The Red Rulebook

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Even though the recent Russia-Africa Summit did not yield any substantial results, the hold that Russia and, for that matter, China have over the continent, remains significant. While the West has concentrated its efforts in other geopolitical regions, these two superpowers have established themselves as viable alternatives to the West in Africa, threatening the region's democratic worldview and its West-aligned perception of global politics. Taken at face value, the development of events can seem sudden, which necessitates an analysis, conducted from a historical, present and future point of view, to understand the issue at hand.

Historical Mistrust Looking at what separates the West from the East from a historical perspective instantly brings European colonialism to mind.

Whereas the West has a long history of occupying and exploiting numerous countries in Africa, the East simply does not. Additionally, Europe's relations with Africa are underscored by contentious issues, exemplified best by the West's reluctance to repatriate prized ethnological and religious artifacts to its former colonies. With this historical backdrop, it is no wonder why mistrust of Western aid still impedes the West's humanitarian and military support efforts, subjecting even the best of intentions to accusations of neocolonialism.

Aid versus Trade If one instead takes a look at how global superpowers act in Africa at the moment, another contrast in the support offered by the West and the East emerges. While the West uses its aid to promote Western values (like gender equality and human rights) and has a history of military interventions in domestic affairs, China and Russia adopt a different approach. China instead engages in pragmatic economic engagement, free of any ideological connotations. This usually being in the form of investments in infrastructure, as well as more flexible loans than those offered by the West. This approach, often used to encourage an unsustainable debt accumulation in targeted countries, has not only allowed for concessions that enabled China's establishment of its first overseas military base in Djibouti, but has also led to noticeable shifts in the voting patterns of African states within the United Nations, reflecting the influence of China's economic policies. Meanwhile, Russia provides states of questionable legitimacy military aid through the Wagner Group, as well as holding the continent's food-supply hostage through its war in Ukraine. Nonetheless, its approach has enabled Russia to become the leading arms exporter to the continent. This dynamic further manifests itself as trade with Europe declines and dependence on China and Russia as lone trading and security partners increases.

Dwindling partners Looking ahead, one has to consider the current trajectory of the East's growing influence in Africa. The continent has witnessed successful coups in six countries since 2019, the most recent example being Niger, as well as seeing a rising level of domestic conflicts. Non-democratic changes in power have so far effectively ended Western support in said countries due to Western aid being more strictly tied to certain conditions, in contrast to aid provided by China and Russia. The latter, therefore, enjoy the advantage of being able to cooperate with any state in Africa, which makes the remaining democratic and cooperating states in Africa even more important to the West.

The African Vote Finally, it is important to mention that Africa, more than any other geopolitical region, tends to vote as a block in major international organizations. If this block is swayed or split as a result of Russian or Chinese influence, it can have serious consequences for important geopolitical issues like the war in Ukraine or Beijing's claims in the South China Sea. The value of these votes transcends mere economic gains, as

they further enable these two superpowers to continuously challenge the liberal world order.

Different Rules

In summary, considering that China and Russia lack a colonial history in Africa, engage economically in bad faith, and have little to no moral reservations about dealing with corrupt states or those who fail to respect human rights, it is safe to say that Russia and China simply do not play by the same rules as the West. It is therefore imperative that Western states acknowledge the disadvantages they face, and that they commit themselves to an approach that addresses the lasting impact of its colonial past, emphasizes practical economic support and further develops stronger ties with democratic nations across the African continent.

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