

Policy Brief

The Russia-Ukraine War: Implications for Africa

By Hisham Aidi

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African states are in a vulnerable position. The invasion of Ukraine could affect food security and trigger a spike in oil prices, inflicting economic duress on African households. The Black Sea region is home to vast fertile farmlands, and war in the “breadbasket of the world” could threaten wheat and fertilizer supplies. Increased economic hardship and social discontent do not bode well for democratic governance in Africa, especially in light of the recent spate of military coups.



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INTRODUCTION

Since Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine on February 24, 2022, analysts have scrambled to explain the Russian leader Vladimir Putin's decision. Different explanations have been advanced. Liberal commentators think Putin's revanchist claims are due to the nature of the autocratic regime in Moscow and the Russian leader's need to shore up flagging domestic support (earlier military campaigns in Chechnya in 1990, Georgia 2008, and Ukraine 2014 did bolster his position at home). Realists, in turn, focus on American overreach, specifically, the expansion of NATO into Russia's sphere of influence, which set the stage for a confrontation with Moscow. Realists also note that this war signals the emergence of a multipolar order and possibly the end of "Pax Americana." Others contend that the conflict, particularly the timing of the invasion, should be understood as a result of Russia's emergence as a petro-state with enormous foreign currency reserves. Less discussed among Western analysts are the far-reaching consequences that this conflict could have for the African continent in terms of energy, food security, and democratic governance.

LIBERAL VIEWS

Liberal scholars maintain that what prompted the war was not Ukrainian leaders' seeking NATO membership, but rather the Ukrainian population's desire for democracy and Kyiv's attempts to secure an "association agreement" with the European Union. In this narrative, it was the former Soviet client states' (Latvia, Estonia, Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary) embrace of democracy and capitalism, that according to analyst Fareed Zakaria, prompted Putin's "bloody, brutal effort to stem this tide of democratization."¹ When in 2014, then Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich, rebuffed the European Union's economic package for fear of Russian reprisals, opting instead for assistance from Moscow, he was driven out of office by mass protests; his exit in turn precipitated the first Russian invasion of Ukraine in August 2014. A related argument, put forth by Samuel Green of King's College in London, looks at the warring parties' differing economic systems, noting how Ukraine's accession to the EU is fundamentally threatening to Moscow: "The expansion of EU influence puts insurmountable pressure on the Russian political economy to move from a rent-based, patronal model of wealth creation and power relations, to a system of institutionalized competition. Having satellite states that are governed in the same patronal mode as Russia gives Moscow geo-economic breathing space, adding years or decades to the system's viability. Losing those satellites removes those years and decades."²

REALPOLITIK

For realists, liberal interventionism and neglect of balance of power considerations set the stage for the current war. After 1990, inspired by the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western officials sought to expand democracy and capitalism into Eastern Europe, believing that realpolitik, or as Bill Clinton stated in 1992, "the cynical calculus of power politics," was now passé. Russia did not like Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic's accession into NATO but could not do anything to stop it. But Moscow's distrust of the West only increased when

1. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/02/15/path-out-of-ukraine-crisis/>

2. <https://tldrussia.substack.com/p/heres-looking-at-eu?s=r>

the Bush administration nominated Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO at the 2008 Bucharest Conference, and following the American invasion of Iraq and the ouster of Gaddafi in Libya, as these actions showed the United States' disdain for international law. Several analysts have, in hindsight, noted that the 2008 Bucharest summit was a critical point, even a "cardinal" sin in the words of one American diplomat. "[T]his declaration was the worst of all worlds," writes political scientist Samuel Charap, "It provided no increased security to Ukraine and Georgia, but reinforced Moscow's view that NATO was set on incorporating them."³

Economic historian Adam Tooze, author of the influential *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World*, offers a more nuanced interpretation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict - and the timing of the invasion, by examining Russia's growing economic power and emergence as a "strategic petrostate." Russia's foreign exchange reserves, estimated at \$400-\$600 billion, are among the highest globally and have given Putin room to maneuver and possibly withstand sanctions. It's not a coincidence that Putin began asserting expansionist impulses, trying to end Russia's post-1990 geopolitical retreat, in 2008, when foreign exchange reserves first peaked. Unlike Poland and the Baltic states, who had joined NATO and the EU, and stabilized economically, Ukraine has been racked by economic crises and intra-elite conflict. Thirty years after the end of the Cold War, Ukraine's GDP per capita is 20 percent lower than it was in 1990. As Tooze puts it, "Ukraine's elites have not come up with a formula for delivering the material basis of legitimacy. i.e., minimum stability and sustained economic growth."⁴ Putin decided to invade in early 2022 for various reasons: the Russian electoral clock (presidential elections are scheduled for 2024), ongoing tensions around the 2015 Minsk agreement, and Moscow's perceptions about where American grand strategy is in 2022. In Putin's view, the Biden administration (which will also be facing elections in 2024) signaled strongly that its priority is China. In withdrawing from Afghanistan in such an inchoate fashion, Washington also telegraphed that it was willing to pay the cost for retrenchment. Moscow perceived vacillation and a power vacuum.

AFRICAN RESPONSE

How have African states responded to this crisis? When Moscow recognized the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk, two breakaway regions in Ukraine, Martin Kimani, the Kenyan ambassador at the United Nations, denounced Russia's encroachment invoking Africa's colonial past and warning of "new forms of domination and oppression."⁵ Once the invasion began, however, official African condemnation was muted. On March 2, a vote took place at the United Nations about a resolution, "deploring in the strongest possible terms the aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine." Sixteen African states abstained, seven did not vote, while Eritrea voted against the resolution alongside Russia, Syria, North Korea, and Belorussia.⁶ The African Union expressed "extreme concern" by the invasion but offered no pointed criticism of Russia.

Similarly, Washington's erstwhile allies have been relatively restrained in voicing opposition to Russian policy in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia, for instance, spurned the Biden Administration's request to pump more oil to calm rising oil prices. The United Arab

3. <https://www.ft.com/content/74089d46-abb8-4daa-9ee4-e9e9e4c45ab1>

4. <https://adamtooze.substack.com/p/chartbook-68-putins-challenge-to?s=r>

5. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/23/europe/kenya-ukraine-russia-colonialism-intl/index.html>

6. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/03/world/africa/russia-ukraine-eritrea-africa.html>

Emirates, despite appeals from Washington, abstained from the UN Security Council resolution vote.⁷ In turn, Israel rebuffed a Ukrainian call for military assistance, fearing that Russia would respond by undermining Israeli air campaigns against militias in Syria.⁸

RUSSIA IN AFRICA

Russia has been steadily expanding her influence in Africa over the past two decades. Moscow has gained leverage in African capitals in part through weapons sales. Russia was a significant arms supplier during the Cold War. By 2000, Russian arms exporters were targeting African states again so that currently, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SPIRI), 49% of total arms imported into Africa come from Moscow (with the lion's share going to Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, and Angola.) An estimated 21 African states are recipients of Russian arms, just as Russian mercenaries, in the employ of the Wagner group, have been active in conflicts in Libya, Mozambique, the Central African Republic and Mali.⁹ Incidentally, Ukraine is one of the 10 largest arms exporters globally, and a significant percentage of Ukrainian arms goes to Africa. SPIRI estimates that 20% of Ukrainian arms exports between 2005 and 2009 went to African states, specifically Kenya, Chad, Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.¹⁰ But Russia has greater diplomatic leverage, for instance, in voting patterns at the United Nations. A report on Africa-Russian cooperation, published by the Moscow-based Higher School of Economics, observed that "None of the African countries introduced any sanctions against Russia [after 2014]. In the voting in the UN on Ukraine-related issues, most countries of the continent express a neutral position."¹¹

Some African states have been swift and blunt in their support for Russia. The president of the Central African Republic was quick to recognize Russia's declaration of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent states. In Uganda, Lt Gen Muhoozi Kainerugaba, son of Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni, minced no words: "The majority of mankind (that are non-white) support Russia's stand in Ukraine," adding "When the USSR parked nuclear-armed missiles in Cuba in 1962, the West was ready to blow up the world over it. When NATO does the same, they expect Russia to do differently." Hemetti, Sudan's deputy leader, flew to Moscow last weekend and met with Russian defense officials agreeing to bolster bilateral relations.¹² Other leaders have also calculated that the conflict in Europe's heartland and the ensuing geopolitical realignments may provide economic opportunities for the continent, especially as European states move away from Russian gas and oil. The president of Tanzania, Samia Suluhu Hassan, who is looking to raise \$30 billion in investment to exploit newly discovered oil in the Indian Ocean, said as much to The African Report: "Whether Africa or Europe or America, we are looking for markets."¹³ Senegal is also looking to benefit as Europe moves to diversify its energy sources, given the discovery of 40-trillion cubic feet of natural gas

7. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-diplomatic-push-for-ukraine-falters-in-a-middle-east-influenced-by-russia-11646214130>

8. <https://www.ft.com/content/8ee5718f-7f10-4fcf-92bd-c3b286d4983c>

9. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/tracking-arrival-russias-wagner-group-mali>

10. <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2011/sipri-background-papers/ukrainian-arms-supplies-sub-saharan-africa>

11. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-60506765>

12. <https://sudantribune.com/article255750/>

13. <https://www.theafricareport.com/178985/tanzania-president-samia-says-russia-ukraine-tension-an-opportunity-for-gas-sales/>

off Senegal's coast.¹⁴ Likewise, Nigeria is already providing liquified gas to Europe and has begun a joint project with Niger and Algeria to build a Trans-Saharan Gas Pipeline to supply European markets.¹⁵

Politically, Russia has portrayed herself as an efficient alternative to the liberal, neo-colonial West, for instance, sending mercenaries into the Sahel to highlight European failure to contain jihadist groups in the region.¹⁶ As historian Maxim Matusevich recently observed, "During the Cold War, the Soviets were trying to sell socialism to African nations while criticizing Western colonialism and imperialism;" nowadays, Russia's ideological calling card is right-wing nationalism. Other analysts disagree. The Nigerian-based publication *The Republic*, for instance, recently ran an extended piece on Russian African relations since the 1960s, noting that "Russian African cooperation has been rooted in shared values including decolonization, Afro-optimism, and Afro-intellectualism," and underlining that "Russia's foothold in many African countries, centers mutually beneficial and empowering relations, thereby creating a sense of comradeship, respect, and collaboration with African nations."¹⁷

FOOD SECURITY

African states are also in a vulnerable position. The invasion of Ukraine could affect food security and trigger a spike in oil prices, inflicting economic duress on African households. The Black Sea region is home to vast fertile farmlands, and war in the "breadbasket of the world" could threaten wheat and fertilizer supplies. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia and Ukraine, were net grain importers; nowadays, the two countries account for 29% of global wheat exports. The recent surge in wheat prices can jeopardize food security across Africa and Asia, especially in countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sudan, who in 2020 received fifty percent or more of their wheat from Russia or Ukraine. Egypt and Turkey import most of their wheat from the warring countries.¹⁸ As several analysts have recently noted, when Ukrainian restricted wheat exports in 2010, that led to a rise in food prices in the MENA region prompting protest, that culminated in the Arab Spring. Russia and Belarus are also major exporters of fertilizer, and the recent spike in price is threatening global crop production. As scholars Michael Puma and Megan Konar recently wrote, the sanctions regime placed on Russia should be carefully calibrated so as not to exacerbate food shortages in low-income countries.¹⁹ Egypt, the world's top importer of wheat is already looking for alternative grain suppliers. Morocco is currently hit by a severe drought that has led to a spike in food prices, raising fears of inflation.²⁰

Increased economic hardship and social discontent does not bode well for democratic governance in Africa, especially in light of the recent spate of military coups. Over the past 18 months, military leaders seized power in Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali and Sudan. The democratic recession could be exacerbated by the economic repercussions of the Russian-Ukraine war and Russia's aggressive anti-liberal diplomacy. Last week Russia's

14. <https://maroc-diplomatique.net/guerre-en-ukraine-positionnement-vers/>

15. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2022/02/25/what-does-the-war-in-ukraine-mean-for-africa/>

16. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-58009514>

17. <https://republic.com.ng/august-september-2020/a-changing-dynamic/>

18. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/25/world/middleeast/in-north-africa-ukraine-war-strains-economies-weakened-by-pandemic.html>

19. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/01/opinion/what-the-war-in-ukraine-means-for-the-worlds-food-supply.html>

20. <https://www.afdb.org/fr/countries/north-africa/morocco/morocco-economic-outlook>

defense minister Sergei Shoigu declared that Russia would host an “anti-Fascist” conference in August and proceeded to invite China, the UAE, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia. As South African journalists William Shoki and Sean Jacobs observed, “Anti-Fascist Summit” actually means “anti-liberal” summit, they wondered whether other African states would follow Ethiopian leader Abiy’s Ahmed’s and join this Russian-led coalition.²¹ The next few months will undoubtedly provide an answer.

21. <https://www.africasacountry.com/2022/03/the-russians-are-here>

About the Author, Hisham Aidi

Hisham Aidi focuses on cultural globalization and the political economy of race and social movements. He received his Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University and has taught at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), and at the Driskell Center for the Study of the African Diaspora at the University of Maryland, College Park. He is the author of *Redeploying the State* (Palgrave, 2008) a comparative study of neo-liberalism and labor movements in Latin America; and co-editor, with Manning Marable, of *Black Routes to Islam* (Palgrave, 2009). In 2002–2003, Aidi was a consultant for UNDP's Human Development Report. From 2000 to 2003, he was part of Harvard University's *Encarta Africana* project, and worked as a cultural reporter, covering youth culture and immigration in Harlem and the Bronx, for *Africana*, *The New African* and *ColorLines*. More recently, his work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The New Yorker* and *Salon*. Since 2007, he has been a contributing editor of *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Culture, Politics and Society*. Aidi is the author most recently of *Rebel Music: Race, Empire and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (Pantheon, 2014), a study of American cultural diplomacy. Aidi teaches the SIPA MIA survey course *Conceptual Foundations of International Politics* and seminars in SIPA's summer program.

About the Policy Center for the New South

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The PCNS advocates the concept of an open, responsible and proactive « new South »; a South that defines its own narratives, as well as the mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, within the framework of an open relationship with the rest of the world. Through its work, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give experts from the South a voice in the geopolitical developments that concern them. This positioning, based on dialogue and partnerships, consists in cultivating African expertise and excellence, capable of contributing to the diagnosis and solutions to African challenges.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author.

Policy Center for the New South

Building C, Suncity Complex, Al Bortokal Street, Hay Riad 10100 - Rabat

Email : contact@policycenter.ma

Phone : +212 (0) 537 54 04 04 / Fax : +212 (0) 537 71 31 54

Website : www.policycenter.ma

