

The Russo-Ukrainian War's Impact: Africa and a 'Neo-Cold War'

Written by Jideofor Adibe

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While the devastating impacts of the Russo-Ukrainian war following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 are well reported on, the secondary impact on Africa is less well understood – principally in economic terms, but also strategically. More thinking is also needed into the possible global configuration of power after the war where a contest over narratives may potentially swing (even partially) in Russia's favor. To examine these issues, this article reflects on the impact of the war on the African continent, the likely drivers of a world order beyond the war, and Africa's possible responses to it.

Beginning with sanctions, western sanctions against Russia present both threats and opportunities for Africa. For instance, some African countries are sensing opportunities from the European Union's decision to phase out dependence on Russian oil and gas over three years and are positioning themselves to seize those opportunities. Countries in this category include Tanzania that indicated that the war has led to growing Western interest in the country's gas reserves (which are among the largest in Africa); Senegal, where over 40 trillion cubic feet of natural gas were discovered between 2014 and 2017, and Nigeria, which is already a supplier of liquefied natural gas to several European markets, and which additionally is embarking with Niger and Algeria on a Trans-Saharan Gas Pipeline aimed at increasing exports of natural gas to European markets. In the same vein, South Africa, which is (after Russia) the world's second-largest producer of palladium (a critical input in automobiles and electronics), has reported a surge in demand.

Some of the sanctions imposed on Russia such as the exclusion of seven Russian banks from the SWIFT payment system alongside announcements by Visa and MasterCard that they were halting operations in Russia, could forewarn African countries that such measures could be visited on them if they have major policy, or strategic, differences with the West. This fear could potentially force African leaders to further push for the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS), a cross-border, financial market infrastructure, launched by the African Import-Export Bank (Afrexim) to facilitate payment transactions across Africa without reliance on the US dollar and Western payment systems. This is an opportunity for Africa because it would facilitate the realization of the integration goal of the African Union's African Continental Free Trade Area agreement, a pact connecting approximately 1.3 billion people across 54 countries with a combined GDP of \$3.4 trillion. According to the World Bank, AfCFTA, has the potential of increasing African exports by \$560 billion while boosting Africa's income by \$450 billion by 2035.

Despite these potential gains, there are several issues to consider. Firstly, there are concerns that the war may have disrupted, at least in the short run, Africa's recovery from COVID-19. Before the pandemic, many African economies were among the fastest growing in the world, with improvements recorded in the Human Development Index. For instance, by the end of 2021, sub-Saharan Africa's growth rate of 4.5 per-cent exceeded the projected growth rate of 3.7 per-cent. The Russo-Ukrainian war has led to skyrocketing energy prices and high inflation in many Western countries, which has in turn led to imported inflation and thus the increased cost of living in several African countries. In August 2022, for example, around 1,000 workers marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria, South Africa's seat of government, calling on the government to contain rising prices and cost of living. In Nigeria the annual inflation rate for August 2022 was 20.52% – the highest since 2005.

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Since 2015, Russia has signed over 20 bilateral military cooperation agreements with African states. There are now fears that some of these deals may be in jeopardy, at least in the short to medium term, as Russia focuses on its military campaign in Ukraine. Similarly, the over \$4 billion in exports from Ukraine to Africa is also impacted. In the same vein, Russia's energy deals in Africa – mostly through state-owned companies like Gazprom, Lukoil, Rostec and Rosatom – could be adversely affected in the short term as the country diverts its resources to the war.

The war has also affected food supply in Africa, especially in regard to wheat and sunflower products. It has been estimated that between 2018 and 2020, Africa imported US\$3.7 billion worth of wheat (32% of the continent's total wheat imports) from Russia, and another US\$1.4 billion from Ukraine (12% of the continent's wheat imports). Even before the war, food prices in several African countries were already at a ten-year high as a result of disruptions to food production and supply chains caused by or exacerbated by climate change, COVID-19, and crime. The war has further escalated food prices, worsening the crisis of food insecurity.

The war has equally affected the cost of fertilizer because the sanctions imposed on Russia (the world's largest exporter) have constrained its ability to export. Between 24 February 2022 and 3 March 2022, futures prices for urea fertilizer jumped by 32%, whilst diammonium phosphate (DAP), futures rose by 13%. Given the importance of fertilizer in agricultural production, there are concerns that escalating costs could exacerbate the food insecurity facing the continent.

The Russo-Ukrainian war also raises the issue of African students in Ukraine who fled the war. While some of those affected, especially medical students, were offered places in countries like Grenada and Hungary, the war has left many with difficult choices, with some of the affected students facing the prospect of not qualifying at all. In Nigeria for instance, many of the student returnees from Ukraine complain that as a result of the war, their schools have refused to release their transcripts or certificates to enable them to transfer to institutions in other locations.

At a virtual Chatham House workshop in July 2021 entitled 'Russia's Quest for Global Influence – Africa', my presentation posed the question of whether Russia's increasing engagement with Africa could revive the Truman Doctrine – an American foreign policy strategy which made containing Soviet a priority for the United States. Announced by President Harry Truman on 12 March 1947, it led, in 1949, to the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However the war ends, with Sweden and Finland applying to join NATO; Switzerland announcing that in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine it would seek closer defence and security ties with the European Union and NATO while preserving its traditional neutrality, and the West showing uncommon solidarity in their opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the distrust between both sides is likely to intensify. This could lead to what can best be called a 'neo-Cold War' order. However, unlike the Cold War that was an ideological contest between capitalism/liberal democracy and socialism/communism, the projected neo-Cold War order (if it materializes) is likely to be driven by a contest between those supporting the current Western-dominated global configuration of power and those opposed to it – led by China, Russia and others that traditionally hold grievances against the West.

In August 2022, US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi defied warnings from Beijing and landed in a military aircraft in Taiwan. With the visit, Pelosi became the highest US official to arrive on the island for an official visit since 1997. Pelosi's visit was condemned by China which saw it as a deliberate violation of its One China principle. It escalated the tension between China and the US, which could make a peaceful resolution of the Russo-Ukrainian war more difficult as it may push China into a bolder support of Russia in the war in the hope that Russia would in turn support it in its escalating tension with the US. Ali El-Hefny, Egypt's former ambassador to China was for instance quoted as saying: "The main purpose of such practices [visit to Taiwan by Pelosi] is to affect China's rise that we have been witnessing over the past four decades and the progress made by China in certain fields, particularly high tech, artificial intelligence, space technology and other fields...." Several opinions in Africa – including from Eritrea, Zambia and Kenya – equally saw Pelosi's visit as provocative just as many in the continent seem to buy into the Russian narrative on why it invaded Ukraine.

The crucial question is whether Pelosi's Taiwan visit and the critical opinions about it in Africa could push the continent into the side of Russia and China in a possible neo-Cold War order. With President Joe Biden also

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promising that the USA will defend Taiwan militarily if China tries to annex it, and China unlikely to give up its claim on the island, this could exacerbate the existing trade tension between China and the USA, with all its implications. For instance, it is feared that U.S. tariffs against China coupled with domestic and external pressures could slow down Chinese production, reducing in turn China's demand for raw materials from Africa. Of course African countries could also benefit from the US-China rivalry if they are able to avoid a zero-sum game option when tapping into the rivalry between the two countries, and if they can adopt measures that strategically play one power against the other while implementing long term domestic policies that would help them maximize the benefits obtained from such a rivalry.

In many ways the contest over narratives which is likely to drive a projected neo-Cold War order after the Ukraine war has already begun. While the West justifies its support for Ukraine primarily on the need to protect Ukraine's sovereignty from an alleged aggression by a bigger power, Russia blames it mainly on the West's eastward expansion of NATO. Russia questions the rationale for that expansion especially given that its Cold War counterpart, the Warsaw Pact, was officially dissolved on July 1st 1991.

Russia's justifications for its military operations in Ukraine seem to resonate well with some African countries. For instance, on 2 March 2022 17 African countries abstained from the United Nations vote condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, representing almost half of all countries that sat on the fence. In the same vein on 7 April 2022, Nigeria, alongside 21 other African countries abstained from voting to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council over its invasion of Ukraine despite the fact that 93 members of the Council voted in favor of the suspension. Similarly, on October 12th 2022, the United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to condemn Russia's purported annexation of the four eastern Ukrainian regions of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson as parts of Russia. The resolution called on the international community not to recognize any of Russia's annexation claims and demanded their "immediate reversal". The resolution was supported by 143 countries, while 35 states including China, India and 19 African countries abstained.

Like in the Cold War era, the projected neo-Cold War order (if it materializes) would present both opportunities and threats to African countries: on the one hand, it could offer smart African leaders bigger latitude for bargaining with both sides while on the flipside, it could accelerate the current democratic reversals in the continent. This is because countries that are treated as pariahs for unconstitutional changes of government in the continent could find company in the welcoming embrace of Russia and China which normally claim that they do not interfere in the internal affairs of African countries.

The impact of the war on Russia-Africa relations will largely depend on how the eventual end of the war affects the distribution of power in the global system. If Ukraine becomes Russia's Vietnam then we may see a Russian retreat from its attempts to project its power and a return to the self-doubt and identity crisis that it had at the end of the Cold War in 1991. This scenario would consolidate the current Western-dominated global configuration of power and many of the deals Russia entered with Africa may suffer as Russia retreats. If this happens, the contest over narratives will also swing in favor of the West since history, as they say, is written from the perspective of the victor. The prestige of Ukraine on the international system would also be boosted under this scenario. If on the other hand, Russia is seen as emerging victorious from the war, it will become emboldened and will likely scout for non-Western allies more aggressively in an attempt to create a new sphere of influence outside Eastern Europe. In such a scenario, some African countries may strive to forge closer relations with Russia – and so so not necessarily at the expense of relations with traditional Western allies.

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