

# Security Logics of Africa's Divided Position on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

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## Abstract

This article examines African states' security interests concerning Russia in order to explain those states' voting behaviour on a UN resolution condemning the invasion of Ukraine. African states do not form a bloc ready to support action taken by 'the West'. Many African states are themselves authoritarian and harbour longstanding suspicion of European and North American powers. Russia has also built close security relations with many African governments as an arms supplier, provider of military assistance, and source of private military companies. Overall, African states may prefer to maintain relations with both Russia and its opponents rather than choosing between rival blocs.



Half of the nation states who chose not to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the United Nations General Assembly's extraordinary session on 2 March were member states of the African Union (AU). At the event, 25 of the AU's 55 member states either abstained, did not vote, or voted against the resolution (*Al Jazeera* 2022). This apparent split within the AU votes raises an intriguing question: Why did the block fail to unite in condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine?

Voting in the UN is generally motivated by perceived national interests (Voeten 2013). In this perspective blog, we will use a security standpoint to try to explain what those perceived interests may be. Overall, we shouldn't think of African states as a bloc that will naturally step in line with entreaties from Western countries.

As of 2020, 64% of AU member states were classified as not fully democratic, 38% as authoritarian, and 26% as a combination of democratic and authoritarian regimes (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance 2021). In such a predominantly undemocratic political landscape, aligning with democratic Western nations may appear to many states as a strategically less safe move. Countries may be concerned about whether they will be guaranteed protection against any Russian retaliation that may destabilise their states, such as supporting one side of a civil war, as it is doing at present in Libya, or a future interstate war.

Africa's ties with the West have always been tainted with suspicion and mistrust due to the dark history of the slave trade and oppressive colonial regimes. The negative pre-independence experiences have been sustained by Western nations' contradictory and inconsistent foreign policy when dealing with international crises and human rights violations. When the victims of violence are non-Western and the perpetrators are Western states (or a Western state), the West is often accused of having a double standard. Thus, it is arguable that many African states, even those with strong social and economic ties with Western nations, may view the West with scepticism when making decisions that may have immediate or long-term security implications.

A more prosaic reason for supporting Russia may be that many African states, especially states in sub-Saharan Africa, continue to have a close security relationship with Russia. Of the 25 African states that abstained, did not vote, or voted against the resolution, Russia has important military relationships with all but three (Eritrea, Namibia and Senegal). The security dilemma inherent in Russia's continued strong influence in the security sphere of African states might have influenced AU member states not to shun Russia for fear of being seen as an enemy.

Analysts have identified bilateral military cooperation agreements covering things

like training and supply of equipment between Russia and 14 of the African states that did not support the resolution (Burkina Faso, Burundi Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Republic of the Congo, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Guinea, Mali, Morocco, Mozambique, Sudan, Tanzania and Zimbabwe) (Hedenskog 2018). An example of the close cooperation that these agreements can entail is that a Russian citizen has been appointed National Security Advisor to the President of the Central African Republic (CAR). Russia has supplied the CAR with arms and military training, and Russian private military companies have operated there (Márquez 2021).

Arms sales are a physical manifestation of security ties between the supplier and the purchaser. According to data collected by SIPRI (n.d.), Russia was the largest supplier of major conventional weapons such as tanks or fighter aircraft to sub-Saharan Africa from 2016 to 2020. This recent pre-eminence is built upon a decades-long history of being a significant arms supplier and security partner to the region that dates back to the Cold War.

Specifically, from 2016 to 2020, Russia was the largest supplier of major weapons to eight states that did not support the UN resolution (Algeria, Angola, Burkina Faso, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Cameroon, Mali and South Sudan). Russia was also the largest supplier to two more over a longer period (South Africa after 2013 and Uganda after 2010), and from 2016 to 2020, it was the second largest supplier to a further four states (Burundi, the CAR, Mozambique and Sudan).

Another manifestation of close security links is the deployment of Russian private military companies such as the Wagner Group, which have close links to the Russian state (Jones et al. 2021). Such companies have been identified as having operated in seven states that didn't support the UN resolution (the CAR, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Sudan and Zimbabwe). For example, a few months after a 2021 coup d'état in Mali, the Russian Wagner Group began a large-scale operation there whose aim was reported to be to train Malian forces and provide security to senior Malian officials (Thompson, Doxsee and Bermudez 2022). When security for the leadership is provided by a Russian company, it is easy to assume that is why Mali didn't vote to condemn Russia in the United Nations.

Russia is a preferred arms supplier for many states as it has a reputation for being willing to supply arms or other military services without concern for democracy or human rights, which are sometimes championed by Western states. In more general terms, many African states are in an advantageous position as China, Russia, the US and European states compete for influence on the continent by offering arms and security

partnerships. If there is a long-term geopolitical realignment by the West against Russia, African governments may find it difficult if they are expected to align themselves with one bloc or another. Abstaining at the UN perhaps represented a desire by many to remain 'non-aligned', but they may not be able to continue with that stance indefinitely.

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