

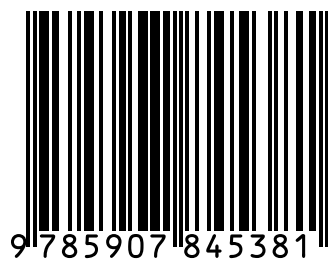


South Africa and Russia: A Long-Lasting Legacy of Strategic Cooperation

Sanusha Naidu and Daria Zelenova

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1. Introduction

The relationship between South Africa and Russia is a complex interplay of historical memory, ideological solidarity, and evolving geopolitical interests. Rooted in the Soviet Union's support for the African National Congress (ANC) during the anti-apartheid struggle, the foundations of this partnership were shaped by a shared commitment to anti-colonialism and resistance to Western imperialism. This early ideological alignment forged a sense of political camaraderie that endured well beyond the Cold War. However, in the post-apartheid and post-Soviet eras, the nature of the relationship has shifted – becoming increasingly pragmatic and shaped by strategic considerations sometimes interpreted as deep-rooted ideological kinship.

In recent years, South Africa and Russia have found common ground in global forums such as BRICS, which both states use as platforms to challenge Western dominance and advocate for a more multipolar international order. This alignment reflects mutual dissatisfaction with the current global governance architecture and a desire to assert greater agency on the world stage. Yet, despite this symbolic and diplomatic convergence, economic ties between the two countries remain relatively weak, raising important questions about the structural depth and long-term sustainability of the partnership.

Moreover, as global power dynamics continue to shift – with Russia adopting a more assertive posture globally and South Africa reaffirming its policy of non-alignment – new avenues for cooperation have emerged alongside underlying global tensions. These developments underscore the importance of revisiting the historical roots of the relationship to understand its current trajectory and future potential.

This paper argues that the South Africa – Russia relationship, while anchored in a shared past, is increasingly shaped by the strategic imperatives of a changing world order. Through a chronological and thematic analysis, the paper explores how both countries navigate their historical legacies, ideological frameworks, and contemporary challenges in pursuit of a partnership that seeks to balance the symbolic nature of the past with the refinement of their strategic partnership under an uncertain global future.

2. Conceptualisation of Relations

In 2025, Russia and South Africa marked 33 years of diplomatic relations, signifying a new phase in post-Cold War ties. These relations are founded on a comprehensive strategic partnership based on mutual respect, equality, and shared history, maintained through high-level confidential political dialogue. Both nations underwent significant domestic changes at the end of the 20th century – the fall of the Soviet Union and South Africa's first democratic elections – which became pivotal moments that led to new developmental paths and political realities. Understanding the changing structural circumstances in both countries provides a helpful benchmark for analysing their bilateral cooperation and the factors shaping current trends in their global engagement. A key consideration is whether their relationship is driven by a common history, shared perspectives, similar development challenges, mutual geopolitical understanding, or a combination of all these elements.

The western-centric narrative of the Cold War has significantly shaped the history and dynamics of bilateral ties between South Africa and Russia. Reflection on their cooperation reveals a tendency to interpret armed conflicts in Southern Africa through a Western lens, often framing them as a “superpower rivalry” during the Cold War. As Professor Shubin aptly noted, it would not be an exaggeration to assert that “all political forces in Southern Africa, from the racist regime in South Africa to UNITA led by Jonas Savimbi in Angola, which received open or covert support from the United States, were ultimately defeated.”¹ This legacy continues to influence contemporary narratives of the Russia-South Africa relations. But as history demonstrates, the ties between the two countries are much deeper and go beyond the Cold War framework. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research that incorporates African perspectives (South Africa included) on contemporary Russia's global focus relating to great power configurations. This outdated Cold War binary framework has also found traction in how the BRICS is interpreted. Both Russia and South Africa share a common vision of the alliance not as a confrontational grouping, but as an alternative platform for establishing a fair, equitable, and inclusive set of global governance institutions.

Thus the continual use of an outdated Cold War model to examine South Africa-Russia relations is myopic, as it overlooks over 70 years of multi-layered cooperation. This includes grassroots channels of people-to-people solidarity and internationalist solidarity promoted at the highest levels of state bodies. Recent oral history and archival research conducted by the team of researchers headed by Professor Sifiso M. Ndlovu and Professor Vladimir Shubin has revealed lesser-known networks and geographies of solidarity between Russian and South African

¹ Шубин В. *Россия – Южная Африка: 30 лет плодотворного сотрудничества и 25 лет официальных отношений* в Ученые записки Института Африки РАН. No 1. (38). 2017. Pp.6-18.

peoples². Moreover, the Cold War model failed to recognise that Russia has never had colonies in Africa, yet its people were acutely aware of developments in distant parts of the continent. For example, Russians supported the Boers during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), with approximately 200 Russian volunteers traveling to South Africa to offer their support. Conversely, South Africans also journeyed to Russia, and the Transvaal Republic established diplomatic relations with Russia in 1898 through consulates. Adolf von Gernet, a mining engineer and entrepreneur, became the first full-time Russian consul in Johannesburg and Pretoria, while Dr. Willem Johannes Leyds was dispatched to Russia to strengthen diplomatic ties.³

Therefore in conceptualising the relationship between South Africa and Russia, the engagement must be explored through a broader lens than just the optics of the Cold War. The relationship must be viewed through a prism that examines the relationship through a multi-layered conceptual framework that encompasses historical solidarity, strategic pragmatism, and evolving global realignments. In the next section, this multi-layered approach will be discussed further.

3. The Multi-layered Conceptual Framework

The relationship between South Africa and Russia is neither a full-fledged strategic alliance nor a purely symbolic partnership. It is best understood as an evolving arrangement shaped by past affinities, present pragmatism, and future uncertainties.

a) The Ideological Affinity

During and after the Second World War, a deep resonance emerged between Soviet anti-fascism and South African anti-racism. As early as 1945, the Non-European United Committee of South Africa publicly likened apartheid to fascism⁴, aligning the racialised system in Southern Africa with the totalitarianism of Nazi Germany.

² Shubin V. and Ndlovu S., (Eds). *Solidarity in the struggle against apartheid. Memories in Russia and South Africa*. Scotaville, Johannesburg, 2024.

³ Филатова И., Давидсон А. СССР и Южная Африка в годы Второй мировой войны в Африка в судьбе России. Россия в судьбе Африки. М.: Политическая энциклопедия, 2019. С. 120 – 133.

⁴ SADET. *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*. Vol. 3. International Solidarity Part. 1. P.2. UNISA Press. Editors: South African Democracy Education Trust.

For the USSR, emerging victorious from a war against fascism, this ideological framing provided ground to conceptualise white minority rule in Africa as a moral and political affront to the anti-fascist order. The Soviet state, thus, positioned itself as a natural ally to the oppressed peoples of Africa, not merely in rhetorical terms, but as part of a broader vision of global socialist transformation.

The ascendancy of Nikita Khrushchev to Soviet leadership in 1953 not only marked a turning point in Moscow's foreign policy but also coincided with the global wave of decolonization, which pushed the USSR toward greater alignment with the Global South. A key moment in this shift was the 1955 Bandung Conference – a landmark event in world politics where newly independent Asian and African states openly declared their interests, articulated their principles of international relations, and reaffirmed their commitment to fighting colonialism and neocolonialism⁵. The ANC officially was not recognized as the government in exile, but Moses Kotane still visited the event as the representative of the ANC.

During the same period in line with the decolonization processes Khrushchev revisited the ideas of Lenin's proletarian internationalism, which saw the struggle against imperialism, colonialism, and racial domination inherently connected to the global class struggle and the advancement of the socialist internationalism project⁶. Consequently, the USSR became a critical backer of the national liberation movements in Africa, offering not only political and moral support but also concrete military, educational, and logistical assistance. For three decades the USSR had provided full assistance to the parties that led the liberation struggle in Southern Africa – ANC, SWAPO, ZAPU, MPLA, and FRELIMO by introducing and supporting resolutions in the United Nations and other international organizations calling for immediate action against the apartheid regime, and also sharing its direct material, humanitarian and military effort with the freedom fighters.

b) A Shared Legacy of Internationalist Solidarity

The relationship between the Soviet Union and South African liberation movements transcended elite diplomacy and party-to-party connections, deeply

⁵ See, for example: *70 Years On: The Legacy of Bandung. An Expert Discussion*. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/events/announcements/valdai-club-to-discuss-the-legacy-of-bandung-1955/>

⁶ See, for example, Westad, Odd Arne. *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*. 1st. ed. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

embedding itself within society through the dynamics of people-to-people exchanges. Given the longstanding traditions of communist solidarity rooted in the Comintern, it is unsurprising that ANC and SACP initially engaged with the Soviet Union in the mid-1950s.

Archival records reveal early interactions: Josiah Gumede's visit to the USSR in 1927, Moses Kotane's studies at the International Lenin School in 1930, and frequent visits by ANC and SACP leaders throughout the 1950s. Notably, in 1953, ANC Secretary General Walter Sisulu and ANC Youth League Secretary Duma Nokwe visited Moscow en route to China. In 1954, prominent anti-apartheid activists Brian and Sonia Bunting travelled to the USSR as guests of the All-Union Society of Cultural Ties with Foreign Countries. Among the activists there was also Ruth First who visited the Anti-Fascist Committee of Soviet Women in Moscow. These interactions fostered enduring bonds and a mutual recognition of shared struggles against exploitation and oppression.

In April 1963, Oliver Tambo, then ANC Deputy President General and head of its external mission, visited Moscow to present the organization's strategic decision to adopt armed struggle against the apartheid regime. This pivotal meeting initiated Soviet political and military training programs for ANC cadres across various locations in the USSR⁷. Over time, these military training initiatives expanded significantly in both scope and scale, eventually encompassing specialized instruction for navy and air force officers.

Military cooperation intensified in the post-1975 period, particularly through Angola, which became a critical site of Cold War contestation⁸. Following Angolan independence and the outbreak of civil war and the intervention of racist South Africa, the MPLA, supported by the Soviets and Cubans, offered safe haven and training facilities to ANC's military wing, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK). Soviet instructors played a pivotal role in training ANC fighters, exemplified by the presence of figures like Comrade Ivan (Vyacheslav Shiryayev) and Colonel Michael Konovalenko⁹. These military exchanges were not simply transactional but were imbued with fraternal sentiment and mutual respect, even as they were marked by the strategic complexities of regional conflict.

⁷ See, for example, Shubin, V. *The ANC. A View from Moscow*, Mayibuye, 1999.

⁸ Adamishin, A. *The White Sun of Angola. A Memoir*. URL: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/adamishin_-_white_sun_of_angola.pdf

⁹ See, for example, Shubin, V. *Unsung Heroes: The Soviet Military and the Liberation of Southern Africa in Cold War History* 7, no. 2 (2007): 251 – 62.

MILESTONES OF COOPERATION BETWEEN ANC/ SACP AND MOSCOW



Josiah Gumede,
President of the ANC,
visited the USSR

1927 (November-December)



SACP leader Moses Kotane arrived
in Moscow to study at the Comintern
International Lenin School
for one year

1930



ANC Secretary General Walter Sisulu
and ANC Youth league Secretary
Duma Nokwe visited Moscow
en route to China

1953 (November)



Prominent anti-apartheid activists including
Brian and Sonia Bunting, visited the USSR
as guests of the All-Union Society of Cultural
Ties with Foreign Countries.
Ruth First visits the Soviet Women's
Anti-Fascist Committee
in Moscow

1954



SACP members Yusuf Dadoo and Vella Pillay
travelled to Moscow to brief Soviet officials
on South Africa's political situation
and request financial support for the
SACP, ANC, and families affected
by the Sharpeville
Massacre

1960 (July)



Moses Kotane
and Yusuf Dadoo held
discussions in Moscow with
CPSU leaders on launching
an armed struggle
against apartheid

1961 (October)



Radio Moscow
began broadcasting
in African languages

1961



The Soviet Union opened its embassy
in Dar-es-Salaam, which served
as a key channel for communication
with the ANC's exiled
leadership

1962



Oliver Tambo, ANC Deputy President
and head of its external mission, visited
Moscow to outline the ANC's strategic
shift toward armed struggle against
the apartheid regime

1963 (April)



The USSR initiated
academic, political,
and military
training programmes
for ANC cadres

1962-1963



The USSR Union
of Writers petitioned
the UN to "prevent the execution
of South African democratic leaders,"
one of many such appeals
from Soviet organizations

1964 (April)



Anti-apartheid
lawyer Bram Fisher
was awarded the
Lenin Peace Prize

1967

Importantly, the Soviet commitment extended beyond arms and ideology. In 1985, a grassroots campaign led by Soviet schoolchildren in Sverdlovsk collected 20 tonnes of humanitarian aid for the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College in Tanzania. During his visit to Moscow and in appreciation of the donation, Oliver Tambo, president of the African National Congress, noted that the gifts sent by the youth of Sverdlovsk were an integral part of the great assistance provided to ANC by the Soviet Union.

This civilian mobilization highlighted the deep connection between the Soviet people and the South African liberation cause, revealing the essence of socialist internationalism. This solidarity was driven by a shared sense of justice rather than mere geopolitical calculations, with various segments of Soviet society contributing to this effort. Participants included doctors, military specialists, translators, diplomats, trade union activists, cultural and youth organisation members, scholars, writers, and even schoolchildren. It exemplified the truly transnational networks of solidarity between the Russian people and the oppressed majority in South Africa.



Photo 1. Sveta Ufimskaya, Galya Krovisikova, Yulia Novikova and Natasha Ponomareva perform at the fundraiser to send a parcel to children and students that are living and studying in the ANC Freedom College of Solomon Mahlangu. They are singing revolutionary songs and songs of solidarity with the people of South Africa suffering under apartheid. Photo from Tatyana Mukhammed's archive



Photo 2. Photo from Tatyana Mukhammed's archive

c) Support for Diplomatic Efforts

The complexities encountered by the Soviet Union in Angola – exacerbated by its concurrent military entanglement in Afghanistan – significantly shaped Moscow's recalibrated approach toward Africa and the broader Third World during the 1980s. The ascendancy of Mikhail Gorbachev and the introduction

of *perestroika* and the “new thinking” doctrine in 1985 marked a pivotal shift from militarised internationalism to a diplomacy-oriented foreign policy. This transition advanced negotiated settlements in regions previously defined by armed struggle, including apartheid South Africa. Despite this strategic pivot, ANC and its military wing, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK), continued to receive robust political and military support from the Soviet Union. However, parallel discourses emerged within Soviet policy circles that began to prioritise peaceful resolution and post-apartheid state-building.

The increasing global condemnation of apartheid – amplified by the regime’s eroding legitimacy – further intensified international solidarity with ANC. Domestically, the rise of legal opposition movements and the reconfiguration of internal resistance coincided with changes in the structural conditions in the Soviet Union. From the mid-1980s, Soviet academic institutions and public organisations started direct engagement with South African actors advocating for democratic transformation. This included high-profile visits by figures such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Alex Boraine of the Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa (IDASA), and Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, former leader of the Progressive Federal Party.

A milestone in Soviet-ANC relations occurred on November 4, 1986, when Mikhail Gorbachev met with Oliver Tambo in the Kremlin. The communiqué issued after the meeting reflected a maturing political alliance and outlined three core conditions¹⁰ for a viable political settlement in Southern Africa: an end to Pretoria’s military aggression against neighbouring states, the implementation of UN resolutions mandating Namibian independence, and the complete dismantling of the apartheid regime – identified as the fundamental cause of regional conflict. In this context, *perestroika* played a dual role. It not only redefined the USSR’s strategic posture but also contributed to dismantling the “Red Threat” narrative that had long sustained white minority rule in South Africa¹¹. In doing so, it widened space for a negotiated political transition, positioning the USSR as a constructive actor in the final chapter of the anti-apartheid struggle.

¹⁰ See, for example, Шубин В. *Россия – Южная Африка: 30 лет плодотворного сотрудничества и 25 лет официальных отношений* в Ученые записки Института Африки РАН. No 1. (38). 2017. P.11.

¹¹ Ndlovu S. *The History and Geopolitics of Soviet phobia and anti-communism in South Africa*. Skotaville, 2021.

MILESTONES OF COOPERATION BETWEEN ANC/ SACP AND MOSCOW



Moses Kotane died and was buried at Moscow's Novodevichy Cemetery

1978



The first group of Soviet military advisors was deployed to assist the ANC in Angola

1979



Mikhail Gorbachev met with Oliver Tambo in Moscow, reaffirming Soviet support for the ANC's struggle against apartheid

1986



The ANC opened its mission in Moscow

1987



Archbishop Desmond Tutu of Cape Town visited Moscow

1988



The USSR facilitated the relocation of Umkhonto we Sizwe soldiers from Angola to Tanzania and Uganda at the ANC's request

1989



Oliver Tambo held a press conference in Moscow, confirming continued Soviet support for the ANC

1989



The ANC, SACP, PAC, and Umkhonto we Sizwe were unbanned in South Africa

1990



Nelson Mandela was released from prison

1990 (February)



Nelson Mandela was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize

1990 (May)



The Soviet Union dissolved

1991 (December)

4. Structural Shifts and Domestic Transformation in South Africa and Russia, 1989 – 1994

Between 1989 and 1994, South Africa and Russia were swept into the currents of a rapidly changing global order. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the ascendancy of neoliberalism reshaped international norms and power dynamics. These structural shifts had profound and divergent domestic consequences in both countries, triggering democratic transition in South Africa and political-economic fragmentation in post-Soviet Russia.

Gorbachev in his last days in power was distancing himself from the ANC, citing a need for “equidistance” from the parties in the South African conflict. This was marked by the resumption of consular relations between South Africa and the Soviet Union in November 1991, followed by De Klerk’s state visit to Russia in 1992. The new Yeltsin-led administration showed a clear inclination to cooperate with the apartheid regime, believing that direct contact with the Government of the National Party would aid in a negotiated settlement.

The collapse of the USSR and the onset of Yeltsin’s neoliberal policies coincided with South Africa’s own dramatic transition to democracy. The liberalisation reforms and westernisation of Russia’s political landscape negatively impacted its relations with Africa, leading to a notable decline in cooperation. Several embassies in Africa were closed, and numerous projects initiated by the Soviet Union were halted. Despite this de-Africanisation of Russia’s foreign policy, South Africa remained a significant partner and ally, largely due to the relationships cultivated between Moscow and the liberation forces in Southern Africa.

The table below outlines the key impacts during the period 1990-1994 for Russia and South Africa

Structural adjustment programmes had different effects on Russia and South Africa. In Russia, the 1990s were associated with national humiliation and a weak state, which was largely overcome with the rise of Vladimir Putin and the demand for a strong state.

KEY IMPACTS DURING THE PERIOD 1990-1994 FOR RUSSIA AND SOUTH AFRICA

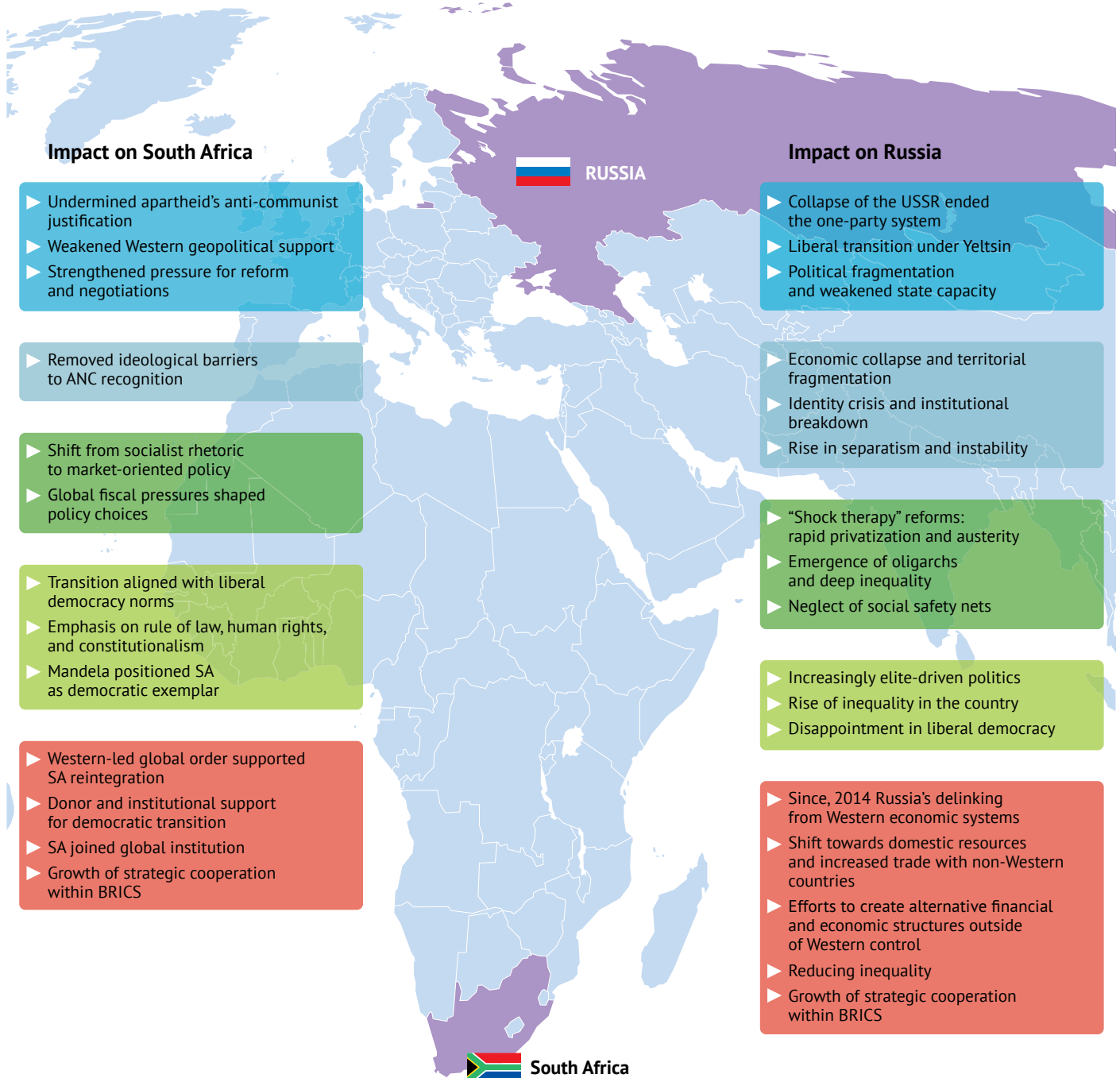
End of the Cold War

Collapse of the Soviet Union

Rise of Neoliberalism / Washington Consensus

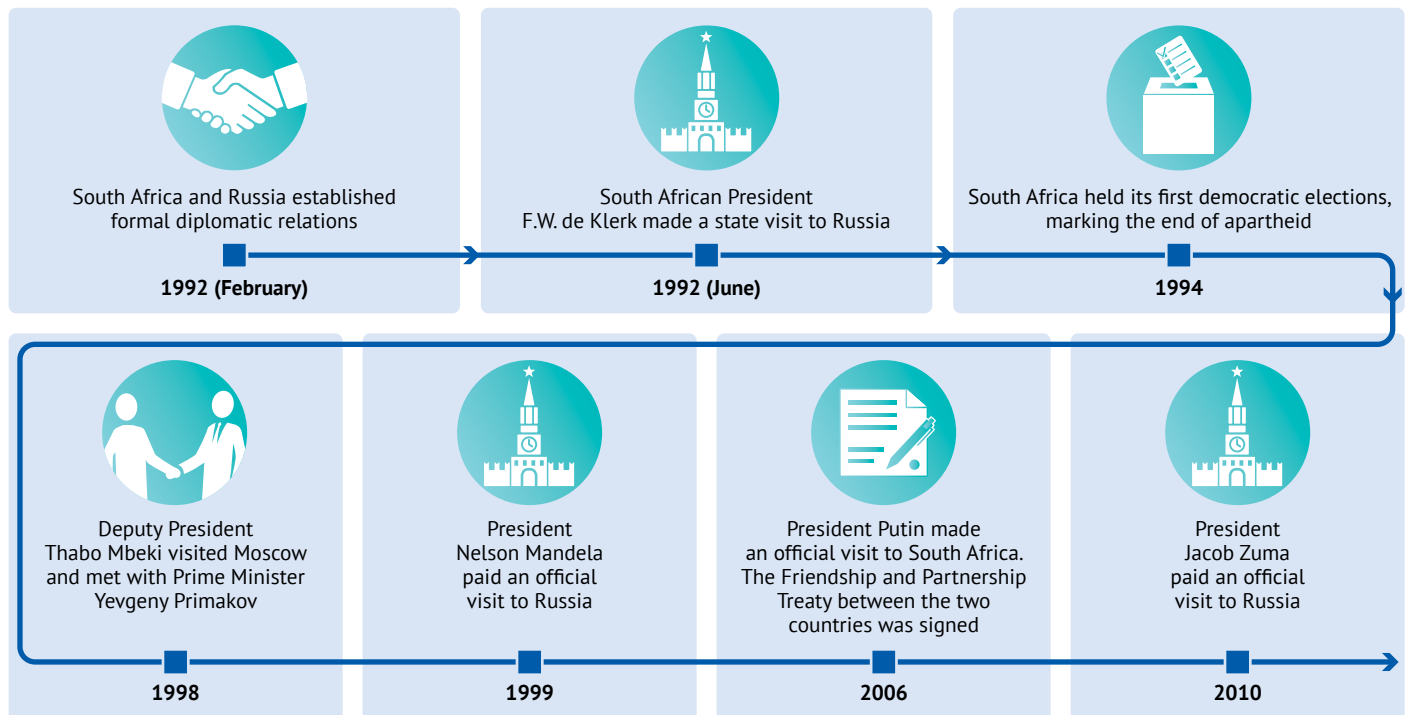
Global Democratic Norms

Geopolitical Realignment



Compiled by authors based on various sources.

TIMELINE OF RUSSIA-SOUTH AFRICA BILATERAL RELATIONS IN THE POST-SOVIET ERA



With ANC's victory in the 1994 election, creation of the Mandela-led government and South Africa's reintegration into the international community, Russia – fresh from its own post-Soviet transformation – welcomed the new democratic government and lent its support to Pretoria's return to global institutions. High-level exchanges that happened under Presidents Thabo Mbeki and Vladimir Putin reflected a shared commitment to multilateralism, sovereignty, and reform of global governance. Both nations found common cause in forums like the United Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement, rhetorically resisting Western dominance and championing a multipolar world order. From 1994 to 2006, Moscow and Pretoria set the foundation for the adoption of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2013.

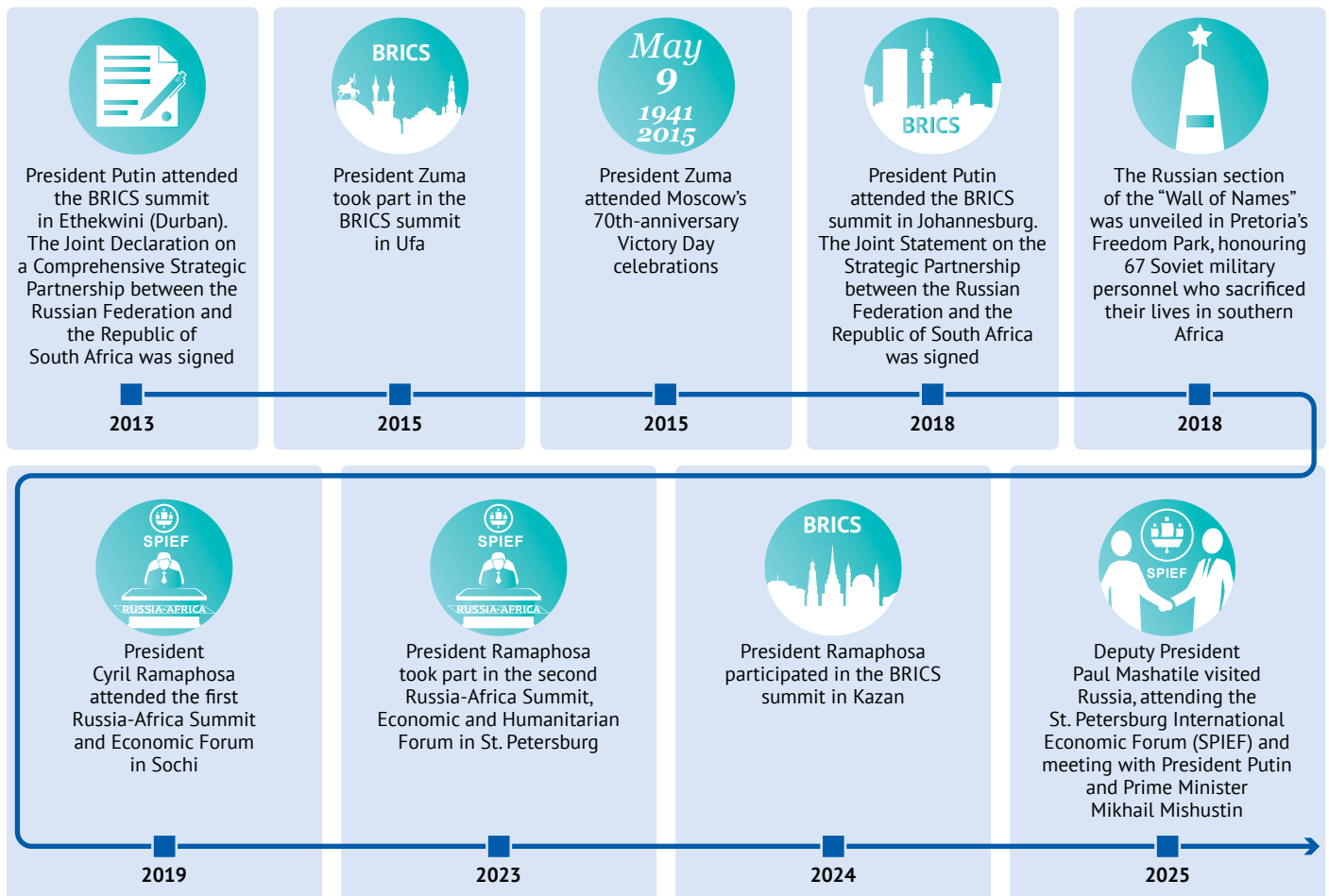
5. Russia and South Africa Relations in the New Era of Cooperation: The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP)

Both Russia and South Africa emerged from the Cold War eager to transcend the burdens of their pasts and reframe their roles on the global stage. Russia pivoted from its Soviet identity to a more pragmatic posture that emphasised multipolarity, sovereignty, and strategic engagements. South Africa, liberated from the pariah status of apartheid, embraced a foreign policy grounded in reconciliation, human rights, and normative leadership. In both cases, policymakers consciously aimed to shed the narratives that had long constrained them – Moscow as the communist threat and the apartheid state's defence against alleged communist encroachment – in favour of agendas that showcased each as forward-looking, independent actors. For Russia, it was about seeking a balanced global order beyond US unipolarity and attempts to work out a mutually beneficial cooperation with Europe, while in the case of South Africa it was the pursuit of a distinctive role – championing human rights, mainstreaming Africa's integration, development and elevation in world affairs, as well as global governance reform while safeguarding its economic and security imperatives in an increasingly multipolar world. In doing so, they each sought to project a value proposition centred on principled engagement, mutual respect, and an affirmation of sovereignty that would reshape perceptions and forge new avenues for cooperation. Signing of the Friendship and Partnership Treaty between the two countries in 2006 and establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CPS) in 2013 represent the culmination of these efforts. In 2018, the two countries' Presidents signed a Joint Statement on the Strategic Partnership, which is "guided by the goal of building a safer, fairer and more democratic international world order based on mutual understanding and mutually beneficial cooperation and reflecting the cultural and civilizational diversity of the world"¹².

The most recent version of Russia's Foreign Policy Concept, approved by President Vladimir Putin on March 31, 2023, reflects significant shifts in Russia's global posture and clearly sets out new strategic goals, one of which is the need

¹² *Joint statement on the strategic partnership between the Republic of South Africa and the Russian Federation*. July 26, 2018. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5325>

TIMELINE OF RUSSIA-SOUTH AFRICA BILATERAL RELATIONS IN THE POST-SOVIET ERA



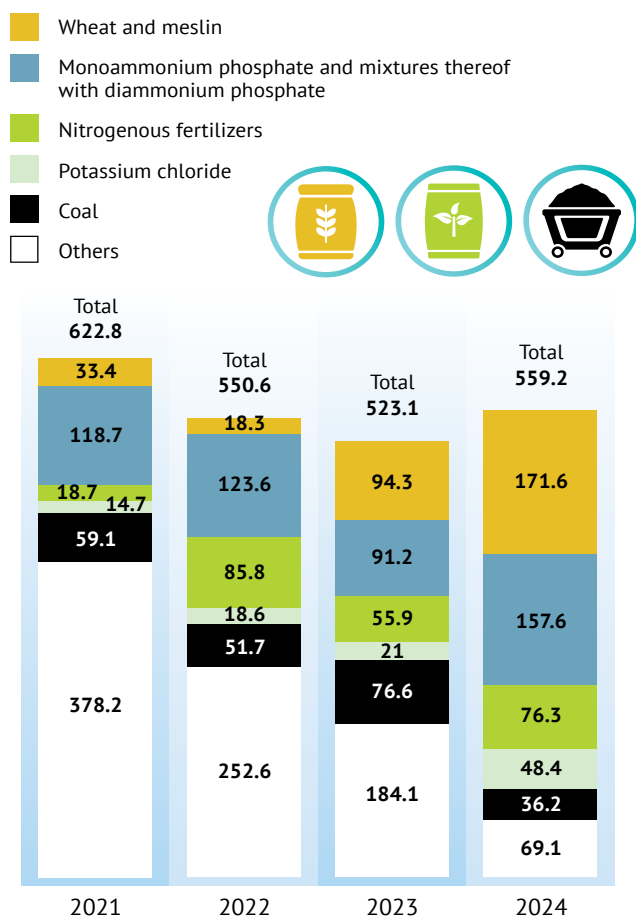
for a multipolar world. While rejecting Western hegemony and the dominance of the United States and its allies, Russia is seeking to create a "Greater Eurasian Partnership" by deepening ties with China, India, the Islamic world", but it also shows commitment to establish long-term relationship with Africa¹³. The new Concept dedicates 6 paragraphs to Africa and mentions that Russia's approach to the continent is guided by three main principles: the Soviet legacy; support for the idea of African solutions to African problems; non-interference in internal affairs and common views on a multipolar world. The Concept details Russian priorities in the region and names the top five: 1) support for the sovereignty and independence of African countries; 2) assistance in conflict resolution; 3) expansion of Russia-Africa cooperation (including under the framework of the African Union); 4) development of trade and economic ties; 5) humanitarian cooperation¹⁴. During the two

¹³ *The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*. March 31, 2023. URL: https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/

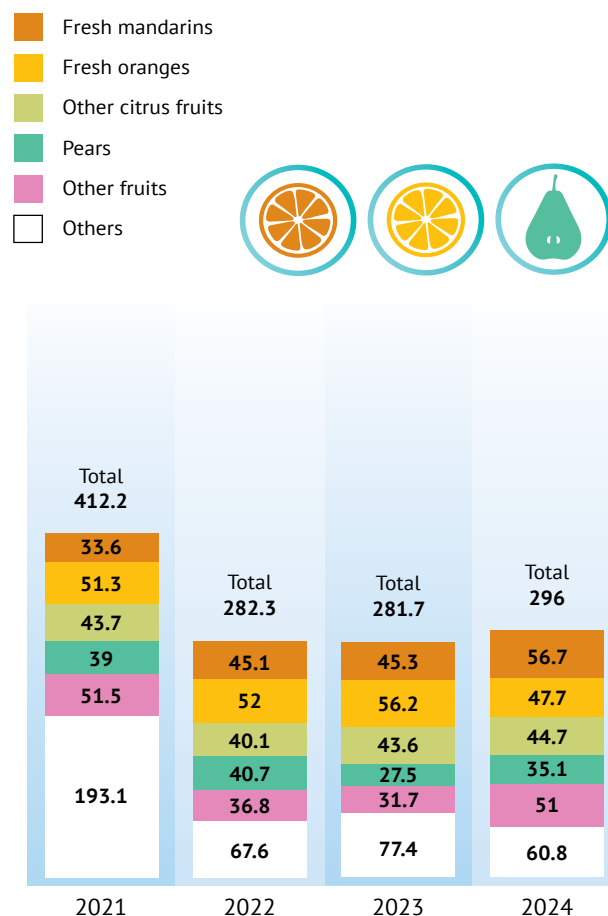
¹⁴ Sviridov, V. *Russia and Africa: Not Only Grain, Oil, and Tanks* in *Security Index Yearbook 2024-2025*. Vol. 1. Orlov V. and Karnaukhova E. (Eds). PIR Library Series № 37. Moscow: Aspect Press, 2024. P. 223.

BILATERAL TRADE DYNAMICS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND SOUTH AFRICA (2021–2024)

Imports from Russia to South Africa (USD million)



Exports from South Africa to Russia (USD million)



Source: Economic statistics. The Department of Trade, Industry and Competition. Republic of South Africa.
URL: http://tradestats.thedti.gov.za/ReportFolders/reportFolders.aspx?sCS_referer=&sCS_ChosenLang=en

Russia-Africa Summits all these areas were covered by numerous treaties and partnership agreements. President Cyril Ramaphosa attended both Summits in 2019 and 2023. At the second Summit President Ramaphosa introduced the African Peace Initiative on the Ukraine-Russia conflict, an unprecedented diplomatic effort, thus positioning Pretoria's global peacekeeping ambitions.

Russia and South Africa have been cooperating successfully within a number of multilateral institutions, including G20 and BRICS, advocating for the creation of alternative world trade, monetary, and financial systems to counter what they perceive as Western abuse of dominant positions in these fields. According to South African statistics, in 2010-2024, their bilateral trade has grown at an annualized rate of 7,5%. Russia exports wheat, fertilizers and coal to South Africa, while South Africa exports citrus, apples and nuts to Russia.

In its global outreach to Africa Russia has been trying to move away from a purely trade model of relationship on the continent to a deeper partnership that can meet Russia's own interests of development and the interests of African countries¹⁵. The strategic areas of cooperation between Russia and South Africa include energy and food security. Given the challenges in energy security and health care in South Africa, nuclear technology has great potential in these areas. South Africa has adopted an Integrated Resource Plan (IRP) for development, which emphasizes nuclear energy and includes plans to construct new power units. Energy sovereignty is a foundational element of Russia's broader realignment and decoupling from Western markets. Additionally, Russia has the capacity to contribute to the continent's decarbonization efforts.

Food security is another strategic area of cooperation. The Declaration of the 16th BRICS Summit in Kazan emphasized that BRICS countries endorsed Russia's initiative to establish a grain trading platform¹⁶. The BRICS Grain exchange is aimed at developing a fair agricultural trading system and implementing resilient and sustainable agriculture, to ensure a continuous flow of food which should be exempted from undue restrictive economic measures, inconsistent with WTO rules. It would set up mechanisms to protect domestic markets from external interference, reducing dependence on Western trading platforms (in particular, the Chicago Mercantile Exchange) and reducing risks associated with speculative price fluctuations and sanctions pressure. In addition, the formation of the exchange will make it possible to set fairer grain prices reflecting the real balance of supply and demand among the BRICS countries, which will stabilize the market and reduce price volatility. An important aspect is the deepening of economic integration: a single trade platform will promote cooperation in the agro-industrial sector, mutual investment and active technology exchange, as called for by Pretoria, Cairo and Addis Ababa. These measures are of particular relevance to African States, as controlling agricultural price movements has a direct impact on their food security.

Another important strategic field of cooperation is the mining industry: Recent initiatives such as BRICS Cooperation Platform on precious metals and Informal BRICS Cooperation Platform with the participation of African diamond-mining nations have the potential to bring significant benefits to African member countries. In particular, participation in the regulation of precious metals prices is particularly relevant for South Africa, which is the world's largest producer of platinum, one of the world's leading producers of gold and the sixth

¹⁵ See for ex., Sviridov, V. *Russia and Africa: Not Only Grain, Oil, and Tanks in Security Index Yearbook 2024-2025. Vol. 1*. Orlov V. and Karnaukhova E. (Editors). PIR Library Series № 37. Moscow: Aspect Press, 2024. P. 223.

¹⁶ For a comprehensive analysis on the Kazan Declaration see Zhao H., Kortunov A. *The Kazan BRICS Declaration – a New World Order Manifesto*. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/the-kazan-brics-declaration-a-new-world-order-manifesto/>

largest producer of diamonds. The strategic advantage of the BRICS platform is the exchange of best practices in the mining of precious metals and diamonds. This cooperation can strengthen the positions of both South Africa and Russia through the introduction of innovative technologies and optimization of gold mining processes.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The contextualisation of South Africa – Russia relations in a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape requires both countries to transition from symbolic gestures to a structured, interest-driven partnership. This warrants a conscious effort to overcome outdated Cold War legacies and build a relationship grounded in present-day realities. Central to this transformation is the need to foster mutual understanding through diversifying media narratives, enhancing academic and cultural exchanges, and promoting reciprocal knowledge of each country's domestic contexts.

Strengthening the partnership also hinges on institutionalising cooperation across multiple sectors. Establishing joint mechanisms for government dialogue, private sector collaboration, and civil society engagement will provide the necessary architecture for sustained interaction. Energy security, infrastructure development, and defence collaboration – anchored in transparency and aligned with South Africa's constitutional values – represent core areas of mutual benefit.

Moreover, the BRICS remains a strategic multilateral platform through which both countries can deepen alignment on global governance reform and amplify their voices in shaping a more equitable world order. By co-developing a targeted roadmap with clear deliverables, timelines, and accountability measures, Pretoria and Moscow can move from abstract solidarity to concrete, mutually beneficial outcomes.

A stronger South Africa – Russia partnership will be realised not through mere rhetoric but through deliberate, strategic alignment founded on trust, shared values, and a mutual commitment to navigating the challenges and opportunities of a multipolar world. This can be achieved by advancing the recommendations (as set out below) under the CSP for a balanced and forward-looking partnership, rooted in mutual respect and shared global aspirations. Such an approach will ensure the resilience and relevance of Russia-South African cooperation in an increasingly uncertain and rapidly changing international order.

PROPOSALS FOR DEVELOPING COOPERATION

Short-Term Priority

Focus Area



Strategic Alignment

Develop a joint strategic framework and roadmap



Institutional Mechanisms

Reactivate ITEC and regular Strategic Consultations



Media & Public Perception

Launch a South Africa – Russia Media Dialogue. Public diplomacy to counter negative stereotypes



Cultural & Educational Ties

Expand scholarships and student exchanges. Promote cultural cooperation and language studies. Open cultural centres in both countries

Recommendations

Medium-Term Priority

Focus Area



Economic & Sectoral Cooperation

Diversify trade (agriculture, pharmaceuticals, green tech). Initiate co-investment and infrastructure PPPs



Security & Defence Dialogue

Deepen cooperation in maritime and cyber security

Recommendations

Long-Term Priority

Focus Area



Multilateral Engagement

Advance joint positions in BRICS, G20, and UN reform efforts. Promote Africa – Russia – South Africa trilateral cooperation

Recommendations

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