a crop cultivar, for instance. We need to focus research in the sectors I have mentioned before: energy, space, agriculture, and healthcare. I think we need to consider carefully what countries and sectors to choose, but we clearly must start doing something. We keep discussing this for a long while, but if we launch, say, 5 to 10 such projects in the next couple of years they will deliver some concrete results.

We are now building a nuclear power plant (NPP) in Egypt. A massive construction project that will help provide electricity not only to Egypt but also to its neighbors. This is something on a scale of the Aswan Dam project back at the time of the Soviet Union. Besides the construction activity itself the NPP project involves the operation of nuclear reactors, auxiliary production operations and services, including radiomedicine. This will require personnel training and development of new engineering sectors in Egypt as well. Why not use this project to test-run a framework for a large-scale technology cooperation in related industries? I heard that Rosatom State Corporation is working, among other things, on seed processing technologies and many others. This is such an immense project which will have a multiplier effect for developing other technology sectors. We need to bring in our scientists and universities. Russia's National Research Nuclear University (MEPhI) and Saint Petersburg Electrotechnical University (LETI) are already opening their branches in Egypt.

We need draw up, wherever possible, a roster of all African graduates of each university or institute and find out what they are doing now. Then try and invite them not for a week as we have done before, which is also a good thing, but for longer periods to show them around so they could see what is going on here. Especially, we need to bring in people who are involved in some industrial processes or are deputy ministers or top sector administrators, there are lots of such people. The cost of this is not going to be that high, while the impact will be massive.

Of course, we need to carefully consider the objectives that Africa has defined for its science and technology development, for example, as part of *Agenda 2063*, the key strategic document of the African Union. There is also the Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa 2024 that very clearly defines the scope of such development. A member of my staff just came back from Ethiopia and told me that Yandex Taxi had already set up shop over there. That is good news.

Technologies are gradually penetrating the African market. I think our digital, space and farming technologies will be the fastest to take off. Development of energy technologies takes a longer time. We need to promote these sectors. It is time to do some hard work, do projects and stop shooting the breeze. In my opinion, we will have to launch separate Africa projects at the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and the Russian Science Foundation. We have been discussing this at length but there are still no programs.

Security Index Yearbook: When speaking in public you have more than once pointed out to the Russian audience that today's Africa is very different from what many Russians imagine it to be. What stereotypes of the African continent must go for good? How would yourself portray the image of Africa in the second quarter of the 21st century, if you had only a few minutes to sum it up in a couple of paragraphs?

Irina Abramova: The established stereotypes are that Africa is all about hunger, poverty, wars, and conflicts. Yes, all this is true but firstly not on such a big scale and secondly Africa today is very different, and we can learn a lot from it.

I have already said that 60 percent of Africa's population are younger than 25 and this means that starting from about 2035 Africa will account for 60 percent of growth in the global labor market. Just think of it: by 2050, Africa, according to different estimates, is going to account for 25 to 32 percent of the world's population or almost one third, whether we want it or not.

Africa is developing extremely fast. Its consumer market is going to double again. It used to double every five years, now it doubles every four years. Africa has the fastest expanding middle class which is the basis of consumption and development of any society. Africa reports the fastest rates of Internet penetration and all digital technologies in general. This is also because of the young population. Now that technology has become available many countries such as Nigeria and Rwanda want to phase out hard cash altogether. I keep reminding people that the very first online payment in history was made in the African country of Kenya.

Africa is the region where considerable efforts are taken to empower women and young people. Many women lead parliaments and there were two women who served as presidents, in Mauritius and Liberia. In Rwanda's parliament women make up 64 percent of its members. Name me any other country in the world where women play a role like this in shaping parliamentary agenda.

Africa is a vast construction site. Not without its challenges – there is indeed a lack of infrastructure and power supply grids, but the process of African renaissance and development is now going full steam ahead. If there is any perception of contemporary Africa, it will be the image of a fast-growing thriving land where everybody is going to enjoy equal opportunities and rights. This applies to women as well as to young generation.

Africa is all about honoring traditions and seeking to preserve its centuries-long legacy. The same is characteristic of us. I think it is because in Africa the dominant economic unit has been a village commune just like in Russia. Collectivism and the desire to help your neighbor are embedded deep inside us, intrinsic to our DNA. We have plenty of similar proverbs, such as *perish yourself but rescue your comrade* and *better have a hundred friends than a hundred rubles*. The collectivist mentality and willingness to seek better future and development all together rather than as isolated individuals, the way it happens in the Western protestant countries, is what unites us with African nations.

At the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit an African lady told me: "Look at our African women and at your Russian women. Women in Russia always want to be elegantly dressed and look gorgeous just like African women. Take European women. What do they look like? Trousers, a blouse untucked and disheveled hair!". African women wear very bright dresses and sophisticated hair styles. This is also something that sets us apart from the rest of the world. Probably it is all about the desire to make things beautiful. Africa is a very colorful continent. When you arrive there, you are immediately overwhelmed with totally different colors, totally different soils, and even a different sky. It is something extraordinary, a combination of golden, red, and orange hues.

African people have an entirely different attitude to life. Most African countries enjoy the highest happiness index although they do have problems galore. They have a different perception of everything, a different view of what they need. In this respect, the standards of consumer society that have been imposed on Russia encouraging people to amass money, things, cars, and apartments have also been grafted on Africa, but they are not as susceptible to all this as many other nations. What they really care about is that the sun keeps shining, their kids are healthy and they themselves can have fun. They are really great fun. We in Russia love to get together, sing and dance and so do Africans. In terms of educating future generations to tell more important values from unimportant stuff we and the entire world have a great deal to learn from Africans.

Map 13. Africa's TOP 10 Happiest Countries Based on a Three Year Average (2020-2022).

Source: Sputnik
(<https://en.sputniknews.africa/20230324/1058475508.html>)

In my view, the stereotypes of poor and starving Africa crippled with conflicts and diseases are misleading. Especially given that their troubles were largely the product of the system of international relations which had been set up under the old-world order. If you give them an opportunity to develop as sovereign states and stop plundering them as they have been for centuries in a row, I believe we would see a rich, thriving, exciting, vibrant and one-of-a-kind Africa that will still make its enormous contribution in the development of our entire planet.

Security Index Yearbook: The last question is probably about the most significant and promising aspect of our cooperation. It is about education. Our African partners say they are looking forward to Russia's comeback as a key player on the market of education, which is in very high demand on the African continent in spite of the much higher competition. Unlike some other influential players, Russia is not popularly associated with a colonial power, and nobody is going to accuse Russia of trying to push a neocolonial policy. What is our competitive edge here? What needs to be done to maintain it for the longer term?

Irina Abramova: I have already said that cooperation in education is what Africans themselves frequently speak about the topmost priority for our relations. Indeed, the *education track* was historically a key part of our evolving relationship in the era of the Soviet Union. All in all, we trained about half a million specialists, a highly qualified workforce, including 250.000 people that we educated in Africa, where we opened dozens of universities and educational and science centers.

Our education policy for Africa has always been based on the following key premise: we are training African specialists so that they can go back and do some good work in Africa. The Western approach was quite different: they usually picked the best African talent to work in their own countries. The brain drain from African economies to the West is still as pressing a problem as it was back then. In this sense, we have never been intellectual colonialists headhunting for TOP graduates. We trained specialists primarily for Africa.

Over the last 30 years, our education system has changed dramatically and not in best way for the Russian Federation. We have been tailoring our education to the standards dictated by the West. It was the same kind of policy: pick the best specialists and develop disciplines that could be put to good use in the West. In this respect, it will not be rather hard to compete with other countries because we have already changed our education system along the *colonialist* lines to some extent. Yet, we are moving away from these standards. We have many higher education establishments that are ready to provide training programs to African students. To be successful, we need to understand the needs of the African continent, i.e., what professions are most in demand in Africa. Such surveys have been conducted and, I think, will be continued in the future. Usually, these are specialists that can contribute to overcoming the challenges of Africa's development, such as healthcare professionals, agriculture specialists, various digital services, and, of course, a wide range of engineering disciplines in mining, geoscience, etc.

I believe that we still need to begin with school education. Clearly, we cannot open a large number of schools, but, nevertheless, we have some experience of setting up Russian schools in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan that could be applied in Africa too. Why not use the resources of the Russian Ministry of Science and Higher Education and our experience with the Educational Centre *Sirius* and open a Russian school, if not in each then at least in half of African capitals, where the most able high schoolers could study in Russian, learn the Russian language, finish school and, building on this training, go ahead to earn degrees at Russian universities. Such a program is perfectly doable and could be very effective. This would be even cost-effective: we would have already strongly motivated students who would study hard and then return home to pitch in with developing their local economies.

Of course, we need to design further professional development programs and engage with graduates of our universities. As part of major investment projects or energy construction projects like in Egypt, we should open branches of our universities to train future project personnel who will be working at these facilities. This should be done not only for the Egypt nuclear power plant but for all our future projects in Africa.

Today we need to do our research to identify specialists that are most needed in Africa and increase admission quotas accordingly for relevant programs, but make sure we select the most motivated students. There might be not so many of them, but we will be able to offer them grants on very attractive terms. Or we could run two parallel programs: on the one hand, increase the quota and, on the other, award grants to specialists who already have a strong education background and can therefore achieve better academic results and then realize their full potential in their home countries. And we absolutely must set up a dedicated program for children of the African elites because in this way we will be training and bringing up our future allies in these countries who will drive positive relations between Africa and Russia in the longer run.

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