Russia-Ukraine War and The Future of Africa-European Relations: Is Europe Dividing Africa?

Ukertor Gabriel Moti
Dean, School of Postgraduate Studies and Director, Abuja Centre for European Studies (ACES)
Department of Public Administration, University of Abuja, Nigeria

Abstract:
The objective of the Africa-European relations is to create a conducive space for solidarity with former colonies to foster security, peace and sustainable prosperity for citizens of the African Union and the European Union, now and in the future, bringing together people, regions and organisations. In the wake of the current Russian-Ukraine war, the European Union (EU) has sought to cash in on its multilateral relationships, including with Africa. Africa has been called upon to support the EU against Russia. While most African countries have decided to remain neutral in the Russia-Ukraine war, it is no longer hidden that the war has already created blocks in the continent, with many countries quietly siding with warring parties. Will the conflict eventually divide Africa into two blocks? One in favour, and the other against Russia. The war is testing the neutrality of various countries in Africa. The question is, is Europe dividing Africa? What will the future of Africa-European relations be in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine war? This paper interrogates these issues as it explores how African countries navigate between neutrality and siding with warring parties. The paper will rely on qualitative research method to gather in-depth insights into this emerging problem.

Keywords: Africa-European relations, Security, Sustainable prosperity, Russia-Ukraine war, Neutrality.

Introduction
On February 24, the world witnessed the full-fledged invasion of Ukraine led by Russian President Vladimir Putin and his forces. Described as one of the most aggressive military acts seen in Europe since World War II, the military invasion of Ukraine has had far more geopolitical consequences than expected. For Africa, which is yet to fully recover from the socio-economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine conflict poses another major threat to the global economy, with many African countries being directly affected. Russia’s war in Ukraine has disrupted Africa’s promising recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic by rising food and fuel prices, disrupting the trade of goods and services, tightening the fiscal space, constraining green transitions, and reducing the flow of development finance on the continent.

While most attention has focused on the implications of this crisis for trans-Atlantic relations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) unity, the invasion of Ukraine presents a significant test of the concept of Pan-African solidarity and regionalism. In recent years, the set of institutions intended to represent this solidarity, from the African Union (AU) to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as well as the...
Southern African Development Community (SADC), have been undermined by conflicting views among heads of state over how to handle the spate of coups in the Sahel and rising insurgencies across the continent.

More generally, though, the conflict has put many African leaders in a difficult position and is attempting to forge a neutral position. South Africa’s neutrality has frustrated the European Union (EU) and Ukrainian diplomats, who nonetheless recognise its special role with Russia via the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) grouping of middle-income countries. Only a week after the invasion, the South African government took a stronger stance, calling for Russia to withdraw its forces. Significantly, the Nigerian government only noted its surprise about the invasion but neither condemned it nor called for a cessation of hostilities.

More broadly, African governments have shown a growing interest in building relationships with both the West and the East in order to diversify trade, investment, and aid options. Russia has reasserted itself in recent years through both security and economic influence on the continent. China, which appears to have tacitly condoned the invasion, has, of course, been a major presence in the region for the last decade, investing close to $3 billion in 2021 alone.

There is minimal interest in returning to an era when African leaders needed to show allegiance to a Cold War power. Yet, given the outright invasion of Ukraine and the violation of international law, the key question now is how African governments will maintain their relationships with their diverse set of external partners and with one another as the geopolitical context dramatically shifts.

After one year, the European Union (EU) is struggling with Africa’s lack of unequivocal support for the West’s efforts, including at the United Nations, to condemn Russia. For many African countries, this expectation feels misplaced, if not offensive. For them, the EU’s actions following the Russian war in Ukraine show the double standards of Europe when it comes to efforts against military aggression and peace negotiations.

Objectives of the Paper

The objective of the paper is to examine the Russia-Ukraine war from an African perspective, the pressure on African leaders to support either side, the response of these leaders, and its effect on the future of Africa-European relations within the context of whether Europe is dividing Africa, reminiscent of the Berlin Conference of 1884, which sought the partitioning of Africa, establishing rules to amicably divide resources among the Western countries at the expense of the African people.

Methodology

The methodology adopted is mainly qualitative content analysis, relying on published literature to gain in-depth insights into the subject matter and make meaning of the African response.

African Response

How have African states responded to this crisis? According to Aidi (2022), when Moscow recognised 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." 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, and Eritrea voted against the resolution alongside Russia, Syria, North Korea, and Belorussia. The African Union expressed "extreme concern" about the invasion but offered no pointed criticism of Russia. Africa did not speak with one voice.
Russia has been steadily expanding its 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 percent 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 (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2022).

Incidentally, Ukraine is one of the 10 largest arms exporters globally, and a significant percentage of Ukrainian arms go to Africa. SPIRI estimates that 20 percent of Ukrainian arms exports between 2005 and 2009 went to African states, specifically Kenya, Chad, Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. 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 on the continent express a neutral position." (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2022).

Some African states have been swift and blunt in their support for Russia. The President of the Central African Republic was quick to recognise Russia’s declaration of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent states. In Uganda, Lt. Gen. Muhozi Kainerugaba, son of Uganda’s President Yoweri Museveni, minced no words: "The majority of mankind (that are non-white) supports 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." Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemetti), Sudan’s Deputy Leader, flew to Moscow and met with Russian defense officials, agreeing to bolster bilateral relations.

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, Europe, or America, we are looking for markets." 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. 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 (Norbrook, 2022).

Politically, Russia has portrayed herself as an efficient alternative to the liberal, neo-colonial West, for instance by sending mercenaries into the Sahel to highlight European failure to contain jihadist groups in the region. As historian Maxim Matusevich recently observed, "During the Cold War, the Soviets were trying to sell socialism to African nations while criticising Western colonialism and imperialism; nowadays, Russia’s ideological calling card is rightwing 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 decolonisation, 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." (Vayez, 2020).
Africa’s Non-Alignment

A lack of principled consistency in solving conflicts makes Africa’s non-aligned position look like short-sighted opportunism. According to Handy and Djilo (2022), since Russia invaded Ukraine in February, the United States and European governments have been scrutinising Africa’s reactions. Views from the continent vary from country to country, with many states taking a ‘non-aligned’ position. How should this stance be understood in a multipolar and highly interdependent world?

African votes at the United Nations (UN) on the war revealed sharp divisions between countries. Djibouti endorsed the UN resolution for Russia to end its offensive, while Algeria, Tanzania, and South Africa underscored the importance of diplomacy without condemning Russia’s actions. The high number of abstentions was widely interpreted as a sign of Russian influence or evidence of the growing anti-Westernism of African governments and citizens. This view wrongly assumes that Africa is a political monolith. It also suggests an underlying expectation by the West that states on the continent should align with them because of the West’s preeminence in development and humanitarian aid and their shared historical past.

Does Africa’s tentative stance on the war show a rejection of key African Union (AU) principles, such as respect for territorial integrity, the inviolability of borders, and the peaceful settlement of disputes? African states have a cynical view of a global order whose rules seem to be determined by the West. The joint visit of Senegalese President Macky Sall and AU Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat to Russia in June 2022 increased Western perceptions of a Russia-leaning ‘neutrality’. Sall said his trip aimed to minimise the conflict’s impact on Africa’s supply of agricultural products and fertilisers, but Western diplomats were not convinced. The lukewarm reception received by President Volodymyr Zelensky when he addressed the AU’s Bureau of Heads of States fueled perceptions that African countries were indifferent to Ukraine’s occupation (Handy & Djilo, 2022).

In recent years, Russia has used various means to disseminate anti-Western propaganda that aligns with African people’s deep anti-colonial and anti-Western resentment. The legacy of 1960s and 1970s Third-Worldism still shapes the views of Africa’s governments and citizens. Russia’s colonial past did not extend to Africa, and its backing of some liberation movements means that Russia elicits more support than Ukraine from Africans. Ukraine is often seen as a pawn of the West.

Western surprise at most African countries’ limited emotion towards Russia’s invasion and Africa’s neutral stand point to self-centeredness on both sides. The West wants its African partners to share its condemnation of Russia. African states, meanwhile, cling to their monopoly on victimhood and historical resentment of Western dominance in world affairs. To justify their indifference towards the Ukraine conflict, some African authorities compare it to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq or Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi’s ousting by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 2011. An infringement of international law (in Iraq) or a generous interpretation of a UN Security Council resolution (in Libya) is considered similar to Russia’s war of occupation in Ukraine—an infringement of the international order.

A Deeper Divide?

While some African states propose a rules-based international order, others favour coercion and force. How do African states benefit from proclaiming non-alignment? Although the conflict reveals the extent of the continent’s dependence on grain and fertiliser from Ukraine and Russia, it does not compare with the Western aid that enables African countries to function. The increasing price of hydrocarbons is affecting Africa’s most fragile states. While European countries-imposed sanctions against Russia despite the costs to their energy supplies, many African countries feel less able to adopt a principled and values-based foreign policy (Handy & Djilo, 2022).
The divide, however, runs deeper, extending to perceptions about the international order itself. Western states defend a rules-based system in which they are preeminent. This difference in outlook may explain Africa’s leniency towards Russia, even though the latter has violated a cardinal AU principle on territorial integrity.

African states’ position is not without contradictions, which is not surprising given the many norms and values on a continent of 54 states. They aspire to an international order based on rules, not force, while at the same time sympathising with Russia and China, which challenge this order for different reasons. African divisions on peace and security were already visible in responses to Libya in 2011 and Burundi in 2015.

These contradictions illustrate the crisis of African multilateralism. While some countries propose a rules-based international order that favours consistency and predictability, others prefer coercion and force. This suggests a dividing line in the AU, but that line is blurred. For example, while some states pushed for Chad’s suspension from the AU following the unconstitutional transition in April 2021, the same countries pushed back against Zimbabwe’s suspension following the 2018 coup that overthrew late President Robert Mugabe.

Divisions on peace and security were already visible in responses to the 2011 Libyan uprising and the cancellation of the Peace and Security Council (PSC) decision calling for military intervention to stop the 2015 conflict in Burundi. What would the AU’s reaction be if a powerful African country invaded another? The precedent of the Organisation of African Unity’s resounding silence during the military escalation between Cameroon and Nigeria regarding the Bakassi Peninsula in the late 1990s did not foster optimism. Neither did the PSC’s ambiguous position on the maritime dispute between Somalia and Kenya (Handy & Djilo, 2022).

Rather than schadenfreude, or the vengeful anti-imperialism that seems to guide many Africans, the Ukraine war should inspire a self-assessment of Africa’s ability to agree on how to solve conflicts. In the absence of principled consistency, non-alignment may look like short-sighted opportunism.

**Pan-African Hurts?**

African countries are fused together geographically, and there are strong historic cultural ties that bind people together. However, this war is hurting Pan-Africanism. Agbelusi (2022) explains how being a Pan-African hurts. In early March, the United Nations General Assembly voted on a resolution demanding Russia immediately stop its military operations in Ukraine. Out of 193 member states, 141 voted in support of the resolution, five voted against it, 35 abstained, and 12 did not vote at all. Of the 54 African member states, Eritrea voted against the resolution, 16 African countries, including South Africa, abstained; and nine other countries did not vote at all.

In all, about half (26) of the 54 member states in Africa chose the path of neutrality in some form. So why did African countries not vote overwhelmingly to support the resolution? There are five key reasons: skepticism towards the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and its motives; growing reliance among some countries on Moscow for military support in the past decade; growing dependence on wheat and fertiliser imports; and a sense that this is a return to the Cold War. African countries have based their decisions on strategic calculations about how the conflict will affect them rather than on the humanitarian catastrophe arising from the conflict. This is in contrast to the European Union, which has been able to converge and take a unanimous stance on the conflict (Agbelusi, 2022).

That impartiality is problematic for Macron, who visited Cameroon, Benin, and Guinea-Bissau during his African tour. "I have seen too much hypocrisy, particularly on the African continent," Macron announced as he began his three-nation tour. "And—I’m saying this very calmly—some are not calling it a war when it is one and saying they don’t know who started it because they have diplomatic pressures."
Macron was not the only high-profile visitor to Africa that week. In East Africa, Uganda laid out the red carpet for Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who was on a four-nation tour to win the continent’s support for Moscow’s war on Ukraine. Lavrov seemed determined to outwit Macron in a battle for the hearts and minds of African leaders. Where Macron was preachy and took the high moral ground on the position of African leaders and the war in Ukraine, Lavrov embraced his hosts and counterparts and did not question their ethical compass. “We appreciate the considered African position as to the situation in and around Ukraine,” Lavrov wrote in a newspaper column published in Egypt, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Uganda, and Ethiopia, the four countries he toured during his visit. 

"Although unprecedented in its scale, the pressure from beyond has not brought our friends to join the anti-Russian sanctions. Such an independent path deserves deep respect," Lavrov added. When Lavrov finished his meeting with Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, the African leader praised Russia, describing Moscow as a "partner" in the struggle against colonialism going back a century.

"If Russia makes mistakes, then we tell them," Museveni said, referring to his own participation in student demonstrations against the Soviet Union’s crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968. "We don’t believe in being enemies of somebody’s enemy," he added (Agbelusi, 2022).

Museveni has in the past enjoyed cordial relations with the West, and Uganda is set to assume the chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement, a global body formed during the Cold War era by states seeking to avoid the geopolitical polarisation at that time.

Supporting Russia

Museveni is not the only African leader the Russians appear to have won over. Even countries that Lavrov did not include in his visit are rooting for Moscow. Zimbabwe, which has frosty diplomatic relations with the West, is in Russia’s corner on the issue of Ukraine. This is most apparent in state media coverage of the Ukraine conflict. The Herald, a state-run daily, takes its cue from Moscow’s description of the war by describing Russia’s attack on Ukraine as a "special military operation". Zimbabwe’s ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (Zanu PF), enjoys historic relations with Russia dating back to the 1960s, when the party was fighting for independence from Britain. To this day, Zanu PF officials address each other as "comrades," a term state media in the country reserves for top government and Zanu PF officials.

South Africa, the Southern African economic powerhouse, also seems to be on the Kremlin’s side. Like Zimbabwe’s Zanu PF, the ruling African National Congress (ANC), has a long-established relationship with Russia that dates back to the country’s struggle against apartheid. Russia provided military support and training to a number of nationalist forces on the continent during the period of decolonisation. African support for Russia was illustrated in March at the UN General Assembly when 17 out of Africa’s 54 nations abstained from voting on the war in Ukraine. The African contingent amounted to half of all abstentions recorded in the vote.

What does it mean for Nigeria?

The Nigerian government has said it received surprise reports of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. The West African country, however, did not condemn the Russian invasion, unlike many countries like the U.S. and the NATO allies, which condemned the invasion and imposed sanctions on Russia. Nigeria’s stance is that Russia’s attacks are targeting only military installations in Ukraine. However, Nigeria’s federal government posits that it was willing to evacuate its citizens from Ukraine (Agbelusi, 2022).

The Federal Government met with envoys of the G7 countries in Nigeria, expressing worries over the Russian-Ukraine conflict and calling for peace to resolve the conflict. Minister of Foreign Affairs, Geoffrey Onyeama, met with the envoys in Abuja, saying that the Nigerian government
called for peace and the use of diplomacy in resolving all differences. Onyeama said Nigeria does not condone the approach of aggression by Russia, calling on Russia to pull back. Russia has played an increasing role on the African continent in diverse ways: trade, aid, military training, and paramilitary security. The future of this long-lasting relationship will be tested by the current crisis between Russia and Ukraine.

The Nigerian Minister of State for Petroleum Resources, Timipre Sylva, was asked by a Bloomberg reporter if Nigeria can heed the calls from the United States to replace Russia’s gas once sanctions begin to take place. The honorable Minister responded by saying he was not privy to that conversation and reiterated that Nigeria does not have the infrastructure for that gas distribution. Herein lies the missed opportunity. Nigeria makes up the top 10 countries with the largest gas reserves in the world, and as reported late in 2021, the Nigerian government discovered 206 trillion cubic feet of gas accidentally while searching for oil. Nigeria has failed to live up to its title as the Giant of Africa and the Largest Oil producer in Africa. The country has missed out on oil earnings because of underperforming production capacity (Agbelusi, 2022).

The recognition of breakaway parts in Ukraine would bring light to the Biafra agitation that has rocked Nigeria for a couple of years now. The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB, is a nationalist separatist group in Nigeria that aims to restore the Republic of Biafra, a country that seceded from Nigeria prior to the Nigerian Civil War and later rejoined Nigeria after its defeat by the Nigerian military. IPOB's consistent calls for separation have seen different "mini-governments in the South-Eastern states. There have been unauthorised stay-at-home orders in solidarity with the separation calls. The growing secession movement would affect the sovereignty and legitimacy of the Nigerian government, as we have seen in Ukraine.

‘New Cold War’

Ronald Chipaike, a lecturer in peace and governance at Bindura University in Zimbabwe, said Lavrov’s visit was designed "to cement relations that have historically been premised on an anti-imperialism axis since the days of the Cold War". Stephen Chan, a professor of world politics at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), said the visits by Macron and Lavrov demonstrated the increased need to woo Africa at a time of growing global tension and a potential "new Cold War" (Abrahams, 2022).

"These countries are opening diplomatic overtures at the start of what looks likely to be a new Cold War," Chan told Al Jazeera via email. The West now realises that African support will come in handy at some stage, he said. "France, Russia, the US, and China are all courting African countries—both for diplomatic support in organs like the UN but also as economic and political allies and partners. But there is a limit to this first stage," Chan said. (Abrahams, 2022).

Chan believes the recent diplomatic developments are part of efforts to set the stage for the "second and third stages" of a "rivalry from which Africa can benefit if it plays its cards astutely and does not rush towards the first courtier with what seems like a 'good deal'."

The race to win over Africa is becoming more heated by the day. Even the United States, which for years appeared uninterested in sub-Saharan Africa, has joined the diplomatic fray. Antony Blinken, the US Secretary of State, visited South Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Rwanda. During his three-country trip, he appealed to "governments, communities, and peoples" across the continent to embrace Washington’s vision of democracy, openness, and economic partnership.

The tour was seen as an attempt by the US to limit Russia and China’s influence on the continent, but Blinken insisted that Washington does not see Africa as the "latest playing field in a competition between great powers". The US is not "trying to outdo anyone else" in Africa, he said. "This is not our demand or insistence on
democracy; it’s what people in Africa want; it’s clear in poll after poll that they want openness on an individual basis, as communities, and to choose their own path (as nations),” Blinken said in Pretoria. (Abrahams, 2022).

China, on the other hand, does not care much for human rights and democracy in Africa. Beijing has opted to work with Africa’s strongmen leaders and offers assistance without criticism or calls for reforms. This approach has augured well with some despotic governments, such as Zimbabwe. Lavrov did not pledge financial assistance during his visit, while Washington promised a total of $1.3 billion to ameliorate the effects of hunger on the continent. France also promised to help with its French-led Food and Agriculture Resilience Mission (FARM) initiative to help African agriculture.

A Russia-Africa summit is scheduled for October 2023 in Ethiopia, and it remains to be seen what it will bring in terms of aid. "What we can draw from all this is that the Cold War never really ended. It has just been presenting itself in a different way over the years," Bindura University's Chipaike told Al Jazeera. There are just more players now than there were during the bipolar political order of the Cold War, he said (Al Jazeera, 2023).

Piers Pigou, the International Crisis Group’s senior consultant for Southern Africa, said there is increased interest in the continent from "a growing number of actors vying for a market share of the African economy", including the European Union, a post-Brexit United Kingdom, and "France trying to resuscitate its Francophone relations". This competition presents opportunities for Africa if handled skilfully, Pigou told Al Jazeera (Al Jazeera, 2023).

Africa should avoid being pushed into partisan political alignments, especially when several countries are pursuing a non-aligned position with "various degrees of sophistication with respect to its messaging and public reasoning". Kenya has articulated that non-aligned position very well, Pigou said, while South Africa has been more muted. "There is increased realisation from international powers of the need to pay more attention to Africa. And this has accelerated an already growing competition for engagement that we have seen."

Migration and the Refugee Hierarchy

According to Kumar, Knoll, and Veron (2022), the refugee hierarchy was on display from the first days of the conflict, when African students fleeing Ukraine were trapped at Ukraine’s borders. Countries like Poland, Denmark, and Ireland demonstrated a deeply politicised stance, rooted in several decades of anti-immigrant rhetoric. This had particular implications for Africans, given that the top countries of origin of Ireland’s asylum seekers in 2022 include Somalia, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Algeria. The ill-treatment of Africans trying to leave Ukraine came at a time of already strained relations between Africa and Europe and was strongly condemned by the African Union as well as individual countries.

This led to an impression on the African side of a lack of consistency as well as ‘double standards’, given the strong stance applied to migrants from Africa. Combined with the significant impact of the war on food security in Africa, Western reactions to the invasion have rekindled long-running grievances that much of Africa has had with the West, which are likely to undermine the EU-Africa partnership going forward. A serious re-assessment of the EU’s migration and asylum policies, together with a much more honest appraisal of how Africa perceives the EU’s response to this crisis, will be key if Europe is to get the migration dialogue back on track and achieve a stronger partnership with Africa that it needs (Kumar, Knoll & Veron, 2022).

EU-Africa Peace and Security Partnership

In response to the Russian invasion, the EU has spent millions to support Ukraine’s defence. The EU has channeled much of this support through the European Peace Facility (EPF), the
successor of the African Peace Facility (APF), in addition to efforts by EU and NATO member states. In a shift from the past, the EPF is now used to provide lethal weapons and ammunition, something that was impossible under the APF. Since February 2022, the EU has spent €3.6 billion for Ukraine under the EPF, including (lethal and non-lethal) military equipment, training through the European Union Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM), as well as field hospitals and medical equipment, demining, and engineering equipment (Desmidt, 2023).

Desmidt (2022) continues that, by comparison, spending on Africa has plateaued. Since 2021, the EPF has provided some €445 million in support to bilateral armies (including the Rwanda Defence Force active in Mozambique) and regional initiatives (such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force). None of the assistance measures adopted for Africa include support for lethal assets or weapons. For now, the budget for actions in Africa seems to be capped at €600 million for the period 2022–2024, suggesting a top-up will be needed in the future. African actors, including the AU, are increasingly asking questions about the future of EU support for African peace and security efforts.

These questions turned louder in light of the decreasing funding for long-term African-led peace support operations such as AMISOM/ATMIS in Somalia; and the withdrawal of a number of large special operations, such as French operation Barkhane and the EU’s Takuba Task Force (which included troops from nine EU member states), following the coup in Mali in February 2022. This comes in addition to existing concerns about the lack of earmarked funds for Africa under the EPF and the loss of a mutual and formal agreement mechanism between the EU and the AU since the launch of the EPF.

The situation in the Central Sahel is emblematic of the cooling of relations between the EU and Africa. There, the relationship between the EU and governments led by military juntas has further deteriorated since the military junta in Mali has moved closer to Russia, with the growing involvement of the Russian mercenary army Wagner Group. The group might soon start operating in Burkina Faso, too. These developments are not new; the Wagner group has been active in Africa for a long time, but they have been looked at with more scrutiny in Brussels and European capitals since the Russian invasion.

The invasion put a spotlight on the activities of the Wagner Group. The group’s profile became public, whereas the Russian leadership had previously denied Wagner’s existence. Wagner’s partners in Africa, too, kept the group’s operations secret, often denying the presence of Wagner troops in their countries. Many policymakers in Brussels, but also in European capitals and embassies in Africa, see Russia and Wagner’s growing expansion in Africa, including in the Sahel, as a direct threat to the EU in Africa. Russia has provided political support to a handful of African governments that have been less aligned with EU values, presenting an alternative model of governance (Desmidt, 2023). African actors have entered an ‘era of choice’, with emerging players increasing their political as well as security and defence cooperation with Africa.

Beyond direct and financial support, there is the more fundamental question of addressing the unease that has settled into EU-Africa relations and whether the partnership on peace and security is still fit to tackle a range of long-standing issues. The Russian war in Ukraine will last longer than many may wish for, putting pressure on the EU’s peace and security spending. But beyond money talks, the EU is overly focused on the competition presented by others rather than reflecting on its ‘own priorities towards Africa, and addressing past and present shortcomings’.

African partners understand that the EU’s security priorities have shifted since the invasion of Ukraine. For example, in the Sahel, there is a sense that the EU is withdrawing amidst a spiraling security crisis, even if reactions from within the region are mixed. Mali asked France to pull out its troops and, at the same time, said it felt ‘stabbed in the back’ by France’s withdrawal in its fight against terrorism. Others
have welcomed the withdrawal of French special operations (Desmidt, 2023).

Much of the attention has now shifted to Niger, where France has partially reorganised its military activities (also met with some citizen protest). The EU launched a military partnership mission in Niger to fight terrorist groups. Since the withdrawal of Barkhane, but also the EU’s Takuba Task Force, in Mali, the EU has not yet announced an overhaul, or even a reboot, of its overall strategy towards the Sahel. France announced a new Africa strategy ahead of Macron’s tour of four central African countries, vowing ‘a new era’ of more limited but tailored French military engagement in Africa.

The fallout from the war in Ukraine should be better managed to avoid sacrificing the EU-Africa peace and security partnership. Both sides must find ways to manage the negative implications and their diverging views better. This can be done by being clearer on what each expects from the partnership to respond to various security challenges in Africa, but also globally, and what concrete steps will be taken to live up to stated commitments.

**Conclusion and Future Outlook**

One year after Russia's war started in Ukraine, one thing is clear: to avoid sacrificing the EU-Africa peace and security partnership, both parties need to manage its fallout better and stop shying away from frank discussions. This can be done by being clearer on what each one expects from the partnership on security challenges in Africa and globally and working towards an effective partnership fit to weather rough times. African states are in a vulnerable position. The fluidity of geopolitics has left many African states between a rock and a hard place.

Russia’s influence in Africa is likely to be diminished by any outcome of the war in Ukraine. In the event of a loss to Ukraine, Russia may ultimately be forced to retreat, regroup, consolidate its assets, and pull back from Africa. This would leave many authoritarian regimes on the continent deeply exposed to challenges from their rivals and would ultimately be more destabilising for citizens in these countries.

The West should recall that African countries will not accept being told with whom they can and cannot engage. Western governments will need to take Africa into their confidence regarding geopolitical matters rather than berate the sovereign stances of countries that feel unseen and neglected by them.

The split in the way African countries voted to condemn Russia’s actions is an important departure point for an exploration of the changing nature of Africa’s ties to Russia. Few have questioned whether the nonaligned stances of these countries were tacit refusals to be used as supporting actors in public displays of condemnation by the United States and European Union (EU), to distract from their inability to offer meaningful practical or military support.

It should also be recognised that Africa’s choice of partnerships has evolved in recent years, from China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to the US Strategy toward sub-Saharan Africa. The EU-AU relationship is therefore just one opportunity for the continent, among others. Africa and Europe have been confronted with major emergencies in recent years, from COVID-19 to the war in Ukraine. These challenges have impacted trust and partnership, but they have also brought opportunities for collaboration. This new context offers a moment to reshape the agenda with a stronger focus on shared concerns and shift from "how Europe can help Africa" or "how Europe underdeveloped Africa" to "how Africa and Europe can work together".

Additionally, the Africa-Europe relationship can no longer be shaped by the neighbouring countries (the Mediterranean) or those with a colonial past (France, Germany, Belgium, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Italy). It is time to give more space to other European and African countries to increase their bilateral engagement across continents, such as Poland and the Baltic States. This will lead to a more diverse and inclusive approach with better results.
A final way to strengthen the relationship is through systematic and long-term efforts, including training of diplomats and officials, building diplomatic services, and encouraging the emergence of and strengthening of Centres for European Studies in Higher institutions on the African continent, an initiative that has begun with the Platform for African European Studies (PAES), where both Africa and Europe will benefit from systematic and evidence-based research and teaching on the European Union, its politics, institutions, and cultures within Africa from an African perspective.

References


