

## **The new power play in Africa: Russia, China and the shifting sands of influence**

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**Africa's geopolitical landscape is changing, driven by the active involvement of Russia and China. Russia has had a hand in Africa for some time, but China's recent involvement is further impacting historic colonial structures and**



**patterns. Vestiges of Africa's colonial past are still evident in its regimented zones of influence and in the political and economic structures that remain among African nations, but the scenario is evolving.**

The two superpowers' trade in infrastructure investment and military co-operation is cementing diplomatic alliances with African countries and these appear to be providing successful alternatives to Western involvement. This is reshaping Africa, its international relations and the structure of global power.

### **Historical legacy: the French and British influence in Africa**

The legacy of both British and French rule, established through the creation of colonies across Africa in the late nineteenth century, shaped European political structures at the cost of local traditions and governance. French, for example, remains the official spoken language in twenty-nine African countries.

Many African nations gained independence, but these political changes were complicated and multifaceted, resulting in enduring connections with France and Britain. Ongoing relationships with former colonial powers have faced criticism, with many questioning Western influence over the geopolitical and economic affairs of the African states.

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## **The rise of new players: Russia and China's entry into Africa**

In the past few decades, Russia and China have intensified their involvement and presence in Africa. Russia's newfound interest leans on Cold-War-era relationships involving military co-operation, arms sales and resources. China, on the other hand, has focused on investing in infrastructure projects and natural resource sectors as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is being used to enhance its influence across the world.

The strategies employed by Russia and China today differ significantly from those of their Western counterparts. Instead of adopting a colonial approach involving immediate political control and economic exploitation, Russia and China position themselves as equal partners offering mutually beneficial business agreements. China, for example, promotes no-strings investment deals, emphasising a lack of involvement in the politics of the African nations it trades with. This approach has been met with enthusiasm as a departure from Western models that tie aid and investment to governance changes and human rights.

On the surface, China's presence in Africa appears to have been welcomed. However, the introduction of these new trading partners has raised international concern as the lack of transparency and debt sustainability could have lasting effects on local economic and political autonomy. Reports already indicate that Zambia, Ghana, Kenya and Ethiopia have either defaulted or are struggling to make loan repayments to China.

## **Strategies and motivations: understanding Russia and China's African agenda**

What motivates Russia and China's interest in Africa? Russia views the African continent as a crucial platform to assert strategic influence and counter Western dominance. At the same time, it is seeking to exploit abundant resources such as minerals and hydrocarbons. China, on the other hand, is actively pursuing long-term, non-Western strategic partnerships to advance its economic ambitions.

Its primary focus is on securing a steady supply of resources to sustain China's economic growth, expand its market and influence-reach in order to fulfil the infrastructure requirements for its BRI project.

### **The future of BRICS: economic pressures and political dynamics**

Russia and China's involvement in shaping the ideals of Africa could have implications for the BRICS alliance. Despite Russia's seemingly robust economy, it is burdened by international sanctions and fluctuating energy prices, potentially hindering its capacity to manage and expand its interests in Africa. While China recently reported substantial economic growth, signs of a significant slowdown have emerged. Moreover, it faces criticism for intellectual property theft and copyright infringement leading to trade restrictions from the West. These challenges place China under significant domestic economic pressure and analysts believe this could complicate the management of its global investments.

These factors raise doubts about the future of the BRICS alliance. Within a very short period, the alliance – comprising a majority of the world's emerging economies – has witnessed a significant shift in the Western geopolitical balance. It could be argued that Russia and China's agenda for Africa will be instrumental in shaping the role and influence of BRICS itself on the global arena. There are opportunities for the BRICS framework in Africa to progress, bringing additional investment, development aid and political engagement. However, this may be hampered by the individual geopolitical ideals of member countries and those of Russia and China.

BRICS must manage the multifaceted interests of its members, while navigating the complexities of geopolitical shifts and future uncertainties. The actions and ambitions of Russia and China, as key power members of the block, and how they address domestic economic challenges and individual geopolitical pressures, could profoundly impact the direction and cohesion of the BRICS alliance.

## Reassessing Africa's geopolitical landscape

In conclusion, as Africa experiences a transformative shift due to international influences, particularly those of Russia and China, it is favouring new partnership-based trade relationships. International concerns persist regarding debt, autonomy, transparency and the intertwined strategies of these two BRICS members and those of the alliance itself. Africa's ability to manage these newfound relationships will be crucial for the continent's future.

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