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Mikhail Bogdanov: “The African continent is not an arena of confrontation between major international players, but a new, growing, diverse, distinctive, global pole of power”



How are Russian companies operating in Africa in the new geopolitical environment? To what extent is Russia willing to cooperate with African countries in such promising areas as digital technologies and peaceful nuclear energy? What has changed in the work of a diplomat over half a century? We spoke to Mikhail Bogdanov, Special Representative of the President of the Russian Federation for the Middle East and Africa, Deputy Foreign Minister of Russia.

–Mikhail Leonidovich, in connection with the intensification of our country’s foreign policy course towards Africa, how quickly will we be able to achieve the set pace, and what will it depend on?

–In fact, the pace has already picked up and, in my opinion, it is quite impressive: in the last five years, two full-scale summits and as many parliamentary conferences have been held in the Russian-African space, the Action Plan of the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum for 2023-2026 has been adopted, the first Russian-African conference of foreign ministers is being prepared, a number of bilateral and multilateral documents on high-level cooperation have been signed, trade turnover is growing, and the number of African students studying in our country is increasing.

The extent to which we will be able to maintain – and preferably increase – this momentum will depend on many factors, but above all on the political will of the parties, the creativity and tenacity of the business community, and the enthusiasm of the public. And – last but not least – on external factors, which are not always favourable: it is enough to recall the coronavirus pandemic, which recently seriously slowed down the dynamic development of Russian-African relations. Nevertheless, we at the Russian Foreign Ministry are optimistic, and we see the same spirit in our partners.

–In your opinion, what are the main results of last year’s Russia-Africa Summit for the participating countries in the political, economic and humanitarian spheres?

– The Second Russia-Africa Summit, held in St. Petersburg on 27-29 July last year, demonstrated the participants’ firm commitment to further strengthening cooperation, making it strategic and focusing on effective solutions to the priority tasks of our partnership. We confirmed the fundamental convergence of our approaches to building a fairer world order based on equality and the principles of international law.

At the same time, Russia’s priority is to support the strengthening of the sovereignty of African states and to ensure the national security of the continent’s states. Progress in these areas, taking into account the cultural and historical peculiarities of African countries, as opposed to the Western policy of neo-colonialism, became a transversal idea of the St. Petersburg Summit, a doctrinal consolidation of our common attitude towards the continent as an emerging centre of a multipolar world.

Within the framework of the Summit and in accordance with its results, agreements were reached on the whole spectrum of Russian-African cooperation and the main vectors of future joint work in the political, trade, economic, investment and humanitarian spheres were defined. They were summarised in the aforementioned Action Plan of the Russia-Africa

Partnership Forum for 2023-2026, and the conference of foreign ministers scheduled for this autumn will assess the progress made, make any necessary adjustments and clarify the way forward.

– Who are our main competitors in Africa? And what can we offer to the continent that others cannot?

– World interest in Africa is strong and growing, as a “continent of the future” with truly inexhaustible natural and human resources and an increasingly large and, in many respects, highly profitable market. Competition among external actors for a place under the African sun is therefore fierce, and increasingly involves representatives of the “global East and South”, in addition to the traditional contenders represented by the states of the “collective West”: China, India, Turkey, the countries of the Persian Gulf, South-East Asia and Latin America. As you can see, the list is long and growing.

Russia is not afraid of fair competition and is ready for it, offering Africa first and foremost the role of a serious guarantor of stability and security, as well as its traditional and newly developed competences, some of which are unique. Judging by the reaction of our African partners, there is a growing demand for our country’s help in the Sahara-Sahel region and throughout the continent.

What we categorically reject is the West’s attempts to tell Africans with whom they can and cannot do business. Fortunately, Africans themselves are increasingly rejecting such neo-colonial attempts.

In developing our cooperation with African countries, we start from the principle that the African continent is not an arena of confrontation between major international players, but a new, growing, diverse, distinctive and global pole of power. Russia is ready to actively help strengthen the existing potential of African countries without imposing political conditions or offering unsolicited advice – this is our competitive advantage.

– For more than two years now, the whole world has been living in a new geopolitical reality that has changed dramatically since the beginning of the special military operation. How has this affected the work of Russian companies in Africa, many of which have been sanctioned?

– Today’s realities require a change in our relations. The unprecedented political and economic anti-Russian sanctions imposed by the “collective West” require a significant reconfiguration of many parameters and mechanisms of cooperation with African countries. Work is underway at all levels to create new instruments. First and foremost, this concerns trade and economic relations. We are talking about the establishment of transport chains,

systems for foreign trade payments and ensuring food, energy, sanitary and epidemiological security in Africa.

Even in these difficult conditions, work is continuing vigorously in specific areas, including the construction and modernisation of infrastructure and industrial facilities, the exploration, extraction and transport of minerals, the promotion of Russian developments in medicine and digital services, and the expansion of the supply of Russian products. Not only are our exports growing, but so are imports from African countries. The federal executive authorities, in cooperation with our embassies, are actively supporting Russian business in its work on the African track, including the search for promising areas for effective access to the continent's markets.

At the same time, major Russian economic players have been operating successfully in Africa for a long time, and the current world situation only favours further growth of their interest in this continent. We also see a reciprocal interest on the part of African partners, especially in direct investment from Russia based on domestic technologies applicable to African conditions.

–How ready is Russia today to cooperate with African countries in new promising areas such as digital technologies, peaceful nuclear and space exploration, and how much does Africa need it?

– Moscow consistently favours the development of the full range of economic relations with Africa, both with individual states and regional groupings and, in the near future, with the emerging African Continental Free Trade Area. At the same time, there are no sectoral or thematic restrictions on the Russian side's cooperation with these countries – on the contrary, Russia is focused on strengthening the technological sovereignty of African countries along the entire chain of competencies – expertise, adaptation and transfer of technologies, establishment of enterprises and training of specialists.

Recently, the focus of our economic cooperation has gradually shifted to high technologies. Examples include the creation of a national satellite communications and broadcasting system in Angola and the construction of a space tracking station in South Africa. We are discussing cooperation projects with a number of African states in the peaceful use of nuclear energy and in space exploration and the application of its results. We see great interest on the part of Africans in these areas and we are endeavouring to meet it as far as possible.

The same applies to information and communication technologies. Russian ICT companies offer package solutions in the areas of digitisation, development of telecommunications networks, creation and implementation of mobile operating systems, radio control and cyber

security. At the same time, some of our partners' developments are of interest to us, as demonstrated by the week-long Russian-African seminar held at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow at the end of last year.

–After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a number of our embassies on the African continent were closed. We are now actively working to reopen them. In which countries have diplomatic missions already been opened or are they planned to be opened in the near future?

– Following the results of the Second Russia-Africa Summit, the leadership of our country set itself the task of expanding Russia's diplomatic presence on the African continent – not only in those countries where it was reduced in the 1990s. Just before the New Year, our embassy was opened in Burkina Faso, and another Russian diplomatic mission will soon be opened in Equatorial Guinea. Several more “points” are in the pipeline – we will let you know exactly where they will open as soon as we are ready.

– This year marks the 50th anniversary of your diplomatic career. What has changed in the work of a diplomat over these years?

– Half a century is a long time in human terms, and in some ways almost everything has changed. Suffice it to say that when I joined the Foreign Office, a diplomat's main “working tools” were a ballpoint or ink pen (or a typewriter for the more skilful) and a landline telephone. Nowadays, people in our profession cannot imagine life without a computer, a mobile phone with a wide range of functions and an Internet connection that is as stable and fast as possible.

The relationship between the various components of a diplomat's work has also changed. Our profession has become much more open and public, which of course has its advantages and disadvantages. The importance of universalism has grown: not in the sense that a diplomat should know and be able to do a little bit of everything, but in the sense of deeper and more thorough economic, legal and media qualifications. What has not diminished is the ability to establish and maintain personal contacts, as well as knowledge of foreign languages and their use in work. What has remained constant is a high level of professionalism within the framework of functional and country specialisation, a broad and in-depth knowledge of international issues, general erudition, and an interest in the history and culture of the countries and regions in which the diplomat is based or active.

–To end our conversation, our traditional question. What is Africa like? What attracts and fascinates you? What is it like for you?

– Africa is huge, literally immense, very diverse and at the same time has common features for different regions and peoples. Many things attract and fascinate me: the power and beauty of nature, the richness of flora and fauna, the abundance of monuments of ancient civilisations, but above all – the inexhaustible vitality of the people who inhabit the continent, their worldly wisdom, common sense and ability to overcome difficulties and hardships, to find joy and pleasure in the ordinary. In fact, this is what attracted me to the continent and has never let me go. I am always ready to fly to Africa, to receive guests from Africa and to meet Africans.

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– *Dear Mikhail Leonidovich, we thank you for the interesting and detailed conversation and hope to meet and talk with you many more times.*