



Digital Intelligence
Securing the Future



China and Russia in Africa: Talent Acquisition

Introduction

China

After African countries gained independence from their European colonisers between the 1950s and 1970s, Western-led financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) financed various infrastructure projects across the continent. Economic support often came with stipulations: these frequently required domestic reforms of the economy, which opened the countries up for further investment from other Western powers, thus expanding influence. However, this development largely faded through the 1960s and 1970s as African nations celebrated independence. There was also a lack of available funds from the West post-World War II.

This gap in funding offered China the chance to begin investing in the continent as early as the 1970s, in a bid to further its own international influence. This began when it developed the Tazara Railway linking Zambia with Tanzania, creating the longest railway in Sub-Saharan Africa at the time. Over the years, China has been seen as a partner that countries moving away from colonialism could cooperate with, as Beijing recognised Africa's need for infrastructure amid rapid population growth without requiring the same levels of economic reform.

China is Africa's largest trading partner, accounting for \$282bn in commerce in 2022¹. Much of China's investments in Africa are funded by loans: African nations have borrowed a total of almost \$160bn from China since 2000². Beijing has created 25 economic and trade cooperation zones in 16 African countries. Registered with China's Ministry of Commerce, these zones had attracted 623 businesses with a total investment of \$7.35bn by the end of 2020, according to the China-Africa Economic and Trade Relationship Annual Report 2021³.

Despite seeming to offer an alternative to Western powers, there has been some speculation that China has been using debt-trap diplomacy in African countries to retain long-term influence, though Beijing has consistently rejected these claims. Western powers have alleged that the investment in infrastructure may become a leverage point for China to push some countries or governments to side with Beijing on critical issues of importance to the United States or its allies.

The official website of the One Belt One Road (OBOR) lists 52 out of 54 African countries which have signed an agreement or understanding with it. The project is a worldwide infrastructure development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 to invest in more than 150 countries and international organisations. However, Beijing's funding in OBOR African developments fell to a historic low in 2022, as it cut financing for some large projects, amid debt concerns⁴.

Over the last 20 years, China led a financing surge for infrastructure projects in Africa ranging from ports and hydroelectric dams to highways and airports. However, OBOR funding in Sub-Saharan Africa dropped by 54 percent in 2022, to \$7.5 billion from \$16.5 billion in 2021, according to a recent report by the Green Finance and Development Centre, which is part of the Fanhai International School of Finance at Fudan University in Shanghai. The report detailed that Sub-Saharan Africa attracted \$4.5 billion for construction in 2022, compared with \$8.1 billion in 2021⁵.

At the time of writing, China's plans for the OBOR in 2023 and beyond are unclear, though it is predicted that it will seek to invest further into Information and Communications Technology (ICT).

Widely interpreted as an effort to counter the OBOR, the G7 launched the Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative in June 2021, allegedly to provide a more sustainable and environmentally friendly alternative to the Chinese programme. However, the project has made little progress since its unveiling. The proposed \$600 billion in funding, with the United States pledging \$200 billion, has yet to be collected. It is likely that the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War and the West's focus on addressing that conflict have hindered progress⁶.

There is a general practice of confidentiality surrounding the details of many of China's loans in Africa, with a lack of available reports and documents on how much money is being lent and where the funds are going. In the cases where information has been obtained, it is clear that China is strict with repayments. This secrecy and difficult nature of various contracts is often perceived as a lack of transparency, though there is minimal evidence that China is actively using debt traps in Africa.

Among the top African countries indebted to China, the percentage of money owed to Beijing is only a small proportion of total public debts. This contradicts narratives that the Chinese could take control over these debts and seize power of some assets.

Russia

Like China, Russia has supported liberation struggles and post-colonial governments in Africa, with it being one of few world powers that has never had colonies there. Therefore, Moscow appears to be promoting a view to strengthen relations with the continent. This has prompted some African countries to embrace Russia's shared struggle against the West.

Contrary to China, Moscow invests little in Africa, contributing less than one percent of the foreign direct investment (FDI) going to the continent, according to the World Investment Report 2022⁷. Instead, Moscow's financial commitment to Africa is primarily based on trade. At the first Russia-Africa summit in Sochi in 2019, President Vladimir Putin pledged to double trade with African states within five years; instead, it has declined each year since 2018, dropping by 30 percent in aggregate. Russian trade with Africa in 2021, the most recent full-year figure available, was worth \$15.6bn, a tenth of the continent's trade with China⁸.

As Russia has become more isolated from Europe since its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moscow is seeking to expand diplomatic and trade cooperation elsewhere. In addition, engagement in Africa allows Russia to advance geostrategic interests, securing a presence on NATO's southern border. Unlike China, Russia is placing geopolitical interests ahead of economic possibilities.

Over the last decade, the Kremlin has built a presence in many of Africa's 54 countries. Documents leaked in 2019, obtained by the Dossier Center, a London-based investigative unit, detailed that Russia is seeking to further increase influence on the continent. This, according to the documents, would be achieved using the Wagner Group, led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close ally of President Putin. The Central African Republic (CAR), Madagascar, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Libya and South Africa are just some of the countries which Prigozhin sees as key areas of cooperation where Russia can provide aid to stabilise political situations, assist in the building of

state institutions and produce new media⁹.

The increasing presence of the Wagner Group across African nations has raised concerns, owing to reports of criminal activities and claims of human rights abuses. Wagner has been active in Sudan, Mali, the Central African Republic, Mozambique, Burkina Faso and Libya.

In Mali, the Private Military Company (PMC) has been accused of being responsible for the death of civilians and an increase in violence, whilst conducting a series of offensives against Islamist extremists that control parts of the country. More than 2,000 civilians have been killed since December 2021, compared with about 500 in the previous 12 months, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). At least a third of those deaths recorded last year were from attacks involving the Wagner Group, according to the data compiled by ACLED. In addition, the Wagner Group is said to be releasing prisoners from jails in CAR and sending them overseas¹⁰.

More recently, the Wagner group has been linked with Sudan across mainstream media platforms, as conflict continues between the military and paramilitary forces. Prigozhin has denied any current involvement in the fighting, suggesting that no members of the PMC have been present in the country for over two years. However, the group has been active in Sudan since 2017, allegedly through gold mining agreements, providing training to soldiers and helping security forces¹¹.

Many believe that the primary goal of the PMC in Africa is to gain access to natural resources. In addition, Russia sees the Wagner group as an instrument of diplomacy, with strategies incurring minimal costs economically, and carrying significant political gains.

In January 2023, the US sanctioned people and entities linked to the group for their role in recruiting prisoners to fight in Ukraine and designated Wagner as a transitional criminal organisation¹². Furthermore, in February 2023, the European Union announced new sanctions on the group for human rights abuses in CAR, Mali, Sudan and Ukraine¹³.

The unofficial use of the Wagner Group in African countries allows Moscow to protect Russia's interests by providing military and political support, without having to take responsibility for a PMC not officially linked to the Kremlin.

Media, Telecoms and Propaganda

China

As China bolsters its presence in Africa, Beijing is continuing to expand its media footprint across the continent. China plays a major role in supplying and investing in ICT and telecoms equipment to Africa, though has been criticised by some Western countries for allegedly disseminating Beijing's political rhetoric. This is said to include disinformation campaigns as well as influencing some states with misleading information about the West, in an attempt to manipulate public opinion.

The US is one of the most outspoken critics of Chinese media influence: it has accused Beijing of generating false news reports with artificial intelligence and posting large volumes of antagonistic social media posts. However, the 2022 Africa Youth Survey, which comprised 4,500 interviews of 18- to 24-year-olds in 15

countries, found that 76% of respondents believed China had a positive influence in their country. Of the US, 72% said they believed American influence was positive¹⁴. This demonstrates the influence that Chinese media practices have on young people and signifies that the African youth are responding well to these campaigns.

Huawei and AICTO hosted the first Africa 5G Summit held in Bangkok in October 2022, where Huawei pledged to further increase investments for 'digital transformation' in Africa¹⁵. It was announced the following month that South African operator Telkom had launched its 5G network using Huawei kit. This made the operator the third in the country, following Vodacom and MTN, to launch 5G services¹⁶. In Kenya, Safaricom was the first telecoms company in East Africa to commercially launch 5G high-speed internet services, with infrastructure built by Huawei and Nokia¹⁷.

Deploying multiple vendors is seen as a way for African operators to circumvent US or European sanctions and calls to avoid Chinese technology.

Huawei's Executive Director of the Board, Chairman of the ICT Infrastructure Managing Board and President of the Enterprise BG, David Wang, has announced that the company is due to invest over \$300 million in African data centers and cyber security industries. The announcement was made during the Industry Digital Transformation Summit at the 2023 Mobile World Congress in Barcelona and the timeframe for the investment is yet to be confirmed. Huawei, with a focus on data center infrastructure innovation, is leading the development of capabilities to process vast and diversified computing power and support organisations against cyber threats¹⁸. The lack of digital security infrastructure on the continent has been a significant challenge for Africa, with Interpol's Africa Cyberthreat Assessment Report stating that around 90 percent of businesses are operating without the necessary cyber security protocols in place¹⁹.

Furthermore, MTN Group and Huawei signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) at MWC Barcelona 2023 to strengthen strategic cooperation in the field of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG). The companies are collaborating on deploying RuralStar to provide online access to remote and rural communities²⁰.

Additionally, Huawei, Hikvision, and CloudWalk, backed by Chinese loans, are in tender to lead the development of a new "smart" capital city in Zimbabwe to replace Harare. The new capital, which is slated by the government to become an artificially intelligent city, is facing some opposition from residents of the country, owing to concerns that the government is not prioritising economic issues, and fears surrounding state-monitoring of citizens. This follows reports from 2021 which suggest that President Emmerson Mnangagwa's administration has used targeted surveillance in the form of Pegasus spyware on the phones of politicians and journalists. Zimbabwe's relationship with China dates back decades, as Beijing- as well as Moscow- supported the country's struggle for independence from British colonial rule²¹.

Huawei has already built large information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure across the continent but continues to face challenges from Western countries over security concerns. Canada, Denmark, Sweden, the UK and the US are among some of the countries which have either banned Huawei or are phasing out the use of the company's equipment, with Germany becoming the latest considering a prohibition on components made by Huawei and ZTE in their 5G network. Ironically, many of the

cybersecurity incidents involving Huawei products have taken place in Africa. This includes CCTV footage being syphoned from the African Union headquarters in Ethiopia, as well as accusations aired in the *Wall Street Journal* that the company aided and abetted efforts by the Algerian, Zambian and Ugandan governments to spy on political dissidents. Huawei denies any involvement in the incidents²².

Russia

It is not uncommon for Russia to spread anti-West messages through propaganda tools, and Moscow has been accelerating its alleged misinformation campaign in Africa, with Putin expanding his influence in some countries through media content.

Of note, a large network of social media groups that spreads pro-Kremlin and anti-West propaganda is being widely used in an attempt to promote Russian influence, most notably in former French colonies in Africa. The network of social media groups, with a presence across multiple platforms, is called 'Russosphère' (Russian Sphere) and typical posts accuse France of modern-day colonialism, laud Putin, and call the Ukrainian army "Nazis" and "Satanists". Posts portray a positive rhetoric towards the Wagner Group, with content known to include recruitment details for the PMC. Russosphère, which was launched in February 2022 days prior to the invasion of Ukraine, describes itself as "a network in defence of Russia". The individual behind it is Belgian national called Luc Michel, who in the past has worked to legitimise votes in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories, and been linked to "Merci Wagner", a group supporting the work of the Russian mercenaries. According to Michel, the network is financed by private money and has received no funding from Moscow²³.

There have been reports of a propaganda campaign by the Wagner Group targeting Niger and Côte d'Ivoire. Disinformation attributed to Prigozhin has circulated in the two countries in recent months, depicting the French as zombies, snakes and in one case a 'fat rat called Emmanuel'. The PMC has a reputation of targeting unstable countries, though this new campaign suggests that Wagner is keen to further expand influence across the continent²⁴.

It is indisputable that Russia's anti-France messages are being heard in the former colonies of Africa, with Moscow's focus remaining on the Sahel region, despite the war in Ukraine. Russia is inserting itself in countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso and is taking advantage of the turbulent relationship these countries have with France, where ties have deteriorated over the past year. This has resulted in protest actions in opposition to France, with Russian flags photographed at some of these demonstrations. Moscow's presence delivers good publicity that undermines Western attempts to isolate Russia.

Aside from former French colonies, countries across Africa have varying responses to this so-called campaign, with people from Kenya and Nigeria for example, more open to Russia's rationalisation of the Ukraine War. African countries have been reluctant to label Russia's claimed special operation in Ukraine a war. Many abstained from voting on Russia's suspension from the UN Human Rights Council and refused to comply with Western sanctions, with 17 African nations abstaining and one voting against, during the United Nations General Assembly Resolution of 2 March 2022²⁵. BRICS member South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa blamed NATO for the war in Ukraine and said he would resist calls to condemn Russia. Ramaphosa also claimed that South Africa had been asked to mediate in the conflict, in comments made in

March 2022. The ruling African National Congress party of South Africa had strong ties to the former Soviet Union, which trained and supported anti-apartheid activists during the Cold War²⁶.

The effectiveness of Russia's messaging appears to have lessened African opposition to the war: this is also highlighted by the direct impact it is having on various African countries, with the continent subsequently being exposed to supply chain destabilisations, fuel price increases, elevated food insecurity and financial instability.

There is also evidence to suggest that Russia was involved in interference in the Madagascar presidential election in 2018. At least six candidates have said that they were offered sums of money to drop out of the election campaign. Russians are said to have arranged mock demonstrations outside the Consulate of France in Antananarivo, to spread anti-French and anti-colonialism messages. The winner of the election, President Andry Rajoelina, has denied receiving any Russian money. Purportedly weak legislation in the country is said to have allowed an open door for foreign interference²⁷.

Technology conglomerate Meta conducts investigations into "co-ordinated influence operations", with the goal of detecting fake accounts that build the illusion of widely held beliefs²⁸. Meta commenced this operation in 2017 and has since unearthed around 250 networks globally, with approximately 30 targeting Africa.

Meta executives have detailed that several of the efforts were Prigozhin-linked. In a report from 2021, the company said it had removed a network controlled by Sudanese nationals on behalf of people linked to the Russian Internet Research Agency, also known as Glavset, which engages in online propaganda and influence operations on behalf of Russian business and political interests. United States authorities alleged that the network included 83 Facebook accounts as well as 49 on Instagram, with a total following of almost 500,000 users²⁹.

Universities and Scholarships

China

The number of African students choosing to study in China is increasing. This can be attributed to economic and cultural exchanges between Africa and China, as well as Beijing's reputation for being technologically and economically advanced.

In November 2022, the Association of African Universities (AAU), and the China Association of Higher Education (CAHE) signed a five-year MOU to collaborate in areas of mutual interest, for the benefit of higher education institutions and other stakeholders within their respective regions. The MOU secures an agreement to guarantee the collaborative efforts of the two partners and paves the way for the implementation of a portfolio of activities and initiatives aimed at addressing the needs of higher education institutions. Main areas of the agreement include the establishment of a 'China-African Consortium of Universities Exchange Mechanism', with the intention of allowing universities, educational and research institutions on both sides to cooperate and conduct annual strategic meetings. Furthermore, a research network between China and Africa will be set up to compile and publish guidelines on higher education in the two regions, and there will be a programme to promote scholarships and grants for African students to

pursue postgraduate studies in China³⁰. According to a report from the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China titled "China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals", published in November 2021, Beijing has helped more than 30 African universities set up Chinese language departments or Chinese language majors. The report notes that 16 African countries have incorporated the Chinese language into their national education systems³¹.

Since 2004, China has sent a total of 5,500 Chinese language teachers and volunteers to 48 African nations. China has established more than 54 Confucius Institutes (CIs), public educational and cultural promotion programmes funded and arranged by the Chinese International Education Foundation and 27 Confucius Classrooms (CCs), hubs radiating out across a local authority, based in schools and serving the local community, on the continent, according to the 2018 edition of Quartz Africa³².

CIs are set up through a partnership between a Chinese university, a host country university and the office of Chinese language and culture promoter Hanban, an agency of the Chinese ministry of education and an affiliate of the Chinese Communist Party. CIs are housed in African colleges and universities but are fully funded by and controlled by Hanban. These CIs can develop and maintain relations with other local higher education institutions, which allow them to enrol additional students. The US has commented that the institutes interfere with free speech, suggesting that some faculties may censor material that is critical of China. In recent years, over 100 CIs have been closed on American campuses, while in the UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has promised to shut down dozens. Some Western governments see the CIs as propaganda systems for President Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party that produce Beijing's perspective on how the government works.

As a result of this, China is offering more university scholarships to African students than the leading Western governments combined. The annual Global Education Monitoring Report produced by UNESCO in 2020³³ showed that China was prepared to offer 12,000 scholarships to African students in the 2021 academic year, largely to support study at Chinese universities. In contrast, the UK government offered about 1,100 annual scholarships for African students, mainly through the Chevening scholarships, while the German and French governments offered around 600 each and EU programmes over 300 more³⁴.

China has emerged as one of the largest African student-hosting countries globally. According to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 81,562 African students studied in China in 2018, a 770% increase compared to 1996, when the number of African students in the country exceeded 1,000 for the first time. It is believed that African students who study in China are less likely to publicly criticise the state, largely due to having been taught a different world view³⁵. Some students have also allegedly experienced racist abuse, which was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. One student at Wuhan University claimed that when the COVID-19 outbreak began, foreign students were prevented from leaving the campus, for their own protection, due to concerns that local residents would provoke conflict³⁶.

Huawei operates a Seeds for Future programme, launched in 2008, which aims to develop skilled, local ICT and STEM students and link communication between various countries and cultures. The annual programme brings together university students worldwide to take part in an exchange programme in China. Malawi, Kenya, South Africa and Ghana were among the African countries to participate in the programme in 2022, which was held virtually due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions³⁷.

Furthermore, Huawei has announced that it will partner with UNESCO to enhance learning in developing countries, including Nigeria, Egypt and Cote d'Ivoire in Africa. Huawei's Vice President of Corporate Communications, Vicky Zhang, speaking at the Digital Talent Summit co-hosted by Huawei and the Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) in Barcelona, said that "the company is proud to be joining forces with UNESCO to better deliver enhanced learning experiences in these countries through the use of technology"³⁸.

These initiatives aim to improve cyber security and will enhance knowledge surrounding procedures to mitigate cyberattacks. This is essential, owing to the continent's current lack of understanding and training surrounding these practices. According to evidence collected in the KnowBe4 2023 African Cyberthreat Report³⁹, conducted across Botswana, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Mauritius, Nigeria and South Africa, one out of every three employees is likely to click on a suspicious link or e-mail, or even comply with a fraudulent request. The report highlights that African businesses and internet users remain uninformed about how to mitigate cyber threats, which leaves them vulnerable to attacks.

Russia

Russia is advertised as a desirable location for African students to study, most notably for health-related degree programmes. Russia promises studies in English and French, with the option of also studying in Russian after a seven-to-10-month pre-university language course. Furthermore, universities promote affordable tuition fees, which owing to the economic situation in some African countries, is likely to attract students.

Social media posts sponsored by the Russian State Universities organisation (Racus), aimed at undergraduate African students, portray its degrees as some of the most widely recognised qualifications in the world. Asya Manvelyan, student services manager for the department of Middle East and Southern Africa at Racus detailed that in 2023, some 30,000 African students are studying in Russian universities and over 100,000 African students are 'registered' – implying they have applied for enrolment in universities and professional colleges⁴⁰.

From November 2022, the Russian government increased its scholarship offer to Ghanaian students from 75 to 110. Students who qualified for the scholarships were able to pursue medicine and engineering courses in Russian universities. The Russian Ambassador to Ghana, Dmitry Suslov, assured Ghana of Russia's preparedness to support the country in its bid to use education to transform its economy. The Russian language is being taught at the Faculty of Languages at the University of Ghana, and the Russian Ambassador indicated that increasing the number of centres for the studying of the language would pave the way for many Ghanaians to travel to Russia⁴¹.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, there have been reports of Russia recruiting students to be deployed to fight for Moscow. Anonymous students at the Southern Federal University (SFedU) in Rostov-on-Don, near the border with Ukraine, claim that authorities have been pressuring African students at the institution to join Russians fighting in Ukraine. Students say that the university's officials have made attempts to persuade them into accepting an offer from either the Russian army or the Wagner Group, claiming both are willing to pay up to \$3,000 and \$5,000 respectively. Unconfirmed reports suggest that a failure to accept the offer may result in students being denied certain privileges, including increasing tuition

fees and cancelling scholarships⁴².

One Tanzanian and one Zambian student are known to have been killed fighting for Russia in Ukraine since the outbreak of the war. The students were studying at the Moscow Technological University and Moscow Engineering Physics Institute and were both sentenced to prison for unspecified criminal charges. They were offered pardons to participate in military activities with the Wagner Group. It is likely that there are other African students currently deployed with the Russian military, in exchange for freedom from prison⁴³.

Employment opportunities

Through investments and infrastructure projects in Africa, China has created several million jobs on the continent, with some companies providing skilled training and apprenticeships for employees. Cooperation in trade and investment has helped to create a thriving job market in Africa. According to a report released by China in 2021 titled “China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals”, China’s imports in services from Africa have been growing at an average annual rate of 20 percent, creating close to 400,000 jobs for the continent every year. Furthermore, Chinese Ambassador to Liberia, Ren Yisheng, said that Beijing has trained more than 160,000 professionals across various fields and created more than 4.5 million jobs for the continent⁴⁴.

Chinese private companies have become the main investment power in Africa. By the end of 2020, China had established over 3,500 companies across the continent: with more than 80 percent of their employees being locals, they have created millions of jobs. However, due to a lack of employment laws in multiple countries in Africa, there is an opportunity for Beijing to take advantage of workers, with low wages and poor working conditions not uncommon⁴⁵.

In Ethiopia, businessman Zhang Huarong operates the Huajian International Shoe City in Addis Ababa, one of the largest Chinese employers in the country. Some residents see businessmen such as Huarong as a ticket out of poverty, though his company has received scrutiny amid reports of poor working conditions and extremely low wages. Chinese employers have not gone unnoticed by the West, with some alleging that Chinese companies are unable to create jobs in Africa because they bring workers from China to fill the vacancies. Former US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, told leaders at the African Union, in Addis Ababa in March 2018, that Chinese investors “do not bring significant job creation locally”. His comments echoed warnings about neo-colonialism in Africa and Chinese labour importation by Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, respectively⁴⁶.

However, there is little evidence to support these claims. A McKinsey report from 2017, which surveyed more than 1,000 Chinese companies in construction, manufacturing, trade, real estate, and services in eight African countries, including Ethiopia, found that on average 89 percent of employees were African. This was the first time a large-scale dataset on Chinese hiring practices in Africa had been made available⁴⁷.

Huawei has been named the ‘Top Employer’ in Africa for 2023, by the Top Employers Institute⁴⁸. The telecoms company was also named Top Employer in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Cameroon, Cote d’Ivoire, Mali, Ethiopia, Senegal, and Republic of Congo. The Top Employers Institute grants its certification based on the companies’ results in the HR Best Practices Survey, which features six main HR categories, divided into 20 themes, including people strategy, work environment, talent acquisition, training and skills

development, wellbeing at work, and diversity and inclusion.

Russia's First Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade Vasily Osmakov said in a statement in March 2023 that Moscow is planning to establish its own leasing company in Africa. Osmakov stated that the company will be specialised and its location is currently being discussed. He also noted that Gazprombank Leasing is likely to be the main company behind the venture. There is currently no timeframe for the project; however, upon completion there are likely to be job opportunities available for Africans⁴⁹.

Through investment projects and the development of infrastructure, Beijing has provided a multitude of employment opportunities to the continent. However, due to the lesser focus on direct financing and more of a concentration on geopolitical gain, Russia has had a much lower impact on the creation of jobs in Africa.

Unemployment

Unemployment is an ongoing issue on the continent, with South Africa registering the highest unemployment rate in Africa in 2023, with around 30 percent of the country's labour force being out of work. The country is in a severe recession, which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the official unemployment rate declined for the fourth consecutive quarter in October-to-December 2022 at 32.7%⁵⁰.

There are concerns that this level of unemployment will directly impact crime rates, with people forced to turn to illegal activity to make enough money to live. Many unemployed South African youths took part in a major spate of looting and unrest in Johannesburg and Durban in July 2021 and it is possible that this could be repeated.

Africa has the world's youngest population, with many directly impacted by a lack of job opportunities. Owing to economic, political and socio-demographic issues, the African youth are more likely to face unemployment than most other regions globally. In 2023, the youth unemployment rate in Africa averaged around 12 percent and the youth population is expected to double to over 830 million by 2050. There are simply not enough available positions on the continent to be filled by the population. Consequently, it is clear to see why many in Africa are enthusiastic about new opportunities brought by foreign investors⁵¹.

Chinese and Russian cooperation in Africa

Tensions between China and Russia are currently limited, with both countries signing the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation in 2001, which was renewed in June 2021 for five additional years. However, the relationship between them has not always been good, with the breakdown of political relations as part of the Sino-Soviet split during the Cold War⁵².

China and Russia are pursuing contrasting strategies in Africa; however, both intend to counter neo-colonialism on the continent and accelerate a shift from the West to the East. This is demonstrated by the countries frequently voting together in the United Nations Security Council, and commonly expressing solidarity in opposition to Western criticisms of their policies in Africa.

In February, China, Russia and BRICS member South Africa conducted military drills, which were condemned by the United States and some European countries, due to the timing of the military exercise, which was

held as the world marked one year since the invasion of Ukraine. David Feldmann, spokesperson for the U.S. Embassy in South Africa, said that “timing would at the very least present South Africa with a diplomatic challenge”⁵³.

Some argue that South Africa is encouraging Russia to showcase its military power as it continues to engage in a war in Ukraine, which has resulted in a large number of deaths. With South Africa being a regional hegemon in the continent, there are concerns, notably from the West, that its close relationship with both China and Russia could result in some of the politically unstable and easily influenced countries in Africa looking to the powers for support. South African officials have defended the recent military drills, suggesting that such exercises with other nations are routine.

Western interest in Africa

The US has been increasing attempts to build American influence in Africa. So far this year, United States Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Vice President Kamala Harris have travelled to Africa. Though the visits were not defined by the Biden Administration as a direct counter to Chinese and Russian influence, they were in fact seen by many as a response to China and Russia’s economic, political and military activities on the continent.

Recently leaked classified Pentagon documents highlight US anxieties over increasing Russian influence in Africa. One of the documents describes a propaganda campaign by Russian intelligence to shape public opinion in Africa, which allegedly includes spreading conspiracy theories about US biological labs with the goal of “realigning” African countries with Russia. Another of the documents indicates that a Wagner Group employee, Vitaliy Perfiljev, pitched officials in the Central African Republic on an anti-US media campaign to counter a reported US plan to oust Wagner from the country⁵⁴.

Through the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which was enacted in 2000, the US provides economic and commercial engagement to Africa⁵⁵. The policy grants duty-free access to the US market for over 1,800 products, in addition to the more than 5,000 products that are eligible for duty-free access under the Generalized System of Preferences program. This in turn creates additional job opportunities across the continent. However, there are concerns that the AGOA is due to expire in 2025 and there is yet to be any indication from the US government that it will be extended. This has forced many business owners in Africa to halt plans to expand their businesses, as orders from American buyers could dip. Subsequently, this could have a direct impact on African jobs⁵⁶.

Any delays to the decision on whether to extend the act could reinforce a sense of a drift in relations between the US and Africa. America’s imports from sub-Saharan Africa have fallen since 2008. The 35 AGOA beneficiaries collectively account for about one percent of US imports, less than they did before the act was passed. As a trade partner for Africa, America has now been overtaken by China.

During a recent tour of Africa, and his 18th presidential trip to the continent, French President Emmanuel Macron visited Libreville, Luanda, Brazzaville and Kinshasa. The March trip came at a time when France is becoming increasingly concerned with Russia’s rising influence on French-speaking countries there. Macron outlined his strategy in Africa during a speech, where he called for a “mutual and responsible relationship” with the continent. Contrary to Russia, Macron does not believe that France should increase its security

efforts in Africa; instead remaining French military bases would be co-managed and shared with the forces of the host nations⁵⁷.

As previously stated, it is clear that former French colonies are listening to Russia's anti-colonial messages. In the last six months, Macron has accused Russia of feeding anti-French propaganda in Africa as part of its anti-colonial position. The French president has described Moscow's initiatives in former colonies as "predatory".

Conclusion

It is clear that Russia and China have become great powers in Africa, both with differing and non-conflicting aims on the continent- at least for now. The countries have shown great support to post-colonial struggles in Africa and have been regularly active in providing assistance to varying areas of significant need, which in turn has countered former Western hegemony.

Emerging talent in Africa is being supported and harnessed by the two countries, with desirable scholarships, apprenticeship programmes and training being offered. The need for increased training is indisputable and it is clear that many young people are keen to break free from poverty and crime, which is known to be a significant issue in many African countries. It is also vital that progress is made in countering the unemployment crisis that continues to impact Africa.

Of course, there are concerns surrounding the level of influence these countries may have on the continent, with Russia's Wagner Group continuing to expand a secretive presence across sub-Saharan Africa and the Ukraine war remaining a major global issue, along with the ongoing investments and initiatives from controversial Huawei and China being known to use propaganda as a powerful tool to spread pro-Beijing ideas.

Western countries should be aware of this growing influence on the continent, with the presence of Russia and China being widely well received by many across Africa. The West may need to up its game to compete with the increasing popularity of Moscow and Beijing.

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Endnotes

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About Cyjax

Cyjax was formed in 2012. Working closely with the financial sector, we developed technologies and methodologies to help stem the advance of digital threats impacting banks and consumers around the world. We quickly established ourselves as a leading provider of cyber threat intelligence capabilities across all industry verticals, a journey we continue today. Cyjax is built on its own growth and remains wholly owned by its founding members in the UK.



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