



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

The US has a way to reduce Russian and Chinese influence in Africa – will it use it?



The US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen arrived in the South African capital Pretoria just two days after Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had visited. There has not been such a close encounter between two senior members of the governments of the US and Russia, which speaks volumes about Africa's accelerated movement towards a new training ground for influence between the two states.

On Monday, Lavrov was consolidating agreements with Pretoria regarding naval military exercises for their two armies with China, scheduled from February 17 to 26 on the east coast in the Durban area.

From Russia's point of view, military manoeuvres on a completely different side of the world would be a good opportunity to mark the one year anniversary of the start of its aggression against Ukraine. Cooperating with two large countries in the military field would demonstrate its resistance to the isolation to which it is exposed.

For Moscow's war propaganda, and its efforts to raise the declining conquest enthusiasm of its population, military manoeuvres in South Africa would be an opportunity that must be seized.

"Russia is trying to indicate that it's not isolated internationally, that it has international military reach. And South Africa, by agreeing to hold these exercises, or going ahead with them, is feeding into that narrative that Moscow's putting out", said Steven Gruz, head of the Russia-Africa program at the South African Institute of International Affairs.

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On the other hand, Janet Yellen is on a mission of revitalising the US partnership with African nations, after a long period of absence and neglect. A small amount of the US in Africa has been replaced by a lot of Russia and even more China, whose influence on the continent has grown dramatically in recent years.

Washington wants to change that. One of the most important points on Janet Yellen's tour would be to promote a large 55 billion dollars package, which the administration of President Biden allocated for health, economic and security assistance to African countries last December.

It is a significant change in Washington's relationship with Africa. From when Donald Trump insulted them in closed meetings, saying that they were "shithole countries", to a package of 55 billion dollars as a ticket for the renewal of partnership in a few years.

President Biden clearly wants to reverse course on Africa, as the neglect goes back to before Donald Trump's tenure. Nine years ago, Barack Obama organised the first US-Africa summit at the White House, announcing the strengthening of relations, but it simply did not happen.

The US had a very passive decade towards Africa, during which Russia and particularly China skilfully occupied the vacant space.

Russian arms exports to African countries have grown by nearly 25% over the past five years, and the continent accounts for a fifth of the total market for Russian arms (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute).

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In this respect, Moscow exploits the often expressed pro-Russian sentiment among African leaders, which dates back to the period when it helped their coups and nationalist movements.

Russia needs loyal partners, particularly during its aggression against Ukraine, and it is getting that in a large part of Africa. South Africa is only one of 17 African countries that abstained from voting in the UN on resolutions condemning the Russian invasion.

On the other hand, Russia sees many African

countries as important points for circumnavigating Western sanctions on oil exports. Its political and commercial interests demand rapid action, as evidenced by Lavrov's current African tour, which is the second since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine.

It is also a kind of preparation for the Russian-African summit, which was moved from last year to July this year, precisely because of the war in Ukraine.

The stakes are higher now, and there may be more on offer from the US side

In countering this aggressive Russian presence in Africa, the West and particularly the USA may be grasping at straws.

"Russia's invasion of Ukraine has made it all the more important for the US to back up its positive rhetoric with concrete action", said Scott Morris, a senior fellow at the Center for Global Development who served in the Obama administration.

"The stakes are higher now, and there may be more on offer from the US side", he said, according to Bloomberg.

The US has a chance to regain its position in Africa, particularly through the softening of trade and financial operations, bearing in mind that in the past decade the continent has turned to cheaper and more accessible borrowing from China.

Financial dependence on China has been growing and loan repayment costs have been rapidly rising. According to the World Bank, they will reach 25 billion dollars this year. At the same time, China is the third largest creditor of African economies, with deposits ten times larger than the US.

In addition to the support package of 55 billion dollars, the reactivation of the US law that would grant most African countries duty-free access to the US economy, which Biden also spoke about at the recent US-Africa summit, would be of great importance.

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The US can match the growing Russian and Chinese influence in Africa, if it consistently works on the ambition that the administration of President Biden is now showing.

Russia's influence, along with arms sales, relies mainly on the warm emotions of African nations from the days of liberation.

South Africa is no exception with its military manoeuvres with a country that is currently waging a war of conquest and has no visible interest in one of Africa's largest economies, apart from giving Russia an important foreign policy boost.

South Africa's annual trade with Russia is as much as 15 times smaller than its trade with the US. This provides a huge scope for the renewal of the partnership between Washington and Pretoria, which has been neglected in recent years, mainly thanks to the US.

It is similar with other African nations, and maybe this could change this year, which will be packed with visits of the most senior US officials. Janet Yellen's visit is a prelude to the visit of President Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris, Trade Representative Katherine Tai and Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo.