THE RETURN OF RUSSIA TO AFRICA: INSTITUTIONALISING A FRAMEWORK FOR RUSSIA-AFRICA RELATIONS IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD ORDER

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Keywords

Russia-Africa Relations, Law, Multipolarity, Summit, Diplomacy, Economic Partnership

Abstract

Research Problem
The paper analyzes the main development vector of Russia-Africa relations amid the restructuring of the global order, built on the Soviet legacy of supporting Africa in the 20th century and adapting to the current challenges. The main research problem is a lack of legal and institutional frameworks to govern the emerging political and economic relations between Russia and Africa, help safeguard their sovereignty and reduce reliance on Western countries.

Methods/theory
As qualitative research, it adopted a systematic and structural-functional approach to examine historical relations between Africa and Russia from the decolonization to the post-Cold War era through analysing multilateral and bilateral treaties, political declarations and initiatives between Russia, the African Union, African countries and regional organizations within the framework of the multipolar world order.

Results
The paper reveals that while Russia-Africa has experienced a revival and significant expansion since its return to Africa in the 2000s, much of this effort remains generally fragmented and ad hoc and lacks established institutions to ensure sustainability. Additionally, legal and institutional frameworks are incoherent compared to the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), a coordinating framework for Africa-China relations. Hence, it is unable to coordinate Russia's geostrategic interest in Africa. The findings argue that a coherent legal framework could foster further cooperation and advance the post-colonial Russia-Africa relations of the 21st century.

Conclusion
The paper concludes that Russia-Africa during the Cold War era relationshas beenlargely hingedon decolonisation and solidarity. Since its revitalization in the 2000s. Africa has become a strategic masterpiece for Russia's geostrategic and foreign policy goals in a shifting multipolar order. Russia lacks a coherent legal and institutional framework to coordinate robust and effect foreign policy within the purview of the

Russia-Africa relations.Thus, a legal and institutional framework such as the FOCAC will provide a stronger coordination, inclusive and balanced collective position in international economic and political pursuits.

Key Contribution to Knowledge

The key contribution of this article lies in demonstrating the need for institutionalization the Russia-Africa relations to ensure mutual benefits for all parties.

Recommendation

The paper recommends developing a comprehensive legal framework starting with a Russia-African Union strategic partnership agreement to consolidate cooperation, institutionalize dialogue, and ensure long-term fruitful relations. The framework should define coordination andregulatory mechanisms common position in international politics, economic cooperation drawn from the success lesson from the Forum on China-AfricaCooperation to ensure mutuality, mitigate conflict and fragmentation.

Introduction

Russia's return to Africa after more than a decade, following the conclusion of the Cold War in the 1990s, was marked by historical connections rooted in its assistance for decolonisation initiatives in Southern Africa. The dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the socialist bloc at the conclusion of the 1980s signified the disintegration of the bipolar framework of international relations along with its associated norms and regulations. This will ultimately necessitate a reevaluation of international relations and the development of conceptions and theories that mirror the evolving global reality. Contrary to notions supporting the global supremacy of the United States, scientists and politicians have increasingly discussed the emergence of a new multipolar world order characterised by greater cooperation, in contrast to the Cold War period (Peters, 2023).

The rise of a new multipolar world order in recent years has necessitated a substantial reorganisation of international relations. There is no consensus on the definition of multipolarity within scholarly discourse. Scholars from various countries and representatives of diverse schools and perspectives define and evaluate the nature of multipolarity in distinct manners (Soluianov, 2021). Multipolarity theoretically signifies that multiple (at least three) governments possess approximately equivalent economic and military capabilities, constituting a distinct economic and political centre of the world (Acharya, Estevadeordal, & Goodman, 2023).Recent literature underscores theme concerns regarding Russia's geopolitical and geostrategic interests in Africa, particularly in relation to energy, security collaboration, and competition with the West for influence on the continent. Moreover, power dynamics and distribution provide insights into the causes of Russia's foreign policy and its strategic objectives in Africa.

Western nations portray Russia's growing influence in Africa, especially in the Sahel, as that of a revisionist state with dubious objectives. Russia appears to establish itself as a prospective partner for Africa. Although Russia's position in Africa has been analysed primarily through power dynamics, structural problems, particularly the governance of Russia-Africa ties, have been overlooked.

Consequently, theorising Russia-Africa relations has proven challenging due to the lack of a legal and institutional framework that governs and establishes norms for the partnership (James, 2022).

The disparity is evident when juxtaposed with the Chinese model of multiallelism in Africa, particularly when the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is utilised as a unit of study. Conversely, Russia depends on ad hoc and fragmented mechanisms that undermine coordination, accountability, and the functionalist worldview. The lack of instructional architecture diminishes both Africa's autonomy and its collective bargaining capacity. Moreover, the durability and long-term dedication of Russia to its connections with Africa engender ambiguity and drive a shift in geopolitical allegiance. This study analyses the void resulting from the lack of institutional architecture to regulate Russia-Africa ties, focussing on the consequences of Russia's preference for a bilateral over a multilateral framework in its interactions with Africa. Therefore, it is essential that in the absence of a rules-based framework, Russia-Africa ties experience a lack of institutionalisation that will undermine the desired mutually advantageous results for both Russia and African nations.

Research Problem

The paper examines the problem of the lack of coherence and coordination in Russia-Africa relations owing to the absence of multilateral institutions. The paper tries to underscore the implications of Russia's fragmented approach to the Russia-Africa multilateral relations, which lack a legal and institutional framework. Whether or not the BRICS+ can complement the absence of multilateral architecture to drive the cooperation. Thus, the paper advances the idea of the institutionalisation of Russia's foreign policy partnership with Africa.

Research Objectives

The key objective of this paper is to examine Russia-Africa relations within the purview of legal and institutional framework and its implication.

Particularly, the paper:

Analyse the nature of the existing Russia-Africa relations within legal and institutional framework

Interrogate gaps in the institutionalisation of Russia-Africa relations

Examine how the absence legal and institutional framework undermine bargaining power and Africa's collective agency Russia-Africa relations

Research Methodology

This study used a non-empirical qualitative framework derived from an analysis of journal articles, books, and online resources. Data from secondary sources underwent theme and content analysis to highlight Russia-Africa ties, focussing on the existing legal and policy tools and institutional framework as the units of analysis. The research comparatively analysed the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) institutional model to identify the institutional deficiencies in Russia-Africa ties and to derive lessons for mitigating the disjointed and fragmented multilateral relations in the post-Cold War period.

Conceptual Clarifications

This study highlights essential themes such as institutionalisation, multipolarity, and collective agency to analyse Russia-Africa relations in the post-Cold War period. Institutionalisation refers to the formal and informal methods employed by several governments to establish institutions and promote norms and rules that regulate their relations. Multiple theoretical traditions exist

on the concept of institutionalisation, including realist, functionalist, and constructivist paradigms. The realist perceives the institutionalisation of diplomatic relations as a mechanism for domination, power projection, competition, and conflict. Functionalists contend that collaboration is essential for addressing transnational issues. Consequently, states resemble entities that address certain issues through collaboration. They underscore the significance of ideas and the contribution of nonstate actors in the establishment of institutions within the international system. These theoretical ideas offer a conceptual framework for comprehending patterns of cooperation and conflict in the post-Cold War international system. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2021.

Multipolarity denotes the configuration of the international system, the distribution of power, the relative capabilities of states, and the hegemonic dominance exercised by a single state, numerous states, or a bloc (Lala, 2019). The transition from a bipolar Cold War to a multipolar international order has enabled other nations, notably China, to exert considerable influence, thereby challenging the supremacy of both the United States and Russia (Götz& Kaas, 2024). Despite the discord between the capitalist and socialist blocs during the Cold War, the rise of new nations varied the international system, leading to a more polycentric world and a pursuit of collaboration with Africa. Putin rationalised the relationship between Russia and Africa at the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit. This global diversity provides Africa the opportunity to assert its collective agency with Russia (Abdulle, 2024). The collective agency of Africa denotes initiatives aimed at fostering a cohesive approach to influence its involvement and decision-making on the world stage. This is thought to possess the capacity to reshape international power dynamics and geopolitics, particularly with initiatives aimed at enhancing Africa's integration via the Africa Free Continental Trade Area (Volkov &Konstantinova, 2023).

Literature Review

This study examines the developing trajectory of Russia-Africa ties in the context of the shifting global governance landscape since the conclusion of the Cold War and the rise of multipolarity. Russia's retreat from Africa in the early 1990s was followed by a return in the 2000s, marked by an absence of structural and legal frameworks. Nkuna& Shai (2020) assert that a disjointed and fragmented approach to Russia-Africa ties will hinder Russia's capacity to coherently maintain its strategic foreign policy objectives in Africa.

The return of Russia to Africa, signalled by the Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi and St. Petersburg, marks a new era for Russia's geopolitical interests on the continent. Notwithstanding these summits, the diplomatic meetings were predominantly ad hoc and without a secretariat for activity coordination, in contrast to the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. Götz& Kaas (2024) contended that Russia's low influence in Africa extends beyond the legal and institutional framework; it is mostly due to an absence of a unified strategy and resources to effectively execute its foreign policy objectives in the region. Konkov (2023) said that Russia's involvement in Africa lacks a clearly defined framework and common ideals, which leads to its portrayal as opportunistic and reluctant to establish sustainable partnerships with the continent. Nonetheless, it might be contended that, in spite of the absence of a formal framework, BRICS+ has afforded Russia a more expansive platform to exert influence over Global South states.

The critical examination of literature on Russia-Africa ties emphasises historical narratives and Russia's resurgence in Africa (Elbassoussy, 2021). Nevertheless, country-specific interactions between Russia and

African nations demonstrate well-documented robust partnerships. Although both bilateral and international agreements exist, there are no institutionalised forums for the coordination of common ambitions (Geldenhuys, 2020). Despite the expanding literature on Russia-Africa relations, there exists a scholarly deficiency about Russia's engagement and institutional limitations in countering the predominant influence of Western powers in Africa (Mangani, 2024).

Despite the acknowledgement of Russia's post-Cold War involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa, there exists a paucity of understanding of its multilateral governance framework. Russia's involvement in Africa may be acknowledged through the perspectives of national role and geopolitics. The systematic investigation of its multilateral legal framework, a crucial component of the interaction, is constrained. This represents a significant divergence from the multilateral framework embraced by key global entities. Studies, such Ntantang&Ayuk (2024), contend that Russia's geostrategic objective is to capture natural resources and bolster energy markets in Africa, lacking a comprehensive sustainability and development strategy. Duursma&Masuhr (2022) assert that, in the absence of a legal and institutional framework, Africa's role in Russia-Africa ties will remain passive.

Gatto (2025) asserts that it is essential to emphasise how institutional mechanisms shape Russia's influence in Africa, facilitating a mutually beneficial relationship between Russia and Africa within a multipolar international system, transcending the perceived opportunistic and transactional nature of their interactions. Furthermore, a framework would solidify accountability within the partnership and Africa's collective negotiations, akin to the FOCAC model (Wang, 2024). Although this may initially appear valid, the power relations between Africa and Russia cannot establish accountability or facilitate collective bargaining. While FOCAC may serve as a commendable model, it does not provide equality and accountability from China; concurrently, the institutional constraints imposed by state sovereignty are essential (Olivier &Suchkov, 2020).
The literature on Russia-Africa relations acknowledges Russia's resurgence in Africa since the 2000s but criticises the absence of a comprehensive institutional framework for sustainable and accountable interactions. This article aims to evaluate the absence of a framework, problems, and prospects in Russia-Africa relations over the long term.

Historical Perspectives on Russia-Africa Relations

The Russian Federation and African nations share enduring and amicable historical ties, originating from the Soviet Union's substantial support for Africa during its independence movements and the later post-colonial period. Over the years, the USSR implemented a proactive foreign policy in Africa, assisting nations in overcoming colonial subjugation by offering political, military, and logistical backing to liberation movements across the continent (Webber, 1992). Notwithstanding the discourse surrounding solidarity and decolonisation support, the Soviet Union's interactions with Africa lacked a definitive institutional framework for managing its involvement. Consequently, Russia's Cold War-era involvement in Africa is portrayed as a historical gesture of goodwill towards the continent, while overlooking the reality that the failure of Russia-Africa relations stemmed not solely from the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but from an intrinsic challenge in institutionalising these relations. This trend may adversely affect the existing Russia-Africa relations, especially if a substantial domestic political upheaval transpires in Russia.

The decolonisation era also seen a demand for regional integration. In the late 1950s, regional economic unification attempts gained momentum among newly independent governments (Zwanbin, 2023). African nations commenced moving towards the aim of creating a regional supranational institution for African unity. Kwame Nkrumah, a leading advocate for integration, regarded continental unification as an essential prerequisite for Africa's progress in the post-colonial era, rather than a utopian ideal. The primary objective of African integration was to transcend artificially imposed colonial boundaries and create a unified continent. Consequently, regional integration initiatives in the post-colonial era emerged as a crucial element of Africa's development strategy. In 1963, the Organisation of African Unity was founded, serving as the inaugural Pan-African forum for political discourse and coordination (Small, 2017). Nevertheless, the integration represented merely a symbolic compromise among the three ideological factions (Monrovia, Casablanca, and Brazzaville) due to the intrinsic tensions among the newly independent states, whose primary focus was on sovereignty and noninterference in their domestic affairs. The predominance of bilateral over multilateral relations between African governments and Russia underscores a preference for sovereignty preservation rather than a cohesive strategy that would augment negotiating leverage.

While the formation of the OAU represented a significant advancement in African integration, the newly sovereign governments faced numerous challenges, including internal instability and external pressures. In light of these conditions, the Soviet Union provided substantial assistance to African nations in safeguarding their independence and achieving sovereignty. Shortly after the Democratic Republic of Congo declared independence from Belgium on 30 June 1960, MoïseTshombe, leader of the copper-rich province of Katanga, announced on 11 July 1960 that the province would secede from the DRC. In response, Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba appealed to the United Nations Security Council to employ force to quell the separatist movement. Consequently, on 14 July 1960, the Security Council voted Resolution No. 143, initiating the UN Operation in Congo. Consequently, the UN's passivity compelled Lumumba to seek military assistance from the Soviet Union (Sidorova, 2020). The USSR provided substantial support to the liberation efforts in Cabo Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Namibia, and South Africa. The USSR provided military assistance to Angola and Mozambique during the initial years of internal strife in those nations (Telepneva, 2019).

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 also impeded Russia-Africa relations for over a decade. The newly established Russian Federation reaffirms its stance in the global system. President Boris Yeltsin's foreign policy clearly shifted towards collaboration with the West, prioritising relations with the United States, the European Union, and NATO. In this setting, Africa, once pivotal to Soviet foreign policy, declined (Duursma&Masuhr, 2022). The deficiency of financial resources exacerbated this disengagement: the Russian economy could not maintain the extent of aid, military collaboration, and educational exchanges that characterised Soviet involvement with the continent. Numerous embassies and cultural institutes in Africa were shuttered, and previously established partnerships expired without renewal (Marten, 2019). Consequently, the African region became peripheral to Russia's foreign strategy. Consequently, the mid-2000s marked Russia's re-engagement with Africa. The pause period revealed the vulnerability of Russia-Africa ties due to the lack of a cohesive policy and legal framework to regulate these connections, free

from domestic political upheavals in Russia, such as the Soviet Union's fall in the 1990s.

The Return of Russia to Africa

The Russian Federation, led by President Vladimir Putin, aimed to restore its great power status and establish a fair international order that acknowledges the perspectives of all nations. Russian state-owned and privately owned enterprises have resumed economic engagements in Africa with their African counterparts, particularly in the energy and natural resources sectors. The expanding collaboration ultimately resulted in the revival of Russia-Africa summits, the first of which took place in Sochi in 2019. The Summit attracted 6,000 delegates from 104 nations and culminated in the ratification of 92 agreements valued at over one trillion rubles (Gruzd, Ramani, & Clifford, 2022). The Russian Federation seems to have re-engaged with Africa robustly after decades of negligence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union to aid in Africa's developmental initiatives. Although Russia's re-engagement with Africa clearly indicates a strategic involvement with the continent, it has not altered its governance approach to the alliance. Nonetheless, Russia's recalibrated resurgence may be associated with its strategic survival in Europe and the necessity to consolidate geopolitical strength and restore its sphere of influence in Africa.

Russia-Africa ties are founded on mutual respect and solidarity, compliance with international law, and the ideals of the United Nations Charter. The growing collaboration is a crucial element of the developing multipolar world order, as it fortifies their standings on the international scene. Russia asserts that its development assistance is offered without political preconditions, differentiating its approach from that of numerous Western nations. Russia has sent a variety of military equipment and armaments to nations including Angola, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sudan, Uganda, and others. Russia has frequently served as a mediator in the resolution of intra-African conflicts. In September 2018, Moscow convened a confidential peace meeting in Khartoum with the Christian Anti-Balaka militia and the Muslim Seleka coalition, culminating in the signing of a mutual peace agreement (Filippov, 2019). Russia persistently funds diverse educational and cultural exchanges, illustrating its intent to enhance soft power in Africa (Elbassoussy, 2022). The opportunism and transactional caricature associated with Russia's involvement in Africa reflect its lack of commitment to institutional development, which is perceived or misconstrued as a superficial dedication to maintaining engagement in contrast to other frameworks such as the FOCAC.

BRICS and Russia-Africa Relations

Another aspect of Africa-Russia relations is BRICS. Russia staunchly advocates for the enhancement of African participation in the BRICS+ framework and an expansion in the number of African representatives. The platform provides African nations the ability to engage in formulating declarations and establishing alternative agendas for global economic governance, finance, and sustainable development. In the last two years, numerous other African nations have expressed their desire to join BRICS partners (Kia &Enyindah, 2023). In 2024, under Russian leadership, BRICS concentrated on collaboration in three principal domains: politics and security, economics and finance, and cultural and humanitarian relations (Zondi, 2024), aiming to terminate Western economic and geopolitical hegemony in the Global South (Siddiqui, 2024) and establish a just world order founded on mutual respect and equality. Russia underscored the need of de-dollarization in trade and collaboration to enhance economic relations with African countries. Russia contends that dependence on

the US dollar will hinder strong financial relations for African nations and within BRICS. De-dollarization may promote trade and investment via alternative currencies.

These measures may facilitate Russian investment in Africa notwithstanding extraordinary pressure from Western nations (Arnold, 2024). The aims of BRICS nations align with those of African nations, encompassing the enhancement of economic and technological autonomy, along with strategic resilience. They include collective security measures in energy and food, institutional support for technical self-sufficiency and innovation, adaptation of green and digital agendas to local developmental requirements, and procedures for the peaceful resolution of disputes while preventing external interference. Developing collaborative contacts between Moscow and Africa through prominent integration frameworks like BRICS will allow the continent to derive substantial advantages from BRICS+ membership (Entin&Zlobin, 2025).

To facilitate the efficient execution of these aims, it is essential to establish a regulatory and legal framework that governs inter-state cooperation at both the bilateral level and within the context of intergovernmental integration associations and international organisations.

Challenges of Russia-Africa Relations

Russia and African nations have advocated for the discourse of mutually advantageous partnerships, initiated new initiatives, and enhanced commerce. Nevertheless, the relations encounter difficulties. A significant difficulty is the absence of a legal basis for cooperation, resulting in inadequate coordination. The interactions between China and Africa serve as an exemplary model and framework from which to derive lessons for establishing multi-year action plans and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms (Du Plessis, 2014).

Russia-Africa collaboration primarily relies on bilateral agreements, private initiatives, and provisional arrangements, frequently devoid of a robust institutional foundation. China has allocated billions to African infrastructure via coordinated initiatives encompassing transport, electricity, and digital connections (Calabrese, 2025). Russian endeavours, including energy projects in Egypt, often function in isolation, constraining opportunities for wider integration and enduring influence.

Russia persists in encountering external economic limitations due to strained relations with the US and Western Europe, including currency and settlement restrictions, as well as a deficiency of surplus investment capital that impedes investment processes. Nevertheless, Russia is investing in sectors such as energy and manufacturing. Regulatory inconsistencies among African nations and regional economic groupings further hinder coordination. Conflicting regulations concerning contract enforcement, investment protection, and dispute resolution processes generate uncertainty for Russian investors and impede substantial projects between states and foreign investors. Conversely, the FOCAC Multilateral Framework has instituted standardised norms for investment, project implementation monitoring, and dispute resolution, so providing Chinese investors with a more defined legal and operational framework (Fokina, 2022). This pattern of tenuous involvement restricts Russia within the international framework, preventing it from transforming Russia-Africa relations into a geopolitical force in the Global South. Consequently, it bolsters Russia's asymmetric foreign policy objectives in Africa, which depend on ad hoc agreements. Geopolitical tensions exacerbate the partnership's complexity. African nations

collaborating with Russia, especially regarding de-dollarization or military alliances, can encounter threats of sanctions or diplomatic resistance from Western powers. This pressure results in legal and political concerns that are atypical in Chinese-African relations, as China has generally avoided direct conflict with Western nations. Despite obstacles in Russia-Africa relations, there are promising potential. A significant advancement in addressing the difficulties is the Africa-Russia summit, which is progressing towards an institutionalised multilateral collaboration. To enhance predictability in relations, mitigate investment risks, and promote strategic alignment, Russia and African nations should persist in organising Russia-Africa summits and establish a legal and institutional framework. The execution of infrastructure and investment projects, collective energy and food security measures, and the establishment of technology-sharing programs present concrete chances to enhance multilateral relations. Incremental de-dollarization and the transition to payments in national or alternative currencies may foster economic interactions between the parties by diminishing their reliance on the currencies of third nations (Saaida, 2024).

The subsequent pivotal phase in Africa-Russian ties may involve the negotiation and ratification of a multilateral accord aimed at establishing a governing body for Russia-African relations, facilitating effective coordination, monitoring mechanisms, and regular forum sessions. Consequently, the transition from intermittent encounters to a more organised and enduring collaboration will signify a crucial milestone in enhancing political and economic relations between the two parties.

Discussion of Findings

The current resurgence of Russia in Africa and the Russia-Africa ties mirror the Cold War era due to the absence of an institutional framework. It depends on summits and bilateral accords. This engenders institutional fragility and a deficiency in policy consistency, potentially hindering sustained collaboration. Notwithstanding the absence of an institutional structure, Russia has persistently grown its footprint on the continent throughout the 2000s. Although Russia advocates for the sovereignty of African nations and espouses anti-imperialism, its preference for a bilateral rather than a multilateral approach to engagement with African governments undermines Africa's capacity to enhance its collective bargaining strength. Consequently, the article contends that an institutional framework embedded in international legal instruments will enhance African agency in Russia-Africa ties. Nevertheless, the absence of institutionalisation will create structural constraints and disparities in power dynamics. Although institutions do not inherently provide equal power relations, they give a framework and legal instruments for the conduct of those relations.

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) exemplifies an institutional framework for China's multilateral involvement with Africa. While FOCAC does not inherently equalise power dynamics, it offers frameworks for agenda formulation, action planning, meetings, and the monitoring and assessment of developmental initiatives for quantifiable results. The rotating summits conducted in Beijing and African nations advocate for the concept of African agency in China-Africa relations. The FOCAC paradigm, although indicative of possibilities for sustainable collaboration, does not inherently imply equity and accountability. Consequently, institutionalisation devoid of common values and aspirations would fail to solidify African agency in the Russia-Africa ties.

The report also concludes that the declining hegemony of the West does not necessarily

result in equitable relations between China or Russia and Africa. Nevertheless, institutionalisation and legal entities will facilitate interaction within a rule-based system. Africa faces geopolitical risks and a deficiency in collective bargaining power if it depends on the ad hoc and incoherent policy mechanisms established by Russia-Africa ties. Furthermore, Russia cannot depend on BRICS+ as a replacement or superficial entity to manage the Russia-Africa alliance. This may indicate that Russia lacks commitment to the alliance. The article asserts that the primary problem to Russia-Africa relations is in the absence of a multilateral and institutionalised framework that would ensure sustainability and mutually advantageous outcomes for both Russia and African nations.

Conclusion

This study analysed Russia-Africa ties from a historical to a present perspective, emphasising the institutional and legal framework. The paper diverged from the historical and geopolitical narratives that define current Russia-African studies. The findings indicate that although Russia's resurgence in Africa has increased diplomatic visibility, security collaboration, and economic involvement, these advancements are limited by the lack of a coherent, rules-based, and institutionalised global framework. This study reconceptualisesinstitutionalisation not merely as an administrative or technical issue, but as a pivotal arena where power, agency, and sustainability in external partnerships are negotiated within a multipolar international framework.

This paper theoretically expands discussions on multipolarity by contesting the assumptionimplicit in much of the literaturethat the dispersal of power from Western hegemony inherently results in more balanced and fair partnerships. The findings indicate that multipolarity might exacerbate rivalry among external actors in Africa, hence rendering institutional frameworks increasingly vital for regulating participation and safeguarding common interests. This article resonates with critical institutionalist ideas, illustrating that in the absence of strong legal and organisational frameworks, multipolar interaction may perpetuate fragmented, transactional, and asymmetrical relationships akin to those seen in previous global orders.

The findings align with current literature that highlights Russia's constrained material resources and strategic limitations in Africa, as well as characterising its involvement as sporadic and selective. This research diverges from much of the existing literature by asserting that these limits stem not solely from resource constraints or geopolitical pressures, but are fundamentally entrenched in the absence of institutionalisation. This research emphasises governance weaknesses as a key factor influencing the trajectory and perception of Russia–Africa ties, in contrast to studies that predominantly ascribe Russia's limited influence to economic weakness or Western sanctions.

The research ultimately enhances the literature by asserting that Africa's collective agency is structurally diminished when external interactions are mostly executed through bilateral and ad hoc arrangements. This paper positions the African Union as a viable cornerstone for a multilateral Russia–Africa framework, providing a conceptual avenue for rebalancing cooperation dynamics without merely duplicating current models like FOCAC. The study illustrates that the institutionalisation of Russia–Africa ties is not merely an optional diplomatic upgrade but a strategic and theoretical need for attaining lasting, responsible, and mutually advantageous cooperation in a changing multipolar international order.

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