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Russia and South Africa to Forge Strategic Alliance

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Russia and South Africa enjoy an extraordinary relationship that goes deep down in history. Some of its moments resemble a heroic saga or a breathtaking detective story.

It may be interesting to know that in 1923 South African Communists sent 1300 pounds sterling and 1600 sacks of corn and flour to help those who suffered from hunger in the USSR. In 1942-1944 South Africans delivered aid to the Soviet people fighting Nazism. Many moments in the history of bilateral relations are yet to be explained. For instance, it is still unclear who insisted upon establishing diplomatic relations with the regime of apartheid in its last days instead of waiting for the new democratic government to come to power. Evidently, the goal was to undermine the relationship between Russia and the administration led by Nelson Mandela. As a

result, the visit of Mandela to Russia was postponed more than ten times!

The cooperation between Russia and South Africa has always been very practical. The African National Congress came to power in 1994. It had been receiving assistance – including military aid – from the USSR for more than forty years. In 1969 Umkhonto we Sizwe, the military wing of African National Congress, was on the verge of debacle. Hundreds of its Soviet Union trained fighters were saved by evacuation to the USSR. Twenty-five years later they dominated the ruling cabinet and some of them are still holding positions in the South Africa's government. But Nelson Mandela was released after 27 years in jail and he was not among those who enjoyed warm relations with the USSR.

There were people who had serious reasons to be concerned over potential rapprochement between Russia and South Africa and they did their best to deteriorate the relations between these two countries from the start. Expanding the relationship beyond the boundaries of bilateral ties to full-fledged alliance could significantly change the situation on some of the world markets: platinum, diamonds and, especially, gold. Russia and South Africa could create a «platinum OPEC». It would be an even more coherent entity than the oil OPEC we know today as Russia and South Africa together possess almost all platinum reserves in the world. Platinum prices abruptly went down from about a \$1500 per ounce in 2014 to around \$900 in 2015. Surely, it happened at the time when Russia and South Africa were boosting their political and economic ties. No doubt it was done on purpose. The political and economic damage to South Africa was significant, it resulted in miners' strikes and general unrest. The Marikana platinum mine massacre occurred on August 16, 2012. Police opened fire: 34 miners were killed and 78 wounded. Three years later the event still echoes through the country.

In March 2013, the Russian Federation and the South African Republic signed the Joint Declaration and established a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership to mark their decision to go beyond the routine bilateral interactions.

After the establishment of the New Development Bank (the BRICS Development Bank) in July 2015, South African government immediately announced it would open a Bank's branch in Johannesburg. ESCOM, a leading energy company, said it wanted to get the first loan.

South Africa has a lot of hurdles to overcome on the way. With apartheid gone, economic power is still held by foreign monopolistic capital, which has become an element of global governance. There are forces that cannot reconcile with the policy aimed at developing relations with Russia.

In June a provocation was staged when Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir was detained during the African Union's summit. It sent an unambiguous signal. Although the arrest was sanctioned by court, the South African government let the President leave the country without interference. The provocation had its consequences. Opposition launched lawsuits against the government accusing it of a «Constitution violation» and initiated impeachment procedures to topple President Jacob Zuma. It was also announced that the case could be transferred to the International Criminal Court. As an additional leverage, the United Nations issued a report, which affirmed that South African troops committed «war crimes» during the peacekeeping mission in Central Africa.

Despite the intrigues, the Russia-South Africa cooperation continues. A few weeks ago the South African nuclear energy program was made public. According to the document, Russia is to play the role of its major partner. The Moscow's participation was fiercely opposed. Media outlets were full of anti-Russian materials. Voices were raised to warn about the danger of playing the «Russian roulette». There were also calls in support of «green energy» while the very idea of using nuclear power came under harsh criticism that sounded like a pure hypocrisy keeping in mind constant blackouts and power shortages in the cities.

Apart from the economic resources there is a number of points that bring the two countries closer together. South Africa has a unique geographic position on the African continent. The Pan African policy of South Africa turns the country into a gate to the continent. In this regard it's worth to note the following continental initiatives of South Africa: the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), an economic development program of the African Union, and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Recent summits of SADC and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) have proven the fact that the Dark Continent is ready to stop being guided by the recommendations of International Monetary Fund. The program of SADC industrialization where South Africa plays a locomotive role and the set goal to turn the whole territory of Africa into a common market evidently prove the point.