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Putin woos Ramaphosa and other African leaders as he warns against Western 'blackmail'

Oct 23 2019 07:55 Henry Meyer

Bloomberg
NEWS


After restoring Russia as a key power in the Middle East, President Vladimir Putin is turning his attention to Africa to raise Moscow's profile in the struggle for geopolitical influence.

Putin hosts leaders from more than 50 African states on Wednesday in Russia's first conference with the continent, underlining a Kremlin push to rival the US, the European Union and China as strategic players in the resource-rich region.

"Russia is increasingly looking to Africa as a region where it can project power and influence," said Paul Stronski of the Washington-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "The power vacuums created by a lack of Western policy focus in recent years" are giving it "an opportunity to curry favour."

The two-day summit in Sochi co-hosted with Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi, the current African Union chairman, is an effort to revive former Cold War relations, when African regimes often allied with Moscow in the ideological contest with the US before the Soviet Union's collapse. It's "an unprecedented, benchmark event," Putin told the state-run Tass news service in an interview published Monday, calling stronger links with Africa "one of Russia's foreign policy priorities."

Still, there's a sense Russia is coming late to the continent after China and other states including Turkey and the United Arab Emirates filled a vacuum left by the erosion of Communist-era ties. Russia's \$20 billion trade volume with Africa in 2018 was dwarfed by the EU's 300 billion euros (\$334 billion) and China's \$204 billion, and was about a third of the US's total.

Moscow's "influence will grow but it will be incremental rather than exponential," said Ronak Gopaldas, director at Signal Risk in South Africa, a risk-management firm. "I don't think they'll come anywhere close to matching Chinese influence in Africa."

Renewed focus

As in the Middle East, where Putin leveraged his **successful Syria intervention** to bolster Russia's standing at the US's expense, the Kremlin is exploiting Washington's **fading influence** even as US President Donald Trump's new Prosper Africa strategy seeks to **reverse the decline**.

While it's never been entirely absent from Africa, the Kremlin's renewed focus has largely involved a two-pronged strategy so far, shoring up unstable regimes through informal military contractors while offering defense and energy cooperation to other states.

Russia signalled its capabilities by sending two Tu-160 'Blackjack' strategic nuclear bombers that were **due to arrive** in South Africa on Wednesday, the first time they will have landed on the continent.

"We are ready to engage in competition for cooperation with Africa," Putin said in his interview. "We



Russian President Vladimir Putin. (AFP)

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see a number of Western states resorting to pressure, intimidation and blackmail” in attempts to regain “lost influence and dominant positions in former colonies.”

Russia, which has written off \$20 billion of African debts, plans to offer financing to states with little access to capital markets. It has also inked defence-cooperation accords in recent years with about 15 African nations. State atomic energy operator Rosatom Corp., meanwhile, is seeking contracts across the continent including in Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria and Zambia. Still, Russia can't match China's financial firepower. Chinese President Xi Jinping last year announced \$60 billion in loans and other financing at a Beijing **conference with African nations**, three years after pledging a similar amount.

'Niche Player'

“Russia is now a niche player and its playing in the energy arena and security area,” said Steven Gruzd, head of the South African Institute of International Affairs' Governance and Diplomacy Program in Johannesburg. It hopes offering African nations closer economic and political ties “will get it more support in forums like the United Nations,” he said.

Putin showed his potential last year when the UN issued a waiver for Russia to arm and defend the government of the Central African Republic, which sought help after its former colonial master, France, ended a three-year peacekeeping mission.

Even so, he's faced setbacks. President Cyril Ramaphosa froze a R1 trillion nuclear power project with Russia after he took office last year. Protests against longtime Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir, who enjoyed **Kremlin backing** despite an international arrest warrant against him for alleged genocide, led the military to oust him in April and share power with the civilian opposition.

The Wagner mercenary group of Putin ally Yevgeny Prigozhin, which has been fighting in Syria, is offering security services in Sudan and the CAR in exchange for gold and diamond concessions. It's active in other mineral-rich African countries including the Democratic Republic of Congo, and is present in Libya in support of military leader Khalifa Haftar, who's battling the UN-backed government in Tripoli.

Influence, Money

Prigozhin deployed political consultants to try to influence elections in Zimbabwe and Madagascar. Russia is backing President Alpha Conde's attempt to prolong his rule next year by scrapping term limits in Guinea, the biggest supplier of bauxite for Russian aluminum giant United Co. Rusal.

Another wealthy Putin ally, Konstantin Malofeev, helped set up the International Sovereign Development Agency this year, which is a general partner at the summit. The agency says it's in negotiations with several central and western African countries and plans to issue \$500 million in sovereign debt to one of them in early 2020, though it won't say which one.

“Real sovereignty begins with economic sovereignty,” Malofeev said. “A lot of the financing received by African countries is granted on unfavorable conditions.”

Russia has “grand designs to be a global superpower again” and knows it can't ignore Africa as “a new geopolitical chessboard,” said Gopaldas at Signal Risk. “For African policy makers, it creates more choice,” he said.

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