



South Africa-Russia Ties: A U.S. Response?

June 27, 2023

Since the start of Russia's [war](#) on Ukraine in 2022, indications of South Africa's support for Russia and, by implication, Russia's war aims, have increasingly roiled U.S.-South African relations. Prior to the war's outbreak, South Africa-Russia ties had garnered fairly limited U.S. attention and concern. South Africa's stance as of mid-2023—[notwithstanding](#) its stated [policy of non-alignment](#) with global powers—could jeopardize U.S.-South African relations on [trade](#) and other [matters](#); intensify local economic [headwinds](#); and tarnish South Africa's democratic, pro-human rights [reputation](#).

[South African ties](#) with Russia, which include a bilateral “strategic [partnership](#),” focus on trade, politics, defense, and other matters. These ties, which are delineated in bilateral agreements, are [rooted](#) in Soviet-era military, training, and other [assistance](#) for the [anti-apartheid struggle](#) led by the African National Congress (ANC), South Africa's current governing party. Both countries also belong to the [multi-focal BRICS](#) (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), an [alternative](#) to similar Western-dominated country groupings.

The United States and South Africa—a significant African regional player—also maintain a [multifaceted strategic partnership](#) and a bilateral defense [committee](#), which last met [June 7-8, 2023](#). The United States has provided over \$8 billion in bilateral assistance to South Africa since 2003 to [counter HIV/AIDS](#), alongside [other](#) development aid. High-level [contact](#) occurs regularly, and the Biden Administration [launched](#) its 2022 [Africa Strategy](#) in South Africa. Bilateral trade and investment [ties](#), which U.S. programs [seek to expand](#), are substantial. The United States is South Africa's [largest source](#) of foreign investment, and for a decade has been its third-largest [trade partner](#), with trade value 16 times larger than that between South Africa and Russia.

Notwithstanding these ties and reportedly positive South African [public opinion](#) of the United States relative to Russia and [China](#), the ideologically leftist ANC has long displayed a [skeptical disposition](#) toward the United States and U.S. foreign policy. Contributing factors include the Reagan Administration's designation of the ANC as a [terrorist group](#) and pursuit of “[constructive engagement](#)” with the apartheid regime, prior to Congress's 1986 [enactment](#), overriding a presidential veto, of comprehensive [anti-apartheid sanctions](#).

As on [multiple other issues](#), U.S. and South African responses to Russia's war on Ukraine have diverged, increasingly straining bilateral ties. In contrast to official U.S. statements characterizing Russia's invasion as “[unprovoked and unjustified](#),” President Cyril Ramaphosa, while emphasizing South Africa's [non-](#)

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aligned status, has attributed the war to NATO’s “eastward expansion.” This characterization reflects the stance of the governing ANC, which has received political financing from a firm linked to U.S.-sanctioned Russian oligarch Viktor Vekselberg. U.S. Ambassador to South Africa Reuben Brigety has called the ANC’s position “outrageous [and] patently false.”

South Africa-Russia Ties Amid Russia’s War on Ukraine

South Africa abstained on multiple U.N. General Assembly votes critical of Russia’s 2022-2023 aggression in Ukraine, citing a greater need for peace diplomacy and mediation. Toward that end—and in a stated effort to ensure African access to Russian grain and fertilizer exports—in June 2023 Ramaphosa led a delegation of African leaders to Ukraine and Russia to propose a peace initiative, which Russia and Ukraine’s presidents largely rejected.

While that outcome may reflect the two belligerents’ military concerns and current unwillingness to negotiate, prior to the trip, some observers had questioned South Africa’s neutrality on the war, citing indications of its favor for Russia, including its:

- Hosting of a joint naval exercise with Russia and China, Operation Mosi II;
- Hosting of separate military-aided stopovers by U.S.-sanctioned Russian vessels: the Lady R, a ship onto which Brigety asserted arms for Russia’s military were loaded, and an aircraft reportedly delivering Russian diplomatic mail.
- Dispatch of high-level delegations to Russia to deepen military, intelligence, and political ties. An ANC-led delegation discussed a “recalibration of the global order,” echoing arguably anti-Western BRICS objectives, and committed President Ramaphosa to share with global leaders President Putin’s demands for ending the war.
- Invitation to President Putin to attend the August 2023 BRICS summit in South Africa in person, notwithstanding an International Criminal Court (ICC) warrant for Putin for war crimes in Ukraine—and despite South Africa’s obligation, as a party to the ICC’s Rome Statute, to arrest Putin if he enters South Africa. To avoid that outcome, South African officials announced planned legal changes, since abandoned, to ostensibly enable South Africa to skirt its obligation, and have since proposed a virtual summit or moving the summit to another country.
- Hosting of bilateral and BRICS cooperation visits by Russia’s foreign minister and other Russian officials.

U.S.-South African tensions escalated in mid-May 2023, after Brigety’s assertion that South Africa had loaded weaponry onto the Lady R (see textbox), thus “arming” Russia, which he called “fundamentally unacceptable.” South Africa officials denied Brigety’s remarks—which were reportedly unvetted and spurred internal State Department diplomatic concerns—but President Ramaphosa appointed an independent panel to investigate.

Congressional and Administration concern over South African-Russian ties appears to have grown. H.Res. 145, introduced in February 2023, critiques deepening South Africa-Russia ties and military cooperation, and calls on South Africa to “publicly oppose Russia’s unjustified and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine.” Should South Africa fail to demonstrate that it does not support Russia, some Members have called for a strong signal of U.S. displeasure. In June 2023, a group of House and Senate committee leaders asserted in a letter to the Administration that South Africa’s Russia policies may make it ineligible for duty-free trade benefits under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA)—as Senator Todd Young asserted during a March 2023 hearing. The signatories also questioned South Africa’s suitability to host the U.S.-Africa AGOA Forum in November 2023.

Whether Members may act to counter South Africa-Russia cooperation—as by legislatively removing trade benefits or imposing sanctions, a risk some South African officials have raised—remains to be seen, but it may be risky for South African officials to assume that such prospects are unlikely. However, while perceived U.S. retaliation could deter South Africa’s government from further pro-Russia actions, it might instead alienate the government and spur it toward greater cooperation with Russia or China.

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