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Editorial

This issue of the *Bulletin* comes out at a time when Africa's approach to foreign relations in an increasingly multipolar world is under scrutiny.

media, to propagate a narrative of 'good' versus 'evil' about the war. This has been done in an attempt to mobilise the rest of the world to take sides and perceive the

war through the lens of Euro-American hegemony. But the efforts at mobilisation have not been very successful. For Africa, in particular, the responses have been divided, with many countries voting in favour of Ukraine but certainly not buying the overall Western propaganda in which criticism of Russia is cast. Thus, the February vote at the UN General Assembly saw twenty-eight African countries voting in favour of the resolution to condemn the Russian invasion, but seventeen abstaining and one, Eritrea, voting in favour of Russia. It has not been lost to observers that some African countries did not take an outright position during the UN vote. A review of those who abstained shows that they are predominantly countries that Russia supported during the Cold War and in their wars of independence from white settler regimes and apartheid.¹

Efforts to use global organs of governance such as the UN to tilt the war propaganda in favour of the West have instead exposed a new multipolar reality in which China and India are key players. The high-volt-

age rhetoric that the US government and Western media unleashed has certainly not drawn the expected support from numerous capitals in Africa, Asia and the Middle East; with China and India, and other formerly less con-

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The Russia–Ukraine war, nearing its fourth month, has gripped the attention of the world. The future is, as a consequence, being discussed in terms of the outcome of the war and how this outcome will shape it. Western countries have done their best, through the Western



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sequential players like Turkey and Pakistan, assuming crucial roles in challenging the US hold on an eroding unipolarity. Where old actors like the United Kingdom, Germany and France almost unilaterally would have

provide an explanation for the growing tensions that have resulted in the current war.

More consequential from the war will be the impact on the politics of economic and infrastructural interdependence in Europe, where Russia is a key player. Many western European countries rely on Russia for oil and gas. Russia is the third-largest oil-producing country in the world. Russia has played the gas card to good effect and continues to hold this as a major hand in the unfolding war. But perhaps even more consequential is the thinly veiled warning about nuclear missiles

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defined the nature of this engagement, most of these ageing former imperial nations have been reduced to repeating tired Cold War slogans, such as 'evil empire' and new ones like 'oligarchs', which have doubtful explanatory power in the context they are used.

The Russia–Ukraine conflict, however, has the potential to become even more catastrophic, with enormous consequences for the world in general and Africa in particular. This possibility remains alive precisely because of the nuclear threat that sits at the heart of recent exchanges in the diplomatic negotiations. Already, the global impact of the war on supply chains is adverse. The increase in prices of oil and gas and the effect on commodity prices across the world has caused outrage. Further, the resulting scarcity of some foodstuffs that Russia and Ukraine supply to the world is a notable global consequence of the war. This is true especially for basic foods, like wheat, the supply chain of which is dominated by the two countries. For Africa, while the disruption of oil markets has triggered commodity price increases, including the cost of food, the expectation is that the crisis leads to internal soul-searching in Africa, questioning why Africa should be dependent on food imports given its abundance of arable land.

But there are specific aspects of the Russia–Ukraine tussle that stubbornly remain a European affair. The political rhetoric aside, the expansion of NATO into former Soviet states set the stage for this eventuality. The origins of the war are therefore internal to European and North American geopolitics, which have been under stress since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The reluctance of both sides to fully observe the agreements reached with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the persisting presence of NATO — a military alliance formed to deter the Soviet Union —

as a potential factor in the war. This threat has acted as a deterrent to NATO countries who prodded Ukraine into this situation in the first place but prevaricated from active military engagement in the war. While NATO has warned and threatened Russia, beyond a plethora of sanctions it has not actively participated in the war in defence of Ukraine. The inability or unwillingness to be active combatants in the war has left Western sanctions the only weapon of choice.

Sanctions have their place in war. But the effectiveness of sanctions, as the Russian experience seems to suggest, depends on the country in question. Ultimately, power asymmetries need to be steep enough for the panoply of sanctions to be crippling to the point of deterring the atrocities we have witnessed in Ukraine. Of course, the jury is still out on what the long-term consequences of the sanctions will be for Russia. But in the immediate term, the projection that a raft of sanctions would cripple Russia and deter it from continuing to inflict damage on Ukraine is not borne out. The growing strength of the ruble, in a context of what was meant as debilitating sanctions, raises valid questions about the effectiveness of sanctions.

The implication of the war in Ukraine for Africa is a lot more immediate for the African social science community. The critical question to ask is not which side of the Russia–Ukraine divide Africa supports. Rather we should inquire into what opportunity and spaces the war provides for Africa to disentangle itself from externally mediated development paths that have failed to actualise Africa's development ambitions. The war in Ukraine represents a geopolitical milestone that will reshape, in some ways, the nature of the relationships between different countries. It comes at a point when the new scramble for Africa is intensifying. This scramble has pawned Africa on a chessboard on which

North America and Western Europe play against new actors in Africa like China, Russia and India. That a new scramble is ongoing is evident in recent moves from Europe — for instance, in the French president instituting a process of ‘refoundation’ of relations between France and Africa.² The Germans, in similar fashion, took the lead in pushing for building a Marshall Plan with Africa from 2017, which was meant to recentre Europe in Africa’s development narrative.³ Of course, it is not lost to observers that in October 2019 Russia successfully convened the first African summit in Sochi.⁴

These *refoundation* initiatives are not free of the national interests of the sponsoring country. In fact, at the heart of the initiative is a strategy to advance European interests even though they are presented in the language of development cooperation that comes embellished with the vocabulary of mutuality, inclusivity and partnership, just as other powers like the USA, Canada, Russia and China have, to a greater or lesser extent, used development cooperation to channel and advance their interests in Africa. In a context where the Ukraine war is forcing a geopolitical rethink, the opportunity and space is presently available for Africa to strategise about its interest in the next phase.

Four areas of such rethinking and re-strategising are worth the attention of African academics and researchers. The first area refers to the role of trade in enhancing regional integration. The second is agriculture and food security. The third concerns the need for internal mechanisms for peace and security. Lastly, is the area of higher education, science and technology.

The coming to force of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in May 2019 created the capacity to galvanise regional economic communities to realise a pan-African trade area. AfCFTA comes with workable distribution mechanisms and economies of scale, if it is backed by the supportive political will. Forty-one of the continent’s fifty-four countries have ratified the agreement, which suggests there is strong political will. Rather than lamenting wheat shortages resulting from the Russia-Ukraine war, Africa should expend its energies examining how to fully implement the agreement and utilise it to improve food distribution on the continent. If Ethiopian Airlines (ET) figured out how to lift African students stranded in Ukraine to safety in Africa, it is possible to strengthen trade within the continent using regional economic blocs, which are already integrated and constitute viable nodes for achieving this ambition.

Optimising trade within the continent will address the challenge of agriculture and food security. There are too many contradictions in Africa regarding agriculture and food security and many of them have nothing to do with agricultural productivity. Often, even within the same country, food is available but not accessible to the rest of the country due to distribution limitations. But rather than address this challenge of distribution, countries resort to expensive and non-sustainable imports that depress local production and empower farmers in far-off places where state subsidies render imported foodstuffs cheaper than local produce. Elite approaches to increasing agricultural productivity, framed in the language of ‘agricultural transformation’, have tended to favour large commercial farmers, many of whom are focused on non-food commodities for export, at the disadvantage of smallholder farming systems that constitute the bedrock of food security and nutrition for most households. Even the much-touted Alliance for a Green Revolution (AGRA), conceived in 2006 as the magic bullet for food security and increased incomes for smallholder farmers in Africa, has not delivered on this promise due to the unsuitability of AGRA’s model to most smallholder farmers in Africa. This accounted for the low uptake of its proposed interventions.⁵

Certainly, a great deal of policy sovereignty is required in this area if the priority is to develop homegrown solutions to food security, and careful choices must be made to strike a suitable balance between homegrown interventions that support smallholder farmers and nutrition on the continent and externally derived interventions that see the solution to food security in terms of structural transformation of the sector. For us, any intervention that favours the commercial aspects of agriculture but does not deal with trade-related barriers within the continent that favour expensive food imports to the detriment of improving food distribution mechanisms is a deceptive intervention.

Establishing internal mechanisms for peace and security within the continent remains a challenge. The establishment by the African Union of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) was meant to realise an African solution to the issues of peace and security. Despite a few successes — for example, in attempts to create an African standby force — resourcing such interventions is still dependent on external resources, which are often unsustainable, as the AMISOM experience in Somalia shows. The ownership of such missions remains in doubt — in a few cases, the AUC intervention has had to seek approval from the United

Nations Security Council. The AU attempt to be proactive in Libya was neutered by the global alliance of the US and key European actors.

Dependence on external resourcing for peace and security operations has led to instances where foreign countries put ‘booths on the ground’ as a substitute for resources, to allow African countries to strengthen the continent’s standby force. Foreign ‘booths on the ground’ can secure interests for their countries beyond, and sometimes to the detriment of, securing peace and security on the continent. For example, Russia’s ‘second coming’ to Africa has been characterised foremost by placing elements of its army in countries such as Mali and Central Africa Republic. In some cases, the Russian army operates side by side with Russian mercenaries. The possibilities that the US/European versus Russian armed conflict underway in Ukraine could be replicated in Africa abound, unless the continent rethinks its approach to peace and security, especially in terms of securing sovereign resources to undertake this task.

Lastly is the area of higher education and scientific cooperation. The immediate concerns to Africans in this area have been the plight of African students who were studying at Ukrainian universities. Besides efforts to lift the students to safety, African governments — with the support of some European countries — continue to place students in European universities to complete their studies. Attracting African students for commercial reasons has become a critical aspect of the internationalisation strategy of most universities in Europe. The October 2019 Russian–African summit at Sochi thrust Russia into this race for African students as part of Russia’s ‘soft power’ engagement with the continent. By the 2020/2021 academic year, the number of students from Africa enrolled in higher education institutions and scientific organisations in Russia was slightly over 27,000.⁶ Besides, and resulting from the Sochi Summit, Russia has enhanced scientific collaboration with several African countries, notably Morocco and South Africa. The call for countries to boycott scientific collaboration with Russia as part of the sanctions against Russia therefore puts several African countries in a difficult position, having to reconcile their political choices with the plight of their students in Ukraine and Russia. It also endangers ongoing scientific collaboration, from which they are being pushed to delink. It is noteworthy that the African countries who were absent or abstained from the February UN

vote were largely those with some form of scientific collaboration with Russian institutions.⁷ A deliberate drive to rethink this area will benefit from the historical experience of scientific collaboration during the Cold War. Did it strengthen or weaken capacity for a self-sustaining higher education sector in Africa?

Notes

1. So threatening has been this failed attempt at unipolarity that the US Congress enacted on 27 April 2022 the ‘Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act’, which expressly directs ‘the Secretary of State to develop and submit to Congress a strategy and implementation plan outlining United States efforts to counter the malign influence and activities of the Russian Federation and its proxies in Africa, and for other purposes’. See <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/7311/text>
2. For a critique, see <https://roape.net/2021/12/13/from-summit-to-counter-summit-imperialism-francafrique-and-decolonisation/>
3. <https://www.tralac.org/documents/resources/external-relations/eu/2038-marshall-plan-africa-and-europe-a-new-partnership-for-development-peace-and-a-better-future-bmz-january-2017/file.html>
4. Abdallah, H.I. and Abdul Salam A., 2021, Rethinking Russian Foreign Policy Towards Africa: Prospects and Opportunities for Cooperation in New Geopolitical Realities, *EJ-SOCIAL, European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 1, No. 2, April.
5. Wise, A. T., 2020, Failing Africa’s Farmers: An Impact Assessment of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, Global Development and Environment Institute, Working Paper No. 20-01. https://sites.tufts.edu/gdae/files/2020/07/20-01_Wise_FailureToYield.pdf
6. Higher education students from Africa in Russia 2020 by country, [Statista Research Department](https://www.statista.com/statistics/1131857/number-of-african-students-in-russia-by-country/), 4 March 2022. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1131857/number-of-african-students-in-russia-by-country/>
7. Cameroon, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Burkina Faso, Togo, Eswatini and Morocco were absent. Algeria, Uganda, Burundi, Central African Republic, Mali, Senegal, Equatorial Guinea, Congo Brazzaville, Sudan, South Sudan, Madagascar, Mozambique, Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa abstained.

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