



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

South Africa no longer has excuses for neutrality on Russian aggression against Ukraine



The US discovery that South Africa had supplied Russia with weapons despite its declared neutrality towards the invasion of Ukraine dispelled doubts confirming Pretoria as Russia's most significant African ally.

The South African authorities have been defending themselves with much confusion since they were caught with their hands in the cookie jar.

The Russian ship Lady R, which is under sanctions, was loaded with weapons and ammunition at a naval base near Cape Town last December.

"Among the things we noted was the docking of the cargo ship...which we are confident uploaded weapons and ammunition on to that vessel in Simon's Town as it made its way back to Russia", said Reuben Brigety, US ambassador to South Africa, last Thursday.

Officials in Pretoria do not consider the statement of the US ambassador or the fact that he received the information from US intelligence to be sufficient evidence. They announced an independent investigation led by a retired judge.

While this government fumbling continues, the national currency, the rand, fell to a historic low immediately after the US ambassador's statement.

African countries, including South Africa, are susceptible to circumventing economic sanctions against Russia. But arms exports are much more than the smuggling of ordinary goods that Russia seeks to ease the isolation of its economy.

Celebration of the anniversary of the aggression

Its joint military exercises with Russia and China last February were much different from the neutrality which South Africa emphasised at the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Ten days of naval manoeuvres near Durban and Richards Bay were also an opportunity for the crews of 2 Russian warships to celebrate the anniversary of their country's aggression against Ukraine. Their partners from the Chinese and South African navies may have joined the celebration.

Pretoria is not yet clear on how it will deal with the international arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin issued by the International Criminal Court.

Putin was invited to the BRICS summit in August, then 3 weeks ago the President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, announced the withdrawal of his country from the ICC, which was revoked only a few hours later by his presidential office.

Under the pretext of neutrality, South Africa has a long list of abstentions in the UN. For example, the exclusion of Russia from the UN Human Rights Council and the UN resolution condemning Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territories.

It always belonged to a convincing minority, thus contributing to the impression that Russia is not completely alone, as long as influential countries, such as South Africa, refrain from condemning its aggression.

Trampling on the legacy of the human rights struggle

With its attitude towards Russia, South Africa has been trampling on the legacy of its post-apartheid history. It gained undivided global solidarity and abolished the racist regime precisely on human rights violations.

Instead of the human rights-based heritage on which it was established, modern South Africa apparently chooses an alliance with the antipode of such a legacy: Russia, to which the ruling African National Congress has been tied since the Cold War era.

"By default, we are on the side of Russia", Obey

Mabena, a veteran of the ANC, who has been living in exile for decades, but still has influence and respect among supporters in the country, told CNN earlier.

Africa's second-largest economy is dependent on trade and technological ties with the West. The US, Germany, Japan, and the UK are by far its largest trading partners. Russia is not even in the top 15.

The exchange between South Africa and the US in 2021 amounted to \$21 billion, which makes it the largest trading partner of the US in Africa. At the same time, about 600 US companies operate in South Africa, many of which act as regional or continental hubs.

The BRICS summit as a test

How long can this imbalance between the economic reality and the completely opposite political orientation of South Africa last?

Can the West even consider it a partner in Africa when its government and the pro-Russian president repeat signals that their political sympathies and interests are directed towards the Russian side?

The discovery of arms shipments to Russia could be a turning point in the West's relationship with Pretoria.

It represents not only a brutal violation of economic sanctions, but direct military support to the aggressor in Ukraine.

South Africa's economy still has privileged access to the US market, but contracts for such arrangements expire in 2025.

These benefits are already under review in the US. While South Africa enjoys privileges in the US market, it simultaneously imposes tariffs on part of its imports from the US, which makes it uncompetitive.

Why would the US continue to grant privileged status to an economy that undermines its sanctions against Russia through arms exports

and as a channel through which Russia manages to bypass international economic isolation?

The period until the BRICS summit in August could be a period of re-examination of the relationship by the West, particularly the US, towards South Africa.

There is no doubt that Pretoria, as the host, will use this summit and its significant influence across the continent to promote pro-Russian positions amongst African nations.

This is undoubtedly what Russia expects. Its head of diplomacy has visited several African capitals since the start of the aggression against Ukraine, including Pretoria.

The discovery of arms exports to Russia, favouring Russian aggression, the vote in international fora, and the reluctance to treat the accused Russian leader in accordance with the decision of the ICC, of which South Africa is one of the founders, are reasons to treat this country as the most influential Moscow's ally in Africa.