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Nuclear Enrichment: Russia's Ill-Fated Influence Campaign in South Africa

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Summary

Amid the widespread attention the Kremlin's recent inroads in Africa have attracted, there has been surprisingly little discussion of South Africa, a country which, for nearly a decade, unquestionably represented Russia's biggest foreign policy success story on the continent. As relations soared during the ill-starred presidency of Jacob Zuma (2009–2018), the Kremlin sought to wrest a geopolitically significant state out of the West's orbit and to create a partnership that could serve as a springboard for expanded influence elsewhere in Africa.

Moscow's strategy was multifaceted, capitalizing on well-established close ties with Zuma, a former African National Congress senior intelligence official with extensive Soviet bloc connections. Russian President Vladimir Putin and other senior officials pursued a series of initiatives, such as the inclusion of South Africa in the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) grouping and the launch of ambitious forms of cooperation between state-backed energy interests primarily in the nuclear sector.

Yet relations were undermined by the Kremlin's propensity to overreach, to lean too heavily on the legacy of Cold War–era relationships forged with leaders of national liberation movements, and to take advantage of cultures of corruption. The controversy arising from a massive \$76 billion nuclear power plant construction deal triggered strong pushback and legal challenges from South Africa's institutional checks and balances, civil society groups, and independent media.

Key parts of the Russian national security establishment view civil nuclear power exports as an important tool for projecting influence overseas while creating revenue streams for sustaining intellectual and technical capabilities and vital programs inside Russia itself. Yet such cooperation is often a two-edged sword. On the one hand, costly projects such as the one pushed by Zuma typically make little economic sense for the purchasing country, spurring uncomfortable questions about who stands to benefit. On the other hand, heavily subsidized projects pursued mainly for geopolitical reasons risk saddling Russia's nuclear power monopoly Rosatom with burdens it can ill afford.

Ongoing investigations of high-level corruption during the period of so-called state capture under Zuma shed remarkable light on how the Kremlin operates in Africa and other parts of the world. In retrospect, the sustainability of Moscow's embrace of South Africa was highly questionable due to its paltry tool kit. Russian involvement in the South African economy is miniscule compared to that of other trading partners such as the EU, China, the United States, India, and the UK, accounting for a mere 0.4 percent of South Africa's foreign trade. While the Soviet Union was an important patron during the anti-apartheid struggle, modern-day Russia offers little in the way of practical assistance for helping South Africa deal with its deep-set economic and societal challenges.

Introduction

Over the past eighteen months, the Kremlin's gains in Africa have attracted widespread attention. Curiously, South Africa seldom features in these accounts. Yet, for nearly a decade, it was one of Russia's biggest foreign policy success stories. Why are Russia's recent inroads in South Africa (and the dramatic reversals that followed) being overlooked, and what do they reveal about the effectiveness of Moscow's broader strategy and overall tool kit on the continent?

The Kremlin often takes advantage of cultures of corruption, and, to a certain extent, its efforts in South Africa fit this broader pattern. The high-water mark for Russia–South Africa relations occurred during Jacob Zuma's presidency (2009–2018), which was marred by a series of corruption scandals commonly described by South Africans as the period of “state capture.” Yet Russian engagement with South Africa during the Zuma era was more deeply rooted. It relied on a web of relationships at the highest levels of both governments, the promotion of multi-billion-dollar projects involving state-owned companies particularly in the energy sector, and the leveraging of Cold War–era ties forged during South Africa's period of national liberation.

In the end, much of what went wrong for Russia was a testament to South Africa's remarkably robust system of institutional checks and balances. Zuma's excesses, which led to his resignation under pressure in February 2018, generated a strong pushback from various quarters. South Africa's competitive political system, civil society, judiciary, and news media served as dogged champions of accountability and transparency. South Africans, from vantage points inside and outside of government, closely scrutinized Russian activities, meticulously documented them, and launched a series of political and legal challenges in response. Their ability to challenge a controversial head of state stands as a powerful example for policymakers elsewhere on the continent and in other parts of the world who are contending with Russian malign activities.

As Carnegie's Paul Stronski has written, Russia is decidedly “late to the party” in Africa.¹ Its gains have been mostly in pariah states ostracized by the international community, such as Zimbabwe, and strategically less important ones, like the Central African Republic, from which other major powers have largely disengaged. Moscow has devoted relatively few resources to expanding its influence in Africa compared to other major external actors such as the European Union (EU), the United States, and China. But it has repeatedly demonstrated a knack for spreading narratives about Moscow's resurgence as a leading power and fostering the impression that its accomplishments on the continent have come at the expense of the United States and its allies.

Yet it is quite striking how, time and again, the Russian leadership has opted for imagery over substance and a consistent reluctance to tackle any of the issues atop the agendas of many African

countries—issues like economic development, quality of governance, the rule of law, communal violence, conflict resolution, and public health concerns including infectious diseases. The Kremlin's modest ability to project military power and low appetite for risk in Africa have meant that its security activities have been mostly parceled out to a rogues' gallery of shadowy mercenaries and contractors such as the Wagner Group.²

Moscow's attempt to secure a foothold in South Africa was somewhat of a departure from its usual approach to the continent. In recent years, Russian inroads in Africa have been largely a product of opportunism rather than strategic vision. Unlike some other African states with a markedly increased Russian presence in recent years, South Africa represented a strategic opportunity for the Kremlin to wrest a geopolitically significant state out of the West's orbit and to create a partnership that could serve as a springboard for expanded influence elsewhere in Africa.

Russia carefully cultivated ties with Zuma from the beginning of his presidency, and the warm relationship was largely free of the erratic ups and downs that had plagued relations between Moscow and Pretoria since the second half of the 1980s. Zuma himself served as a dogged promoter of Russian interests, behaving in ways that mystified even some of his closest aides.

Why, then, did Russian–South African relations soar to such heights during Zuma's presidency only to trigger his political implosion? The pervasiveness of state capture tells a large part of the story, though not all of it. It is also important to take stock of extensive historical ties between Russia and South Africa, which provide a glimpse of how modern-day Russia seeks to leverage the legacy of the Soviet Union's extensive support for revolutionary movements and postcolonial governments throughout Africa. In a similar vein, a close evaluation of Russian ties to South Africa can generate insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the tool kit that the Kremlin brings to bear on the continent.

This account has benefited from extensive investigations of the Zuma presidency undertaken by South African governmental and legal bodies, civil society groups, environmental activists, and independent media outlets.³ By far the most important source has been an impartial legal inquiry into state capture, the so-called Zondo Commission. The commission is an impressive illustration of the strength of South Africa's institutional checks and balances and the country's remarkable capacity for self-examination and accountability.⁴ The commission is similar to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which documented crimes and abuses on both sides of the armed struggle to end apartheid. The Zondo Commission's public hearings and sworn statements provide extensive detail on how the Zuma government operated and how the interests of Zuma's inner circle and the Kremlin became intertwined.

The authors of this paper also conducted extensive interviews in South Africa, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States. In addition, they relied on declassified U.S. government documents, historical records, and open-source materials in Russian and English, along with analytical insights developed as part of Carnegie's multiyear research project entitled the Return of Global Russia.

Comrades in Arms

South Africa has a long history of homegrown, left-wing political activism dating back to the early twentieth century. The South African Communist Party (SACP), whose forerunner was founded in 1921, was an early proponent of a nonracial South Africa and served as an important pillar of the African National Congress (ANC). Senior SACP party members such as Joe Slovo contributed a great deal to underground anti-apartheid activities after the party was banned in 1950, including by participating in the founding of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), or Spear of the Nation, the armed wing of the ANC, in 1961.

As Irina Filatova and Apollon Davidson wrote in their exhaustive history, *The Hidden Thread: Russia and South Africa in the Soviet Era*, Moscow was a central, albeit underappreciated, force in encouraging and organizing opposition to the apartheid regime: “The USSR [Soviet Union] helped the ANC to turn itself, both in South Africa and internationally, into the main voice of South Africa’s oppressed African majority, even though it was a party in exile. It helped the ANC to occupy a respected and prominent place in the international arena.”⁵ The leadership of the ANC carefully balanced this relationship with close ties to Western partners, most notably Sweden, which secretly provided hundreds of millions of dollars in support.⁶ Operating from London, the leaders of the ANC in exile, Oliver Tambo and Thabo Mbeki, sustained a delicate balancing act between its external backers and competing voices inside the anti-apartheid camp.

To be sure, Soviet policy toward South Africa had deep ideological and geopolitical underpinnings. The oppression of the black majority vividly illustrated the evils of the capitalist system, and the anti-apartheid struggle became a mainstay of Soviet propaganda. Throughout most of the Cold War, Soviet activism in Africa was a low-risk way for the Kremlin to challenge Western standing in the developing world and to compete ideologically and geopolitically with its chief Communist rival, China.

Based on these motivations, the Soviet Union provided extensive financial, military, and intelligence support to the ANC beginning in the 1960s.⁷ According to a declassified 1986 Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) document:

The Soviet Bloc provides virtually all the military assistance received by the ANC . . . [and] supplies virtually all the military equipment to the MK and the 500 Cuban and East German instructors present in Angolan training camps provide training to MK recruits, among others. The Soviet Bloc donates all advanced military and sabotage training by means of ‘scholarships’ to the USSR and East Germany; attendance at such courses seems to be a *sine qua non* for advancement in the MK hierarchy.⁸

Upward of 3,000 ANC activists and fighters came to the Soviet Union for extended periods for various types of training, educational opportunities, and medical treatment during this period, according to Vladimir Shubin who coordinated support on behalf of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party.⁹ Veterans of the anti-apartheid struggle speak reverently of their training and experiences in the Soviet bloc. Ronnie Kasrils, a senior MK figure who served as the minister of intelligence services under former president Mbeki (and later became one of Zuma’s staunchest critics), described conditions in the early 1960s at a dedicated training facility for fighters from liberation movements on the Black Sea.

I was there with two hundred black people. For them, their impressions of being trained by white people, being served in canteens by white people, their rooms cleaned by old Ukrainian ladies—they just couldn’t get over it. . . . We were very fortunate to have military instructors who, 20 years earlier, were those driving the Nazis from the gates of Leningrad and Stalingrad. They were witty people who kept us laughing, but at the same time were so clearly strong and determined to pass their lessons onto us. Their presence was outstanding; to us, the Soviet Union was like a dream, and it was held with much love and respect.¹⁰

Yet there were darker aspects to Soviet support. Training programs were geared toward ideological indoctrination and the cultivation of agents of influence. The KGB kept close tabs on foreign students and tried to recruit them as agents.¹¹ Instruction on clandestine activities was a key part of the curriculum for students being prepared to participate in underground movements. “Once a week during the academic year and for a full month during the summer, students learn ‘conspiratorial work,’ such as disguise, use of pseudonyms, infiltration and exfiltration, small-arms marksmanship, and unarmed combat at a paramilitary training site outside Moscow,” according to a declassified CIA report from 1980.¹²

The Soviet relationship with South Africa was complicated by a protracted slump in oil prices during the 1980s, which dried up the primary source of the Kremlin’s hard currency earnings. Those constraints also magnified what famed KGB defector Vasiliy Mitrokhin referred to as “deep contradictions at the heart of Soviet policy towards southern Africa. . . . Moscow maintained top-secret

contacts with Pretoria [under the KGB's auspices] over the regulation of the world market in gold, diamonds, platinum and precious metals, in which the Soviet Union and South Africa between them had something of a duopoly.”¹³ This economic co-dependence appears to have kept in check Soviet willingness to confront the apartheid regime head-on.

A Frozen Relationship

Moscow's relations with the ANC during the waning days of apartheid were complicated by a series of radical policy shifts under both Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin as well as Mbeki's proactive efforts to reduce the ANC's dependence on Soviet support. As the Gorbachev government sought a fundamentally new relationship with the West, it began to downplay support for armed struggle in Africa in both rhetorical and practical terms. For his part, Mbeki understood that “a thaw in the Cold War would inevitably mean Moscow's withdrawal of support for the ANC. Non-alignment was becoming a necessity.”¹⁴ During the late Soviet period, the Kremlin pushed a series of diplomatic initiatives to reduce tensions in southern Africa, including by arranging the removal of all ANC fighters from Angola via airlift to Uganda, roughly 2,000 kilometers away. According to Mbeki's biographer, MK commander Joe Modise believed that this move “was the moment the penny dropped . . . that South Africa's only solution would be a negotiated one.”¹⁵ In 1991, the Kremlin canceled direct funding for the ANC and all military training programs for foreign fighters.

Desperate for new sources of external financial support, the Gorbachev government responded to the lifting of the ban on the ANC in early 1990 by reestablishing formal diplomatic contacts with Pretoria, which stirred unease inside the ANC. Both Gorbachev and Yeltsin avoided personal contact with newly freed Nelson Mandela. In June 1992, Yeltsin hosted a state visit by South African president Frederik W. de Klerk to showcase his break with Soviet foreign policy orthodoxy. Mandela's first visit to Moscow would not happen until seven years later.

Russian policy toward Africa remained a low priority during Vladimir Putin's first two terms as president from 2000 to 2008. The agenda for Putin's 2006 visit to South Africa, the first by a sitting Russian president, was largely devoted to arranging commercial opportunities for Russian companies flush with cash from the commodities boom. A handful of large-scale investments in strategic sectors (specifically, manganese and vanadium mining) by leading Russian tycoons Viktor Vekselberg and Roman Abramovich drew high-level attention.¹⁶ When then president Dmitry Medvedev traveled to Africa in the summer of 2009, South Africa was not included on his itinerary. In a moment of candor, Medvedev admitted that Moscow was “almost too late in engaging with Africa. Work with our African partners should have been started earlier.”¹⁷

Over the following decade, Russia's involvement in the South African economy has remained truly miniscule when compared to that of other trading partners and investors such as the EU, China, the United States, India, and the UK. In 2017, Russia accounted for only 0.4 percent of South Africa's foreign trade,¹⁸ while South African exports to Russia totaled a mere \$747 million with copper wire being the single largest export.¹⁹ Europe, the United States, and China remain by far the most important sources of foreign direct investment for South Africa.²⁰

Zuma's Rise and the Advent of State Capture

Zuma's role in the ANC's underground activities and the armed struggle dates to the earliest days of MK. (His trade union and ANC activism had begun when he was a teenager in the late 1950s.) Imprisoned on Robben Island for a decade, he served his sentence alongside senior figures such as Mandela. Soon after his release in 1973, he went into exile and lived for nearly two decades in Mozambique, Swaziland, and Zambia. He rose quickly through the ranks and occupied a series of senior ANC positions focused on intelligence and the coordination of underground activities inside South Africa. Zuma has spoken very little about his activities during this period. He spent three months in the Soviet Union for military training in 1978, a practice that was customary for senior ANC cadres.²¹

Zuma's role in ANC intelligence structures was largely dictated by the operational requirements of the time. Following the 1976 Soweto uprising that mobilized an entire generation of student activists, the ANC's ranks in frontline countries like Angola and Mozambique swelled as young exiles fled South Africa eager to join the fight. That influx opened the door for the first time to Soviet bloc military training for ANC fighters in nearby countries. But it also allowed the apartheid regime's intelligence service to infiltrate the ANC on a large scale. Extensive Soviet and East German training and support helped the ANC ramp up its counterintelligence capabilities to deal with its most pressing task: rooting out the thousands of infiltrators in its midst. This relentless search for traitors eventually led to serious human rights abuses. Zuma took over the intelligence unit of the ANC secret police in the late 1980s, following an internal ANC investigation into those abuses.²² Strong circumstantial evidence suggests that Zuma himself played a part in the mistreatment of ANC prisoners.

Zuma was part of the first wave of senior ANC officials who returned to South Africa immediately after the ban on the organization was lifted. He played an important role in the negotiations that led to the peaceful handover of power in 1994. Zuma's stature rose steadily during the presidencies of Mandela and Mbeki. He served as deputy president for six years under Mbeki, with whom he had a long-standing rivalry. Mbeki was ultimately forced to resign the presidency in late 2008 following revelations that he had interfered improperly in an investigation into Zuma's alleged involvement in a corrupt arms deal. That paved the way for Zuma's victory in the 2009 presidential election.

Getting Warmer (Again)

With Zuma at the helm, South Africa's ties to Russia quickly warmed. His first year in office—2009—coincided with the global financial crisis, which hit commodity producers especially hard. Zuma pushed for South Africa to join the informal BRIC grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, and China, which Moscow touted as an important alternative to the G7. The Kremlin provided important backing for Zuma's request to join the nascent forum. At the time, many observers were decidedly skeptical, including the Goldman Sachs economist who had first coined the BRIC moniker.²³ South Africa's small global economic footprint, low life expectancy, and high levels of inequality compared unfavorably to other prospective members such as Indonesia, Mexico, or Turkey.²⁴

Zuma attended his first BRICS heads of state meeting in April 2011 in Sanya, China, and joined his fellow leaders in condemning the U.S.-led intervention in Libya—even though South Africa had voted in favor of a no-fly zone over Libya in the United Nations (UN) Security Council just weeks earlier.²⁵ The Libya crisis roiled the U.S.-Russian relationship, with Russian officials charging publicly that Washington and its allies had gone beyond their UN Security Council mandate.²⁶ Events in Libya and other regions also helped propel the Zuma government's foreign policy in directions that were increasingly critical of U.S. and European positions on international security matters.

After Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, the South African government appeared to set aside some of its traditional principles—specifically, noninterference in the affairs of sovereign states, the inviolability of borders, and opposition to regime change.²⁷ It abstained from voting on a UN General Assembly resolution in March 2014 in support of Ukraine's territorial integrity and avoided any direct criticism of Russian actions against Ukraine. For his part, Zuma justified the move by insisting, weakly, that it was important to close ranks with fellow BRICS members on the matter.²⁸

Meanwhile, the Kremlin launched a major push to establish close ties with South Africa's security apparatus. Such moves benefited from a reshuffling of senior security advisers and Zuma's increased reliance on figures such as David Mahlobo, a Zuma protégé and unabashed loyalist with no prior intelligence or law enforcement experience, who was appointed in 2014 to lead the State Security Agency (SSA). During his first year in office, he met with Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev at least four times.²⁹ The Russian readout of Patrushev's late November 2015 visit to Pretoria highlighted the threat of foreign interference and “color revolutions”—the term Russian officials use to describe democratic revolutions, which, they claim, the United States sponsors to install U.S.-friendly regimes.³⁰ From time to time, such rhetoric crept into public pronouncements by Mahlobo and others about Zuma's political and civil society opponents.

SSA personnel allegedly traveled to Russia for training, according to unconfirmed local press accounts. Earlier in Zuma's tenure, South African military intelligence had reportedly sought to develop its own satellite surveillance capabilities with Russian help.³¹ Politicization of the intelligence services, already a long-standing problem, became an increasingly important source of tensions during Zuma's tenure amid pressure on his political opponents, media manipulation, and other abuses, according to a blue-ribbon panel established by current South African President Cyril Ramaphosa.³²

A Nuclear Maelstrom

Starting with Putin's 2006 visit, the Kremlin pushed systematically to elevate bilateral nuclear cooperation with South Africa. The first breakthrough was a Putin-Mbeki agreement for Russia to supply fuel to South Africa's Koeberg nuclear power plant.³³ Koeberg is part of an inheritance from the apartheid regime's nuclear weapons program, and its two reactors generate approximately 5 percent of the country's total electricity.³⁴ On the same visit, Putin also publicly called for ramping up bilateral cooperation on uranium mining and nuclear power plant construction, activities that would eventually take center stage during the state capture investigation.³⁵

South Africa's installed electricity capacity is considerable (at roughly 44,000 megawatts as of 2018).³⁶ The state-owned monopoly Eskom made important strides to expand access to electricity starting in the late 1980s, and it was generally well-regarded prior to Zuma's tenure. Growth projections for the South African economy during the early 2000s highlighted possible supply constraints and the destabilizing effects thereof. By 2010, there was robust discussion about whether future electrical generation capacity would be derived from coal (the country's main legacy fuel source), fracking and natural gas (thanks to South Africa's abundant reserves), nuclear power, or wind and solar energy. During the Mbeki presidency, Eskom explored a possible \$12 billion expansion of the Koeberg facility but decided in 2008 that the project was unaffordable.³⁷

Enter Russia's nuclear power monopoly, Rosatom. The firm's then CEO Sergei Kiriyenko, the author of major reforms to Russia's nuclear sector in the mid-2000s, had identified growth of nuclear power plant construction overseas as one of Rosatom's top priorities in the wake of the global financial crisis. The crisis had led to significant belt-tightening throughout the Russian economy, and Rosatom's leadership viewed international expansion as a mechanism for sustaining intellectual and technical capabilities inside Russia and funding vital programs. The firm continues to play up prospects for foreign reactor sales even today. In a June 2019 interview, current CEO Alexey Likhachev claimed that Rosatom has contracts for \$190 billion, of which \$90 billion is for projects in twelve countries that have already started.³⁸ (Russian and foreign experts have expressed skepticism about these numbers.)

Despite the propensity of the company's executives to exaggerate their overseas marketing prowess, Rosatom also serves as an important tool for the Kremlin's foreign policy agenda. That role has created significant albeit unresolvable tensions within the company. Its technocratic leadership, which takes a more conservative approach to managing the firm's finances, chafes at being saddled with projects that do not make good economic sense. Yet, to the Kremlin, which controls the company through its oversight board, even bad deals can make for good geopolitics. Putin's persistent advocacy of a large-scale nuclear deal with South Africa fell squarely into this category.³⁹

The Makings of a Shady Deal

Viewed from South Africa, the most troubling aspects of the deal were its enormous cost, the disregard for the established legal and administrative norms for government procurement, and the likelihood that the chief personal beneficiaries would be Zuma and the Guptas. The Guptas are a trio of immigrants to South Africa from India who became close with Zuma and enriched members of the Zuma family, his inner circle, and themselves. From Rosatom's point of view, the deal appears to have been little more than a loss-leader. South Africa's lackluster economic prospects and questionable ability to shoulder the costs of constructing and operating a new constellation of civil nuclear power plants meant that financial rewards for Rosatom were far from a sure thing. Ultimately, any commercial upside for Rosatom would have been derived from lucrative long-term agreements for nuclear fuel, reactor maintenance, and decommissioning activities over the plant's projected fifty to sixty years of service life. Accordingly, the geopolitical value of a deal positioning Russia as a major actor in South Africa's economy (with an eye toward further expansion elsewhere on the continent) would have been far more consequential.

Discussions with Moscow on nuclear cooperation accelerated shortly after Zuma ascended to the presidency. From the outset, there was a race under way between the protagonists of the Zuma/Russia nuclear deal and the many checks to it which, early on, were activated.⁴⁰ As early as the autumn of 2011, Zuma told then finance minister Pravin Gordhan that he wanted to award the entire construction deal to Russia. He brushed aside Gordhan's insistence on following established procedures for state procurement, according to Gordhan's written testimony to the state capture commission.⁴¹ Gordhan warned Zuma that failing to follow the established procedures could land the president in trouble similar to the fallout over the earlier arms sales scandal that had nearly ended his political career. As Gordhan's successor Nhlanhla Nene, who served as finance minister from May 2014 to December 2015, put it, the nuclear project "would have constituted the largest public investment program in South African history, and, relative to the size of the South African economy, would have been one of the largest public sector investments ever undertaken internationally."⁴²

As negotiations continued, Zuma loyalists, like those in the Department of Energy, tried to sideline opponents of the deal. Zuma himself assumed direct control of the process through a special energy commission. This bureaucratic wrestling match, along with efforts to conceal information about the deal from parliamentary oversight, made it impossible to evaluate the project's potential impact on the country's financial health. Gordhan and other officials were largely cut out of the discussions. Concerns about tax incentives offered to the Russians as part of the deal were largely disregarded.⁴³ Treasury officials also worried about the projected societal impact of the public debt associated with the project and the possibility that future electricity price increases would be passed on to the general population.

The South African opposition party Democratic Alliance, investigative journalists, and civic activists all charged publicly that the nuclear reactor deal was concocted in large measure to benefit the Gupta family. In 2010, the Guptas had partnered with Zuma's son Duduzane and used state funds to purchase a major uranium mine, a move that positioned them as potential suppliers of the country's future nuclear power plants. (U.S. officials warned South African counterparts at the time that the Guptas' expansion into uranium mining "may have been funded by Iran and that uranium from this mine was destined for Iran's nuclear program."⁴⁴) The Guptas also ensured that Zuma installed their allies on Eskom's board, thus giving them a major say in the running of the company.⁴⁵

In August 2014, Zuma unexpectedly traveled to Russia accompanied only by intelligence minister Mahlobo and a deputy foreign minister. The purpose of the visit and Zuma's meeting with Putin was not adequately explained, which provoked a great deal of attention and speculation at home. Despite its prominence on the bilateral agenda, nuclear cooperation was conspicuously absent from the South African government's official readout of the visit.⁴⁶ (Mahlobo later claimed that Zuma had gone to Moscow for medical treatment following an assassination attempt.⁴⁷)

Just three weeks later, in Vienna, South African and Russian representatives signed a formal agreement on strategic nuclear cooperation.⁴⁸ The agreement was kept confidential, and the episode only heightened suspicions about the true nature of the two countries' developing nuclear relationship. A joint press statement said that the agreement

laid the foundation for the large-scale nuclear power plants (NPP) procurement and development program of South Africa based on the construction in RSA of new nuclear power plants with Russian VVER reactors with total installed capacity of up to 9,6 GW (up to 8 NPP units). These will be the first NPPs based on the Russian technology to be built on the African continent.⁴⁹

Rosatom's Kiriyenko said at the time that the construction portion of the deal was worth upward of \$40–50 billion.⁵⁰ The total deal was estimated to be worth \$76 billion.⁵¹

Scrutiny from civil society groups and Zuma's political opponents—as well as the government's lack of transparency about the deal and about Russia's central role in it—created an escalating series of political and legal problems. Soon thereafter, Ecodefense!, a Russian environmental nongovernmental organization, leaked a copy of the confidential September 2014 agreement to two South African activists. The contents of the document made it difficult for the government to convince anyone that it was conducting a proper tender based on bids from French, South Korean, and U.S. firms, let alone subjecting the deal to parliamentary review.⁵² The activists, Makoma Lekalakala and Liz Mc-Daid, won considerable acclaim for stirring grassroots opposition and organizing legal challenges.

Neither Zuma nor the Russian government appeared to fully appreciate the controversy that they had created or the scale of opposition to the deal. According to former finance minister Nene's testimony, Zuma was fully committed to proceeding with the deal at the BRICS summit in Russia in July 2015, even though key financial details had not been resolved.⁵³ Nene raised concerns with Zuma that the financial details of the deal had been kept from treasury officials, only for Zuma to criticize him for allegedly failing to fulfill his duties. Nene was fired in late 2015.

Even after an April 2017 high court ruling that the nuclear deal was unconstitutional, Zuma remained defiant. He brushed aside demands to adhere to state procurement procedures and accusations of corruption while continuing to look for ways to resuscitate the agreement. In the months prior to his resignation, he stirred additional controversy by assigning intelligence chief Mahlobo to run the Department of Energy.

Zuma's abrupt resignation sealed the fate of the deal. Since then, his successor, Ramaphosa, has maintained a respectful stance toward Moscow even as he has made clear that the nuclear deal is simply unaffordable for now. Ramaphosa's presence at the inaugural Russia-Africa summit in Sochi in October 2019 was overshadowed by a symbolic visit of two Russian nuclear-capable Blackjack bombers to South Africa.⁵⁴ The lack of meaningful deliverables from Ramaphosa's visit to Russia conveyed an unmistakable impression that the bilateral relationship between Russia and South Africa today is simply marking time.

Russia's Tool Kit: Less Than Meets the Eye

The failed nuclear deal was unique in terms of its outsized impact on South Africa's domestic political stability, potential negative economic consequences, and the desire of Russian officials to use nuclear power as a tool to expand Moscow's footprint in Africa for decades to come. But the deal also illustrated the limits of Russia's reach and its modest tool kit for projecting power and influence in regions far beyond its periphery. The failure of the nuclear deal also raised questions about the viability of Russia's renewed hopes for wielding greater global influence.

Notably, the deal was hardly a coup for Russian state coffers. The sheer size of the proposal and its projected burden on the South African economy tend to obscure the fact that Rosatom was being forced to undertake a massive construction project with uncertain upfront financing and equally uncertain prospects for long-term commercial gain.⁵⁵ In theory, Rosatom stood to recoup some of these outlays via long-term fuel purchases and other service agreements. Yet in practice, it is hard to overlook the fact that the deal was largely a dodgy venture with significant risks driven by geopolitical, rather than commercial, considerations.

Russia is hardly an attractive economic partner for South Africa in most respects. Bilateral trade is inconsequential and, considering the major role of extractive industries in both countries' economies, they enjoy no natural complementarity. Russia has long struggled to attract foreign investors and is hardly a promising investment destination for South Africa. Moscow has no history of extending loans to Pretoria during the Cold War. As a result, the Kremlin could not dangle debt forgiveness, one of its primary tools for economic statecraft, to incentivize South African political cooperation in multilateral venues like the UN, as it has long done with partners in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

Arms deals are similarly a nonstarter. Sales of Russian conventional weaponry, which have been important for Moscow's courtship of various African countries, have had little appeal for Pretoria. South Africa, forced to operate under international sanctions during the apartheid regime, has long had its own indigenous armaments industry. As a result, South Africa has neither a legacy arsenal of Soviet-era weapons and equipment in need of modernization or maintenance, nor a need to purchase new Russian arms and equipment.

Besides that, generational change is gradually eroding Russia's other source of leverage—the impressive degree of support the Kremlin gave to the ANC during the apartheid era. The legacy of apartheid is present in virtually every aspect of South African life, and Russia's lack of involvement with the apartheid regime is definitely still an important reputational advantage. But the generation of ANC leaders who were trained in the Soviet Union or who may have benefited from Soviet support is aging. Zuma and Mbeki are both seventy-seven years old. Modern-day Russia offers little in the way of practical assistance for helping South Africa deal with its deep-set economic and societal challenges. That is likely to limit its attractiveness as a partner to future generations of South African leaders. Their attitudes and priorities are more likely to be shaped by the country's complex political life and development needs than by apartheid-era nostalgia.

That leaves two other tools for Russia to exploit in expanding ties with South Africa—high-level diplomacy and a hear-no-evil, see-no-evil approach to doing business. South Africa's inclusion in the BRICS and Putin's personal involvement in BRICS diplomacy are undoubtedly useful for sustaining

high-level ties with South African leaders. U.S. President Donald Trump's administration's continued inattention to South Africa enhances the utility of such personal diplomacy. For South Africa's leaders, annual appearances at BRICS summits bolster their country's standing on the African continent and offer domestic and international prestige.

But when South African leaders have sought to use the BRICS as a platform to deal with the issues of greatest concern to the Global South, they have discovered that the Kremlin is a rather inattentive and fickle champion. The lack of tangible deliverables from BRICS gatherings limits their utility for South Africa and, inadvertently, may even detract from Russia's role in these forums by emphasizing the importance of another key power—China—for South Africa.

At the UN, Moscow has prioritized building close ties with South Africa and the countries holding the three rotating African seats on the Security Council, the so-called A3. Russia and China have frequently dangled the idea of UN Security Council reform in discussions with the A3 and South Africa, which has been a nonpermanent member of the Security Council three times. Moscow and Beijing have implied that BRICS members and other countries of the Global South should have greater clout, yet Russian support appears to be primarily rhetorical.⁵⁶ Russian diplomats seldom, if ever, specify how reform might work or issue convincing calls for expanding the Security Council's membership ranks. Once again, Russia talks big but does not really deliver.

Russia's lack of interest in upholding ethical norms can be useful in its economic outreach in countries with weak rule of law and civil society. But the Kremlin learned the hard way the downsides of pursuing a nuclear deal with South Africa without much regard for that country's well-established legal and administrative institutions and norms, independent media landscape, and vibrant civil society. Such institutional checks and balances helped expose the nature of state capture and improper behavior by senior South African officials, along with Russia's problematic approach to state capitalism. Zuma's willingness to turn a blind eye to the controversy provided only temporary advantages for the Kremlin. In the end, all of these advantages came to naught.

A Meager Inheritance

At first glance, Russia's prospects for securing a foothold in South Africa looked quite promising. Zuma, a Soviet-trained intelligence operative, ascended to the presidency under a cloud of corruption allegations. The Kremlin had successfully leveraged such situations elsewhere in the world. Over time, Zuma backed away from South Africa's Mandela-era, Western-leaning foreign policy framework in favor of a more anti-Western, heavily conspiratorial view of the international system. (To be sure, such views have deep roots in the ANC even though they are strongly contested.) Zuma's

foreign policy aligned rather nicely with Russian positions on many issues, including the conflicts in Libya and Syria, as well as the threat allegedly posed by so-called color revolutions and the hidden hand of self-interested Western powers.

But the Kremlin overplayed its hand. Its pursuit of a massive, nontransparent nuclear deal mobilized South African civil society and Zuma's political opponents. Instead of anchoring Moscow's relationship with Pretoria, the nuclear deal demonstrated Russia's limited reach and lack of appeal as a partner to a country resilient in terms of democratic governance, strong civil society organizations, press freedoms, and political competition. Another unintended consequence was the impression that the failed nuclear deal was all there was to the South Africa–Russia relationship. This exposed Russia's limited—at best—tool kit for long-range projection of its power and influence.

The questionable ethical aspects of the nuclear deal and the Kremlin's role in avidly promoting it illustrate the Putin regime's reputation as an oftentimes unsavory and shortsighted business partner. Such deals may appeal to the leaders of countries with weak rule of law and fragile civil society, but in South Africa any future deals involving Russia are likely to attract considerable scrutiny.

While the questionable benefits of the nuclear deal for South Africa have been well documented, the dubious economic benefits for Russia have drawn less attention. This, in turn, underscores the role of geopolitics and opportunism as the key drivers of Russian policy toward South Africa. With a meager tool kit for sustaining its geopolitical ambitions, Moscow is finding that success is more elusive than commonly perceived. Serious questions remain about the tangible benefits such global forays will provide to the Kremlin over the long run.

Against the backdrop of the Kremlin's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and in other major Western democracies, it is tempting to conclude that Russia's renewed global activism is producing one success after another. Unfortunately, examples of Russian overreach and miscalculation continue to be overlooked. South Africa stands as a revealing example of the limits of the Kremlin's ham-fisted dealmaking, its limited tool kit, and the unsavory tools Russian officials often fall back on.

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