

# AFRICA'S STANCE IN THE RUSSIA-UKRAINIAN WAR: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR PARTNERSHIP WITH CHINA AND RUSSIA

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## Abstract

China's President Xi Jinping and Russia's President Vladimir Putin have repeatedly hailed a 'no limits' partnership between their respective countries to the displeasure of the United States in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Therefore, it has become more apparent that the long-term goals of the Russian and Chinese foreign policies are to establish a new world order by reinstating their countries as great powers while challenging the U.S.-led global hegemony. The current geopolitical turbulence accelerated by the great power rivalry has not only shattered the international order that has existed since the end of the Cold War, but also reframed partnerships where the role of African states are becoming more prominent. Notably, while Martin Kimani, Kenya's UN envoy, was widely praised for his powerful speech reaffirming Kenya's respect for the territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders during the Security Council's emergency session (21 February 2022), 25 of Africa's 54 states abstained or did not vote to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine during the emergency session of the UN General Assembly (A/RES/ES-11/1) in March 2022. This equivocal reaction contrasted sharply not only with the widespread condemnation of Russia's assault from every other region but also with African states' official positions on preserving territorial integrity and borders within Africa.

The study, therefore, seeks to explore Africa's stance in light of the ongoing war and how the interests and (re)actions of African states contribute to furthering Russia's goal of weakening the United States as a dominant power. The study applies a qualitative approach by drawing from literature on Africa's relations with Russia and analyzing media and NGO reports on contemporary events, official communications of African officials, and voting patterns of African states in the UN General Assembly in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Initial findings suggest that several factors contribute to the hesitant position of some African countries. These include the legacy of colonial and imperial control, arms trading, food security, discriminatory treatment of African students in Ukraine, and the U.S. Congress' anti-Russian legislation (H.R. 7311, the Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act), which punishes African nations for their political and economic ties with Russia. These factors reinforce neo-colonialism in Africa.

## Keywords

*Russia–Ukraine War, Africa, China, UN Votes*

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## Introduction

Russia launched a military offensive in Ukraine on the night of 23<sup>rd</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022. The United Nations considers this attack to be a violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty (UN Sustainable Development Group, 2022). Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has set alight the bloodiest conflict in Europe, leading to tens of thousands of deaths on both sides and creating Europe's largest refugee wave since World War II (International Rescue Committee, 2022). The conflict is not only causing a humanitarian, social, and economic crisis for the Ukrainian (International Rescue Committee, 2022) people, but is also affecting the global economy, accentuating the disruption of the supplies of commodities, especially in the food and energy sector, and threatening the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic (OECD, 2022: 2). In addition, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is an existential crisis and a direct challenge to the international security order.

In light of the ongoing war, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted on Wednesday, March 2<sup>nd</sup> 2022 an emergency resolution (A/RES/ES-11/1) (UN General Assembly Resolutions Tables, 2022) deploring the "aggression" committed by Russia against Ukraine (141 votes in favor, 5 against, and 35 abstentions). Notably, while Martin Kimani, Kenya's UN envoy, was widely praised for his powerful speech reaffirming Kenya's respect for the territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders during the Security Council's emergency session (21 February 2022), 25 of Africa's 54 states abstained or did not vote to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Siegle, 2022). This number rose on April 7<sup>th</sup> 2022, when 22 African countries, which included powerhouses like Nigeria, abstained from voting to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council. Similarly, on October 12<sup>th</sup> 2022, a total of 35 states, including India, China, and 19 African countries, abstained from voting at a UN General Assembly resolution, which called on the international community to not recognize any of Moscow's annexation claims (Mishra, 2023). This equivocal reaction contrasted sharply not only with the widespread condemnation of Russia's assault from every other region but also with African states' official positions on preserving territorial integrity and borders within Africa.

In light of the war, Africa's stance is becoming very prominent considering the current geopolitical turbulence that is accelerated by the ongoing power rivalry existing between Russia, China, and the United States since the end of the Cold War. China's President Xi Jinping and Russia's President Vladimir Putin have, to the displeasure of the US, repeatedly hailed a 'no limits' partnership between their respective countries in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine (Association of Global South Studies, 2023). Therefore, it has become more apparent that the long-term goals of the Russian and Chinese foreign policies are to establish a new world order by reinstating their countries as great powers while challenging the U.S.-led global hegemony. The high number of voting abstentions from the African countries was widely interpreted as a sign of Russian influence or evidence of the growing anti-Westernism of African governments and citizens.

This study explores Africa's stances, focusing on the high number of abstentions during the UN resolution votes in light of the ongoing war. The study demonstrates how Africa's interests and (re)actions contribute to furthering Russia and China's goal of weakening the United States as a dominant power. The research, therefore, seeks to explore what factors may contribute to or explain the voting pattern of African countries during the UN resolution vote.

### **Methods, materials, sources, and the structure of the paper**

This paper is primarily based on desk research through the use of publicly available documents and secondary sources. These secondary sources included reports such as press releases and media reports. Current Affairs Publications from *The Conversation* and *The Diplomat*, as well as newspapers such as Reuters, BBC News, Aljazeera, DW News, and Foreign Policy Newsletters with a focus on Africa, Europe, and international politics were among the sources reviewed to reconstruct contemporary relations between Africa, Russia, and China. The search for the relevant academic literature was done using Google Scholar and Scopus as the primary search engines. The content of journals was browsed for articles on African–Russian relations from World War I until the first anniversary of the Russian–Ukrainian War in February 2023.

This paper is divided into three major sections structuring the findings. The first part explores the dynamics of African, Chinese, and Russian relations by mapping the historical and contemporary relations between Africa–Russia, Africa–China, and Russia–China, respectively. This section exposes the reader to an overview of the relationship dynamics that existed before the Russian–Ukrainian war since World War I. Using data results from the UN vote, the second section analyses Africa's stance by exploring the possible factors contributing to the rationale behind the vote of the African countries. The final section concludes by assessing how Africa's stance could shape partnership (economic, security) opportunities with Russia and China.

### **The Triangle of African–Russian–Chinese relations**

#### ***Africa–Russia Relations: A Historical Overview***

In recent years, Russia has rekindled its historic ties with countries on the African continent. Many of these relations were first established by Russia's communist predecessor, the Soviet Union, during the Cold War. Its involvement was driven by a mixture of ideological commitment, pragmatic economic interests, and the need to build alliances during the Cold War (Siegle, 2022). The Soviet Union supported anti-colonial movements in several African countries, offering training and funding to independence movements and facilitating academic exchange programs for young people across the continent. The newly independent African countries desperately needed to find economic partners other than their former colonial powers to help them build their economies and survive long-term (Besliu, 2022). Several of these ultimately became theatres for protracted Cold War proxy wars since Africa became

a sort of military training or experimental field where the United States or the Soviet Union could challenge each other without ‘white’ losses. Such Proxy wars included the Ethio-Somali war (1977 to 1978) and the Angolan civil war (1975 to 2002) (Besliu, 2022).

The Soviet Union engaged with many regimes across the continent, which varied from region to region, including Modibo Keita in Mali and Sekou Touré in Guinea (Besliu, 2022). The Soviet Union established a multifaceted partnership with Mali after gaining independence in 1960. In 1961, the two countries signed trade, economic, and cultural cooperation agreements, allowing Mali to reduce its dependency on France (Matusevich, 2019). It also built infrastructure, such as a cement factory and a gold mining enterprise, to aid Mali’s industrial development. Keita’s regime in Mali was overthrown in 1968, with power taken by a government that improved relations with France (Matusevich, 2019). However, Mali continued to receive military aid from the Soviet Union, such as pilot training and artillery and parachute training (Matusevich, 2019). Guinea was another country that held deep relations with the Soviet Union. After independence from France in 1958, Guinea became the first former French colony in West Africa to refuse membership in the French community and instead opted for complete independence (Maclean, 2019). This move led France to withdraw support. Guinea’s leader, Sekou Touré rejected the United States as an ally and courted the Soviet Union instead. Guinea received arms and equipment, military training, and economic assistance (Besliu, 2022). The Soviet Union also gave Guinea millions of dollars in aid, supporting its industry and constructing cement and leather mills. The West African country’s relationship with the Soviet Union fluctuated over the years, from rapprochement with the United States during the Kennedy administration to allowing the Soviets to use its airfields during the Angolan war (Besliu, 2022).

However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and being preoccupied with domestic challenges, the Russian Federation faced a decade-long social and economic crisis (Taylor & Williams, 2004). Its political and financial commitments and involvements significantly declined in Africa during the 1990s and early 2000s, though the legacy of ties remained. As Russia’s economic conditions improved and its geopolitical role was bolstered by a more aggressive foreign policy under President Vladimir Putin, Russian involvement on the African continent has revived (Taylor & Williams, 2004).

### *A Contemporary Perspective on African–Russian Relations*

Russia’s interest in Africa was reignited following the oil boom of the first decade of the 21st century. Buoyed by newfound economic strength, Russia set out to establish a multipolar world in which it could have a pivotal role, and simultaneously, Syria and certain African countries offered the opportunity for Russia to challenge the United States. Since then, Russia has expanded its partnerships on the African continent (Stronski, 2019). In 2008, President Vladimir Putin visited Libya, a country that previously enjoyed close ties with the Soviet Union. Putin discussed energy

and arms sales and cleared billions of dollars of Libyan Soviet-era debt (Fasanotti, 2016). Then, in 2009, elected President Dmitry Medvedev embarked on a four-day trip to Africa, visiting countries such as Egypt, Nigeria, Namibia, and Angola, accompanied by a 400-strong business delegation, including heads of key Russian companies such as Gazprom. The trip focused on energy and mineral exploration and the sale of Russian technology (Besliu, 2022).

Hoping to reset the U.S.-Russia relationship and increase its influence in Africa, Medvedev's Russia abstained from a vote in the UN Security Council in 2011, enabling a US-led NATO intervention in Libya (Heisten, 2020). The Russian president took this decision despite security officials warning him about its potential to extend US hegemony and, then Prime Minister Putin, decrying a possible rise in extremist movements in case of a NATO intervention (Heisten, 2020). Enabling NATO's intervention proved disastrous for Russia. The intervention contributed to regime change and Libya's destabilization and jeopardized 6.5 billion dollars' worth of signed or verbally promised contracts for Russian energy companies (Besliu, 2022). Instead of resetting US-Russia relations, the intervention made Putin, who would soon regain the presidency, more distrustful of the West:

NATO's intervention heightened Putin's sense of vulnerability. If a leader like Gaddafi, who accepted Western terms, was nevertheless brutally removed from power, who could guarantee that this would not happen in other places, including Russia? Muammar Gaddafi was one of the most significant political figures in the modern history of Libya and one of the most influential regional leaders in Africa who ruled Libya for 4 decades after successfully being appointed as the head of government in a series of military coups led by him (Firdaus, 2020). In 2011, the NATO-led intervention in Libya resulted in the violent death of the country's eccentric dictator Muammar Gaddafi (Kjell, Marcus, & Charlotte, 2014). After the killing of Gaddafi, Putin flatly denied there was a U.S.-Russia alliance at the time, stating: "I sometimes feel that America does not need allies. It needs vassals" (Reuters, 2011)

Western sanctions enacted following Russia's occupation of Crimea and more comprehensive interventions in Ukraine since 2014 led Russia to redouble its efforts in Africa (Besliu, 2022). Russia re-entered the stage at a time of growing discontent.

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France, in particular, is seen as continuing a policy of imperialism in West Africa through conditional support and profitable business deals (Grimsson, et al., 2019). Increasing numbers of African leaders also felt disillusioned with China's offer of an alternative, as it indebted African partners with its loans while conducting its projects with Chinese workers and experts (Grimsson, et al., 2019). This disappointment has led countries such as Ghana to cancel Chinese-led initiatives (Grimsson, et al., 2019). Russia's re-engagement also coincided with US disengagement from the region under Donald Trump, whose priorities included Iran, China, and American isolationism.

Russia has rekindled relations with former allies, such as Guinea and Mali, and entered into a new partnership with the Central African Republic (CAR) (Ling, 2023). In 2018, Moscow swooped into Bangui, Central African Republic (CAR), with arms and mercenaries to prop up President Faustin-Archange Touadera's fragile government in exchange for mineral rights (Ling, 2023). A former Russian intelligence officer is now a national security advisor, and Moscow is considering opening up a military base in the CAR (Ling, 2023). In Sudan, Russia provided diplomatic, financial, and arms support to the beleaguered government of Omar al-Bashir, who, overseeing economic mismanagement and rapidly rising inflation, was ousted in a military coup in April 2019 following widespread protests to his 30 years in power (SMA TRADOC White Paper-Russian Strategic Intentions, 2019).

Russia's outreach to Africa is more than short-term opportunism. Moscow has also strategically pursued mineral access, weapon sales, negotiated security cooperation agreements, nuclear power development, and trade relationships in selected African countries. African Export-Import Bank President Benedict Oramah said in an interview with Russia's state-owned Tass news agency, cited by the Russia Briefing investment news site, that trade between Russia and African countries has doubled since 2015, to about \$20 billion a year (Guensburg, 2022). He stated that Russia exported \$14 billion worth of goods and services and imported roughly \$5 billion in African products from 2015 to 2020 (Guensburg, 2022). This has resulted in a steady growth of Russia's trade with Africa over the past decade. Targeted countries include partnerships existing during the Cold War era, mineral-rich Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries, and countries with large populations and growing markets (Guensburg, 2022). Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has made several trips to the African continent over the past few years. More recently, on October 23<sup>rd</sup> 2019, the Black Sea resort town of Sochi welcomed more than 3,000 delegates – forty-three of whom were heads of state and government – from all fifty-four African states for the first-ever Russia–Africa Summit and Economic Forum, hosted by Russia's president Vladimir Putin and Egypt's president Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi (Couch, 2019). According to a report, Putin wrote off approximately \$24 billion in African debt during the two-day summit (Couch, 2019). The first-ever Russia–Africa summit also generated diplomatic agreements and billions of dollars in deals involving arms, energy, agriculture, banking, and more, said the organizer, the Roscongress Foundation (DW News, 2019). While preparation is ongoing for the



next Russia-Africa Summit to be held in St. Petersburg in July 2023 (Roncongress, 2023), the unprecedented gathering of the maiden Russian-African summit is widely seen as a response or contribution to Beijing's Forum on China-Africa Cooperation.

### *Africa–China relations*

An overview of the Africa–China relations is vital in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine, considering that China's relationship with African countries has deepened significantly since the turn of the millennium (Taylor, 2009), as has its influence on the continent, reflecting China's rise to superpower status. China's activities in Africa began with Beijing's support of liberation movements, fighting colonial rule (Kieran 2009), and for every year since 1950, bar one, the foreign minister of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has first visited an African country (Mboya, 2022). In 1971, the votes of African countries were instrumental in winning the PRC's control of China's seat in the UN General Assembly and Security Council – displacing representatives from Chinese nationalist forces, who had been defeated in the civil war and now governed Taiwan (Taylor, 2009). In the late 1990s, China's commercial engagement intensified, and in 1999, China created its 'Going Out' strategy, which encouraged Chinese companies to invest beyond China (Vines & Wallace, 2023). Chinese engagement also became official in 2013 with the Belt and Road Initiative (Tarrósy, 2020), a well-resourced effort to build political influence and grow commercial relationships throughout the developing world (Vines & Wallace, 2023). Key activities include lending for infrastructure development engineered and constructed by Chinese companies and resource extraction by Chinese mining and energy firms (Carmody, 2023).

While certain countries, including Ethiopia, Angola, and Zambia, have been a priority, China has grown its presence in almost every African country (Bodomo, 2010). Since 2000, China has held the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation every three years (Bodomo, 2010), which is widely seen as an essential means of advancing Chinese diplomatic and commercial interests. Over the decades since the Cold War, Chinese influence in Africa has increased significantly (Vines & Wallace, 2023). China is Africa's largest two-way trading partner, hitting \$254 billion in 2021, exceeding U.S.-Africa trade by a factor of four (Mboya, 2022). China is the largest provider of foreign direct investment, supporting hundreds of thousands of African jobs. This is roughly double the U.S. foreign

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direct investment (Sheehy, 2022). Although Chinese lending to African countries has recently decreased, China remains the largest lender to African countries. Given China's booming economy, which has become the second largest in the world, its commercial activity in Africa is expected to increase. This is due to their need for raw materials to support their large manufacturing base (Brautigam, 2015). Despite numerous debates and controversies regarding China in Africa (Brautigam, 2015), their unprecedented presence represents a strong effort by the Chinese government to make significant progress in Africa. Furthermore, the BRICS countries include China alongside Russia, emerging as new effective actors in the world arena but particularly deepening its engagement in Africa (Deych, 2015).

### ***Russia–China Relations (focusing on Africa)***

The People's Republic of China (PRC or China) and the Russian Federation (Russia) maintain a strategic and multifaceted relationship with extensive military, diplomatic, and economic connections. Although the contemporary China-Russia relationship dates back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Barrios & Bowen, 2023), the two countries also share a long, tumultuous history that has included periods of security and diplomatic cooperation, fluctuations in ideological alignment, diplomatic crises, and a border war in the 1960s (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2022). Russian and Chinese capacities complement each other. China has the world's biggest economy; Russia has the most extensive nuclear arsenal (Barrios & Bowen, 2023). China has money but needs fossil fuels; Russia has fossil fuels but needs money. Together, the two might be able to build a "de-dollarized" financial system immune to Western sanctions, and each validates the other's authoritarianism, much as fascist dictators did in the 1930s (Morris, 2022).

Many experts trace the current dynamism of the relationship to the previous Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 significantly accelerated the slow warming of the relationship that started in the waning days of the Cold War (Morris, 2022). Convinced that it had no real economic opportunities in the West, the Kremlin turned to China to help offset Western pressure (Morris, 2022). At that time, China's initial support for Moscow was tepid. Beijing was vaguely critical of the West for supposedly causing the crisis, never verbally supporting Russian annexation, abstaining from key UN resolutions, and allowing Chinese firms to abide by U.S. and European sanctions (Morris, 2022). China also took advantage of Russia's increased economic dependence to drive a hard bargain on key energy deals (Morris, 2022).

However, Beijing eventually leaned into its partnership with Russia. While Moscow's need to diversify away from the West energized relations, Beijing also came around to recognize the utility of building a stronger relationship with the Kremlin (Bossuyt & Kaczmarek 2021). In particular, the China-Russia partnership crystallized around a fundamentally similar view of the United States as a primary strategic threat and competitor regarding power. Both Xi and Putin view U.S. support for democracies in their regions—and those fighting repression and authoritarianism



inside China and Russia – as an effort to extend influence and ultimately overthrow their regimes (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman 2022). The leaders also view the U.S. alliance network – including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Quad grouping in the Indo-Pacific – as a direct challenge to their security and their regimes (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman 2022). The two countries’ apparent mutual affinity has led some U.S. policymakers and Members of Congress to express concern that Beijing and Moscow constitute a *de facto* alliance and to seek ways to counter their global influence (Barrios & Bowen, 2023). The PRC and Russia’s bilateral relationship falls short of a mutual defense pact, more closely resembling a non-binding alignment based on shared opposition to what they describe as the U.S.-led international order. This joint opposition has spurred cooperation between the two countries but has not fully overcome their historical strategic mistrust.

In the wake of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia’s reliance on China’s economic and political support has grown (McDonald, 2023). At the same time, the war has drawn increased scrutiny to the Beijing–Moscow relationship, including the extent to which China is willing and able to help relieve sanction pressures on Russia. Some observers believe Russia’s invasion has strained relations, with China unaware of Russia’s plans and unwilling to be drawn into the conflict (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2022). Nonetheless, China has avoided public condemnation of Russia’s actions. Russia, meanwhile, appears to be turning to China to circumvent Western sanctions, including selling oil and purchasing critical components for its defense industry (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2022). Trade data suggests some PRC firms may be providing dual-use goods to Russia, but it remains unclear how much support China is supplying Russia. Media reports suggest the PRC government is selective in its engagement, allowing transactions that maximize advantages to China – such as buying oil at a discount, but not supplying lethal weaponry (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2022). Considering a new dimension of Russian-China relations and each country’s pivotal role on the African continent, combined with their joint opposition against a U.S.-led international order, analyzing Africa’s position in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine is crucial.

### **Africa’s Stance in Light of the On-Going War in Ukraine**

Even though African countries are struggling with high inflation, the effects of drought, and a lack of Ukrainian imports (Gbadamosi, 2022), China has made it clear it will provide support to the continent only if Africa pushes back against what Beijing calls Western interference in the war, especially the sanctions aimed at the government of Russian President Vladimir Putin (Stallard, 2023). Meanwhile, on the day of the invasion, February 24<sup>th</sup>, the African Union unequivocally called on Russia to respect “the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of Ukraine,” while Kenya’s U.N. ambassador, Martin Kimani, spoke for many when he compared Russian aggression to that of Africa’s former colonial masters (Cocks, 2022).

The African continent has emerged as an unexpected player in the Ukrainian conflict. A new geopolitical order could take shape, one where Africa revives its

Votes in favour	Votes: abstained	Absent from voting	Votes against
Benin, Cabo Verde, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, DRC, Djibouti, Egypt, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Zambia, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Malawi, Mauritania, Mauritius, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, STP, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Tunisia	Algeria, Angola, Botswana, Burundi, CAR, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Guinea Bissau, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Sudan, Togo, Uganda, Tanzania, Zimbabwe	Morocco, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Comoros, Guinea, Somalia	Eritrea

▲ Table 1. Votes during the 24 March 2022 UN Resolution about the Russia-Ukraine war (Ton, 2022)

historical position of nonalignment with the West and defends its own interests. However, considering the voting records in the UN General Assembly, seen in Table 1., history is unlikely to repeat itself as African countries increasingly align their various interests with Russia's and Beijing's ambitions, seemingly at the expense of their past relationship with the West.

The high number of abstentions from the African countries was widely interpreted as a sign of Russian influence or evidence of the growing anti-Westernism of African governments and citizens. The factors introduced and explained below are possible reasons for the absenteeism of some African nations resonating as support to the Russians.

### ***Imperialist control***

African people's deep anti-colonial and anti-Western resentment does not include Russia since the latter's colonial past did not extend to Africa (Smith, 2023). Russia, at that time, the Soviet Union, instead backed many liberation movements in Africa at a time of Western political dominance. For instance, during apartheid in South Africa, the Soviets offered funding and paramilitary training to the liberation movement that became the governing African National Congress (ANC) after democracy in 1994 (Muronzi 2023). South Africa, therefore, has positive memories of warm relations forged during the Soviet era regarding its own fight against apartheid. Jacob Zuma's presidency from 2009 to 2018 was the pinnacle of the relationship when interpersonal ties in both governments formed a solid basis for cooperation (Vines2023). Similarly, in Zimbabwe, the Soviets supported the African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) when the party fought a settler Rhodesian government from the 1960s until independence in 1980 (Nolutshungu, 1982). The People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) received help from the Soviets to gain independence from Portugal in 1975 (Meijer & Birmingham 2004). Tanzania's Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) ruling party and Namibia's ruling SWAPO party were based on socialist or communist doctrine, and these movements received help from the Soviet Union (Bagnetto 2022). South Africa, and five other

liberation movements in southern Africa that have such historical ties with the former Soviet Union, all abstained in the vote. Therefore, the legacy of the 1960s and 1970s Third-Worldism still shapes the views of Africa's governments and citizens, particularly manifested amongst some African states pitching an alignment towards Russia in the ongoing war in Ukraine.

### ***Arms trade and military aid***

Military and security cooperation is a key factor in the relationship between Russia and several African countries and may account for the reasoning behind the assumed support for Russia in light of the ongoing war. In fact, with a market share of 37.6%, Russia is the top weapons supplier to Africa, followed by the US with 16%, France with 14%, and China with 9% (Nia, 2020). These include major arms (battle tanks, warships, fighter aircraft, and combat helicopters) and small arms (pistols and assault rifles, such as the new Kalashnikov AK-200 series rifle) (Nia, 2020). Algeria reportedly remains the largest recipient of Russian arms in Africa, followed by Egypt, Sudan, and Angola (Nia, 2020). According to a 2020 German daily Bild, citing a secret German Foreign Ministry report, Russia is planning to step up its military cooperation with African countries as part of its new Africa strategy, including building bases in six countries: namely the Central African Republic, Egypt, Eritrea, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Sudan (Daily Sabah, 2020). Moreover, Russia's army is partially secretly and partially officially training soldiers from those countries, according to the report, which claimed, for instance, that 180 Russian army instructors were currently based in the Central African Republic or elsewhere in Africa, adding that "around 20 Malian soldiers are trained in Russia every year" (Daily Sabah, 2020). In fact, since 2015, Russia has concluded military cooperation agreements with 21 countries in Africa, according to the German report (Daily Sabah, 2020). Previously, there were only four military cooperation treaties across the entire continent.

By the end of 2021 alone, Russia had signed military cooperation agreements with Nigeria and Ethiopia, Africa's two most populous nations (Smith, 2021). In Ethiopia, Russia has supported Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government after Western governments balked at his forces' military response to an insurgency in northern Tigray (Alemseged, 2022). Ethiopia felt the U.S., in particular, was aligning with Egypt in the ongoing dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken further evoked the ire of Addis Ababa in March 2021 by accusing forces in Tigray of "ethnic cleansing." Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov then met with Ethiopian counterpart Demeke Mekonnen in June (Abbay, 2022). Russia has supplied strategic weapons both as a potential defense against any Egyptian strike on the GERD, and to aid government forces in Tigray. Ethiopia and Russia signed a military cooperation agreement in July 2021, focused explicitly on knowledge and technology transfers, but simultaneously providing weapons to fight against the "Gains by the Tigray Defence Force (TDF), which had captured parts of the Afar and Amhara (Lanfranchi & Bruijne, 2022).

Russians are therefore interested in presenting themselves as reliable security partners, which is attractive to other countries on the African Continent. South Africa is holding a joint military exercise with Russia and China that opposition figures say amounts to an endorsement of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (BBC News, 2023). The US has also criticized the 10-day naval drills in South Africa, which will continue over the first anniversary of the war in Ukraine (BBC News, 2023). It must be noted that South Africa previously abstained from a UN vote condemning the invasion (UN General Assembly Resolutions Tables, 2022). It also refused to join the US and Europe in imposing sanctions on Russia. Apart from the fact that South Africa's governing African National Congress (ANC) also has long-standing ties with Russia, which dates back to the years of white-minority rule before 1994 (Arkhangelskaya & Shubin 2013), South Africa is also taking part in the joint-military exercise because its armed forces are underfunded and overstretched, according to Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, head of the South African Institute of International Affairs (BBC News, 2023). The navy's priorities are to protect fisheries in its home waters and combat piracy in the Indian Ocean. South Africa, therefore, needs to cooperate with other nations to have the capacity to deal with things off its coast, such as piracy, and Russia seems to provide such a need (BBC News, 2023).

Russia's ability to sell weapons without any pre-conditions makes this a big deal among quite a number of people such as military junta leaders in Africa. One of the abstentions came from Western ally Uganda (UN General Assembly Resolutions Tables, 2022), but this aligns with President Yoweri Museveni's previous dealings with Russia. At the 2019 Russia-Africa summit in Sochi, some African leaders said they would be interested in buying arms and weapons. Museveni went one step further. "Uganda said that Russia should give more loans to African countries so they can purchase arms and weaponry from Russian manufacturers," (Bagnetto, 2022). In addition, Russia has deployed the shadowy paramilitary outfit, the Wagner Group, in at least a half dozen African countries in recent years (Siegle, 2021), making Africa one of the most active regions of Russia's mercenary deployments globally. For instance, mercenaries from the Kremlin-backed Wagner Group are playing a major role in fighting militants in Mali, filling a vacuum left by France, which pulled the last of its troops out in 2022 amid disputes with the country's junta (The Africa Report, 2023). In recent times, Russia has delivered "very large supplies of aviation equipment" to Mali over the past few months, which has "significantly increased" the capability of local forces to fight extremists, according to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. During the minister's recent trip to Mali, he added that Russia is planning additional steps in the field of education through military

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higher educational institutions and regarding the supplies of weapons and military equipment (France24, 2023). Clearly, the provision of reliable security and military partnerships from Russia greatly influences some African states and their decision to align with Russia amidst the ongoing war in Ukraine.

### ***Ukrainian racism perceived by African students in Ukraine***

Within days of Russia attacking Ukraine, hundreds of people have been killed, thousands displaced, and hundreds of thousands aimed to flee to border countries that accept refugees (Ray, 2022). The mass exodus of these civilians includes thousands of international students from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Ukraine was home to over 76,000 foreign students, according to government data from 2020 (Ali, 2022), with an estimated 16,000 being African students, the largest numbers coming from Nigeria, Morocco, and Egypt (Mlaba, 2022). Thousands have fled, hundreds are still trapped, and many remain uncertain about the fate of their education. While confronting difficulties in evacuating a perilous warzone, the exacerbation of an already dire situation has been the numerous accounts of egregious prejudice reported by African students.

Many African students who studied in Ukraine reported that they were facing racial discrimination during their terrifying journeys fleeing Russia's attacks, often struggling to find a way out of the country (Reinstein et al., 2022). Many reports of Black people being refused at border crossings in favor of white Ukrainians, leaving them stuck at borders for days in brutal conditions (Ray, 2022). Ukraine stated they would first allow women and children on trains and transport out of the country to flee the Russian invasion (Ray, 2022). However, it seems they meant Ukrainian and European women and children. Videos show Black people being pushed off trains and Black drivers being reprimanded and stalled by Ukrainians as they try to flee (Ray, 2022). There are even reports of animals being allowed on trains before Africans. BuzzFeed News conveyed the narration from two Nigerian students who said they were subjected to racial slurs on a train and violently thrown off by Ukrainian police officers who pulled a gun on them (Reinstein et al., 2022). Similarly, a student from Sierra Leone said that she and her companions were not allowed to board a train headed to the border despite having tickets. A student from Liberia said she was forced to spend two days in the cold without food and shelter at the Ukrainian border after guards refused to let her and other people of color board buses taking refugees across to Poland (Reinstein et al., 2022). "I was begging. The official literally looked me in my eye and said: 'Only Ukrainians. That's all. If you are Black, you should walk.'" (Mlaba, 2022)

The call for justice following discrimination against Black and African people at the beginning of Russia's war in Ukraine was defined by this singular quote. A quote that reverberated across the internet, taking over our social media feeds and topping news headlines worldwide at the end of February 2022 and stemmed a movement "#AfricansInUkraine." Representatives from the three African nations on the UN Security Council – Kenya, Ghana, and Gabon – all condemned reports

of discrimination against African citizens at the Ukrainian border during a meeting at the UN headquarters in New York City (Ly & Princewill, 2022). Similarly, in a tweet, Nigeria's government strongly criticized reports and video images from its citizens – and those from other African nations – that they were being prevented from leaving and facing harsh treatment in neighboring Poland (Hegarty, 2022). H.E. Macky Sall, President of the Republic of Senegal and Chairperson of the African Union, sharply condemned the ill-treatment faced by African civilians fleeing the warzone in Ukraine for neighboring countries on March 3, 2022. He also called for implementing an international commission of inquiry into allegations of human rights violations in Ukraine (Felix, 2022). Considering the narrations and reports of several forms of racisms perceived by many African students in Ukraine, it will not be to the disbelief of many when some African countries do not support Ukraine in the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war.

### ***Food Security***

According to United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) 25 African countries depended on Russia and Ukraine for at least 30 percent of their wheat, while 16 of these 25 countries sourced 50 percent of their wheat from Russia and Ukraine (Joala & Urhahn, 2022). More than 30 African countries import nitrogenous, potassium, and phosphate fertilizers from Russia and Belarus. For instance, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW), Cameroon, Tanzania, Uganda, and Sudan source “more than 40 percent of their wheat from Russia and Ukraine” (Odiwuor, 2022). 64 percent of wheat and 14 percent of fertilizers in Rwanda come from Russia, and Senegal annually imports up to 650,000 tons of wheat, partly from Russia and Ukraine (Odiwuor, 2022). During the 2020-2021 agricultural season, the continent was supplied with wheat, corn, cooking oil, and other staple foods worth approximately 2.6 billion euros from Ukraine and 3.6 billion euros from Russia (Akinyi, 2023). With the war, supplies are tight and prices have risen, increasing Food and Agriculture Organisation's (FAO) Food Price Index by 12.6 percent, a 34 percent increase in twelve months, the highest since the 1990s (Odiwuor, 2022).

The war has worsened a food security crisis already burgeoning in many countries. There are 281 million people in Africa who do not have enough food to eat daily, and nearly three-quarters of the population cannot afford nutritious food (Dongyu, 2022). There are also implications of climate change, a severe drought in East Africa, as well as the toll from the COVID-19 pandemic crisis that dropped agricultural productivity by 18% and increased hunger by more than 20% (Flowers, 2022). This means that strategic food reserves are being depleted quickly in many African countries, which is problematic since the crisis will hit hard by the next planting season, mainly because farmers cannot afford fertilizer that has doubled in price. This assertion has been confirmed by Apollos Nwafra, vice president for policy and state capability for the Alliance for a Green Revolution for Africa (AGRA) (Flowers, 2022). Countries in North Africa currently experiencing drought, such as Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, and Libya, are likely to feel the pinch



due to their heavy reliance on grains to feed their populations. On the other hand, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Chad, Burkina Faso, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, which are already on the verge of famine, are also at risk due to their reliance on food aid, which primarily consists of grains from Russia and Ukraine (Akinyi, 2023). Currently, global food prices are at the highest since 2011 (Horowitz, 2023), meaning that the invasion will only make things worse for food security and economic stability on the continent.

On March 9, 2022, the Ukrainian government banned grain exports and other food products to prevent a domestic humanitarian crisis (Ramsay et al., 2022). Egypt, the world's largest wheat importer from Russia and Ukraine (Abay et al., 2023), is especially vulnerable as it relies heavily on subsidized imports to ensure affordable access to bread and vegetable oil, with more than 70 million of its citizens depending on subsidized bread. Additionally, the country imports over half of its sunflower oil from Ukraine (Abay et al., 2023). In a cabinet meeting on February 23rd, Egypt's Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly stated that the country's current stockpile of wheat in silos would be sufficient for four months, and that in April, local production would be harvested, extending the stock to approximately nine months (Human Rights Watch, 2022). A few days later, on March 10<sup>th</sup>, the Egyptian government announced an immediate three-month ban on the export of wheat, flour, and other staples. The government aims to secure wheat from alternative sources and will most likely avoid an immediate shortage of wheat supplies, but the direct impact could be a sharp increase in prices (Human Rights Watch, 2022). If the price of wheat increases, the government may need to maintain subsidies to keep the cost of bread affordable for the population, even as they were considering cutting back on subsidies. It is important to note that in June 2021, the Egyptian government reduced subsidies for sunflower and soybean oil by 20 percent in response to increasing prices (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

In July 2022, Senegal's President, Macky Sall, the current head of the African Union (AU), flew to the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi to discuss with Mr. Putin how to free up the obstacles that are curbing desperately needed food exports from both Russia and Ukraine (BBC, 2022). South Africa's President, Cyril Ramaphosa, also called Mr. Putin to discuss Russian agricultural products and fertilizer deliveries to Africa (Fabricius, 2022). Consequently, Russia won more support from African Countries when Russian President Vladimir Putin said that the Kremlin is ready to provide food to Africa "free of charge" – on a condition that a deal on exports via the Black Sea is not extended after the recently agreed 60 days, according to the Associated Press (VOA Africa, 2023). A deal that allowed grain to flow from Ukraine to countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia was extended just before its expiration date, officials confirmed. Speaking at the International Parliamentary Russia-Africa Conference in Moscow, Putin said the extension meant the deal would run for another 60 days. For some African states to keep securing their main source of cereal food and fertilizers, there is a need to align with their suppliers and in this case, Russia.

### *U.S. Congress' anti-Russian Bill (Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act, H.R. 7311)*

The “Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act” adopted by the U.S. House of Representatives is a well-designed legislative measure broadly worded enabling the State Department to monitor the foreign policy of the Russian Federation in Africa, including military affairs and any efforts that Washington deems as malign influence (Azikiwe, 2022). The United States Congressional bill was approved by a wide margin that would target and punish African states that maintain political and economic relations with the Russian Federation. Labeled as the “Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act” (H.R. 7311), it was passed on April 27<sup>th</sup> 2022 by the House of Representatives in a bipartisan 419-9 majority and approved by the Senate, which is evenly split between Democrats and Republicans (Klomegâh, 2022). The bill broadly defines malign activities as those that ‘undermine United States objectives and interests.’ The Secretary of State would monitor the actions of Russia’s government and its ‘proxies’ – including private military companies (e.g., Wagner ) and oligarchs (Fabricius, 2022). This implies that the U.S. government would have to counter such activities effectively, including through U.S. foreign aid programs. It would need to hold accountable the Russian Federation and African governments and their officials who are complicit in aiding such malign influence and activities (Fabricius, 2022).

The bill was introduced to Congress on March 31<sup>st</sup> 2022 was a response to Russia’s February 24<sup>th</sup> invasion of Ukraine. Several other punitive laws aimed at Russia – including one directing the administration to gather evidence of Russian war crimes in Ukraine – were introduced at about the same time (Fabricius, 2022). New York Democrat Gregory Meeks, chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said the bill was designed to thwart Russian President Vladimir Putin’s efforts to ‘pilfer, manipulate and exploit resources in parts of Africa to evade sanctions and undermine U.S. interests’ and to finance his war in Ukraine (Fabricius, 2022). Meeks also presented the bill as supportive of Africa, intended to protect all innocent people who have been victimized by Putin’s mercenaries and agents credibly accused of gross violations of human rights in Africa, including in the Central African Republic and Mali (Fabricius, 2022). In the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali, Wagner has been accused of committing human rights violations to prop up dubious governments and thwart Western interests.

The African continent is questioning the U.S. motives considering the Cold War experience with this superpower. During the Cold War, the U.S. government invoked the pretext of Russian interference to justify a range of crimes, including the assassination of Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, the overthrow of Pan-Africanist hero Kwame Nkrumah, the arrest of Nelson

**The African continent is questioning the U.S. motives considering the Cold War experience with this superpower.**

Mandela, and intervention in the Angolan civil war. Some African governments suspect there's more at play than protecting 'fragile states in Africa,' as Meeks put it. 'Why target Africa?' one senior African government official asked. 'They're unhappy with the way so many African countries voted in the General Assembly and their relatively non-aligned position (Fabricius, 2022).'

The Southern African Development Community (SADC), during its 42nd Ordinary Summit of Heads of State and Government, held on August 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> at Palais du Peuple (Parliament Building), vehemently expressed their collective opposition to a proposed United States law on countering Russian influence and activities in Africa (Klomegãh, 2022). The "Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act" adopted by the U.S. House of Representatives directs the U.S. Secretary of State to submit a strategy on Russia. According to the statement posted to its website, the 16-member regional bloc complained that the United States has made the African continent "the target of unilateral and punitive measures," and its Senate's Foreign Relations Committee pushed the bill designed to stop President Vladimir Putin from using Africa to bypass U.S. sanctions and fund his war in Ukraine, as well as to protect African people from human rights violations by Russian mercenaries (Klomegãh, 2022). The U.S., may very well seek to punish those actors through economic sanctions or regime change. "Russian aggression" is generally being invoked to justify more significant U.S. intervention in Africa, including expanding the Africa Command (AFRICOM) and U.S. military base network across the continent.

Although the Russians have been involved in some questionable activities, many African countries have had positive relationships with Russia for an extended time and have benefited from its support of African liberation movements during the Cold War. This contrasts the U.S., which did not provide such support, particularly in South Africa. Meeks' remarks seem to be projecting their own country's actions onto Russia by accusing the latter of attempting to exploit Africa's resources. However, the U.S. has engaged in this type of exploitation far more extensively and over a much more extended period than Russia. AFRICOM founder Vice Admiral Robert Moeller admitted that one of the U.S. Africa Command's (AFRICOM) guiding principles was "protecting the free flow of natural resources from Africa to the global market." The "Countering Malign Russian Influence Activities in Africa" Act will be used to justify flagrant infringements on the sovereignty of African countries. It uses the Russian bogeyman – like in the Cold War era – as a pretext for neocolonial expansion.

## **Conclusion**

This paper explored Africa's stances, focusing on the high number of abstentions during the UN resolution votes in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine. The paper, therefore, explored what factors may contribute to or explain the voting pattern of African countries during the UN resolution vote. The discussion results reveal aspects such as the historical memory of colonial and imperialist control, arms trade and military aid, food security, and Ukrainian racism perceived by African

students, explaining the voting pattern of some African states in the form of abstention or voting against the bill that condemns Russia. In addition, the U.S. Congress' anti-Russian Bill (Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act, H.R. 7311), punishing African states for maintaining political and economic relations with the Russian Federation, that is reinforcing neo-colonialism in Africa, has been opposed vehemently by most African states and is seemingly a factor that pushes the African states towards supporting Russia.

While the paper indicates certain factors that could explain the (re)action of some African states in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the paper consequently contributes to scholarly discussions and debates on how Africa's interests and (re)actions contribute to furthering Russia and China's goal of weakening the United States as a dominant power. China's President Xi Jinping and Russia's President Vladimir Putin have repeatedly hailed a 'no limits' partnership between their respective countries to the displeasure of the U.S. in light of the ongoing war in Ukraine. The current geopolitical turbulence accelerated by the great power rivalry has not only shattered the global order that has existed since the end of the Cold War but also reframes partnerships in which the role of African States is also becoming more prominent. ✨

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