

What the West fears: Russia and China push sovereign development

By Elisa Barwick

There has been no let up in Russia and China promoting the growth of developing countries, acting both individually and in concert through a number of flourishing multilateral forums. Ostracising and sanctioning them is only drawing more nations tired of the unipolar “rules-based order” into their orbit.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov toured four African nations starting 24 July, visiting Egypt, Ethiopia, Uganda and the Republic of the Congo, which have all increased their trade and economic cooperation with Russia in recent years. Also on a visit to Africa, stopping at Benin, Cameroon and Guinea-Bissau, French President Emmanuel Macron countered 27 July that “Russia has started a new kind of hybrid world war” utilising “information, energy and food”. So too US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who decided to travel home from Asia via Africa, visiting South Africa, Congo and Rwanda, announcing the White House’s new Sub-Saharan Africa Strategy, sans mention of any development projects but full of thinly-veiled attacks on Russian and Chinese plans. His trip “looks like an attempt to regain the narrative” against the two countries, reported a 5 August Bloomberg article, headlined “The US-led drive to isolate Russia and China is falling short”.

Ahead of his visit, Lavrov penned an article pre-empting these very lies, which appeared in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram*, the Congolese *Dispatch de Brazzaville*, the



Unit 1 of Egypt's El Dabaa nuclear plant under construction. Photo: Nuclear Power Plants Authority

Ugandan *New Vision* and the *Ethiopia Herald*. The statement stressed that Russia does not put conditions on cooperation and trade with African nations and would continue to “fulfill in good faith its obligations under international contracts with regard to exports of food, fertilizers, energy and other goods vital for Africa”. Lavrov spent a significant amount of time during his trip tackling myths perpetuated by Western nations that Russia is to blame for the food crisis, addressing the COVID-19 economic crunch, sanctions against Russia, and the harmful “green transition” under way.

Lavrov’s article praised African nations for maintaining “an independent path” under pressure to take a position on Ukraine, and for resisting efforts “to impose a unipolar world

order". Lavrov noted that Russia is "working to gradually reduce the share of the dollar and euro in mutual trade. We stand generally for establishing an efficient financial system" that can withstand potential impacts from unfriendly states.

Reminding readers that Russia never "stained itself with the bloody crimes of colonialism", Lavrov stressed "the sovereignty of the States of Africa, and their inalienable right to determine the path of their development for themselves. We are firmly committed to the 'African solutions to African problems' principle." He encouraged joint Russian-African cooperation for "large-scale infrastructure projects", a major topic of discussion at the second Africa-Russia summit to convene in 2023.

Lavrov met on 24 July with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and the foreign ministry delegations held an extended work session. Cooperation in the fields of grain and food supply, as well as the oil and gas sectors was discussed. Earlier this month, Russian construction started on Egypt's nuclear power project at El Dabaa, nearly 300 kilometres west of Cairo, and work is proceeding on construction of an industrial zone near the Suez Canal. The nuclear project consists of four 1.2GW pressurised water reactors, built by Russia's nuclear energy corporation Rosatom, which will be owned and run by the Nuclear Power Plants Authority of Egypt. Note that Rosatom, the largest builder of nuclear power plants abroad, is building Turkey's first nuclear power plant and has tendered to construct Saudi Arabia's first nuclear facility.

While in Cairo, Lavrov also addressed the permanent representatives of the 22 member nations of the League of Arab States, 10 of which are in Africa. The Russian Foreign Ministry reported that special attention was focused on "expanding trade, promoting industrial co-production arrangements and implementing joint projects in Russia and Arab League countries".

In Uganda, Lavrov was welcomed by President Yoweri Museveni. Food security was discussed along with potential joint projects in the areas of oil refining, energy, transport infrastructure and agricultural production. Also noted was the constructive potential of the Non-Aligned Movement, which Uganda will soon chair, to forge "a truly just and polycentric world".

In Ethiopia Lavrov met President Sahle-Work Zewde and other ministers and "it was agreed to concentrate mutual efforts on promising areas such as energy, transport infrastructure, digital technologies and agricultural production", reported the Russian Foreign Ministry.

Lavrov discussed cooperation in international affairs with Republic of the Congo President Denis Sassou Nguesso, including increasing the representation of the developing countries at the United Nations Security Council. Cooperation in the fuel-and-energy and mineral sectors was discussed as well as infrastructure construction, including nuclear power.

Russian leaders will return in September-October for a series of Intergovernmental Commissions on Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation and Trade in the visited countries.

At his final stop in Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa on 27 July, Lavrov gave a briefing at the Russian embassy to the permanent representatives of the member countries of the 55-nation African Union. Lavrov made clear that a new paradigm is emerging to replace the old "rules-based order"—an order in which there is "no single criterion, no single



Lavrov (centre-left) meets with leaders of the Arab League. Photo: Russian Foreign Ministry.

principle except one. If I want something, you have to obey. If you don't obey you will be punished." He expressed the certainty that the overwhelming majority of the world's countries don't want to live "as if the colonial times came back". They prefer to be independent, rely on their own traditions and history, and don't wish to betray their old friends. That is clear, Lavrov said, in the fact that except for two or three developing countries, "no one else in Africa, Asia or Latin America joined the illegal American and European sanctions" against Russia.

So "more and more countries are shifting to using alternative currencies, shifting to use national currencies", he said. "This is not to say that we are suggesting some kind of revolution against the dollar, against the United States—this is to state the obvious: the West created a system which was based on certain principles—free market, fair competition, sanctity of private property, presumption of innocence, and something else. All these principles have been thrown down the drain when they needed to do what they believe is to punish Russia."

Nations queue to join SCO, BRICS

Lavrov then headed to Samarkand, a city on the ancient Silk Road route in southeastern Uzbekistan, where the foreign Ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) met in Tashkent, 28-29 July, in preparation for the heads of state meeting scheduled for 15-16 September. After meeting with host, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Lavrov noted that "it is especially symbolic that a kind of queue is lined up for the Samarkand summit from those wishing to join as full members of the SCO or join as observers and dialogue partners."

Ministers from all eight member countries attended the summit: China, Russia, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Expansion of the forum was discussed, given the numerous nations wishing to join. These include Belarus, Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Myanmar, Cambodia, Nepal, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Currently Belarus, Afghanistan and Mongolia are observer nations; current dialogue partners are Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Nepal, Turkey and Sri Lanka. A memorandum of obligations for Iran to receive full membership is expected to be adopted at the September summit, its full membership will be finalised by April 2023.

Lavrov met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the summit sidelines. Wang, noting the 20th anniversary of the signing of the SCO Charter, called for strengthening solidarity and cooperation among SCO nations as a pillar of world stability. Lavrov added that Russia and China should continue to strengthen coordination on multilateral affairs. Both agreed to deepen integration of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), another crucial forum which brings together Armenia, Belarus,

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia; Cuba, Moldova and Uzbekistan have observer status. Since its inception it has been an engine of growth for trade in local currencies. ("Steps towards a Eurasia-centred, development-based new financial order", AAS, 6 April.)

Uzbekistan and China agreed to "speed up the feasibility study for the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway, improve the capacity of the China-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan Railway and the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan expressway and jointly safeguard the safe and stable operation of the China-Central Asia natural gas pipeline. The two countries will tap the potential of agricultural cooperation and build a China-Central Asia Agricultural Cooperation Centre", according to the 28 July *Global Times*. The rail networks will complement planned rail development in Afghanistan (box). Wang continued on a diplomatic tour with high level meetings in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Bangladesh and Mongolia to discuss development strategies and cooperation projects.

The groundwork for Wang's trip was laid at the third China + Central Asia Foreign Ministers' meeting in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan on 12 June. The Central Asian Five (C5) includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Wang outlined a 10-point program, stemming from the BRI, for the region's development.

Closing out Lavrov's diplomacy was the 4 August Russia-ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting at Phnom-Penh, Cambodia, and 5 August East Asia Summit (where Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong walked out during his speech). Discussion at the Russia-ASEAN event focused on increasing political dialogue under conditions of geopolitical

turbulence to create a "more equitable and multipolar world", according to the Russian Foreign Ministry. Interaction between the EAEU and the ten ASEAN states (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam) was promoted.

Another forum that has nations vying for places is BRICS. On 2 August China's *Global Times* reported that "After the BRICS summit this year officially proposed studying the standards and procedures for expansion, the group of major emerging economies has become increasingly appealing to more countries." The original group of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa represents nearly a quarter of the world economy, set to become 50 per cent by around 2040. It is also home to 40 per cent of world population.

An expanded circle around the BRICS, called BRICS+, has already brought another 13 countries into the BRICS orbit: Algeria, Argentina, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Cambodia, Malaysia, Senegal, Thailand, Uzbekistan, Fiji, and Ethiopia, all of which participated in this year's June summit.

Saudi Arabia has requested to become a full BRICS member, reportedly with Chinese backing. Iran and Argentina applied after the June summit. Egypt and Turkey are keen to join, and Algeria, Uruguay and Morocco have signalled their interest. Indonesia is another likely contender. As noted, Saudi Arabia and Egypt are also seeking a role in the SCO. In 2021 Egypt became a member of the BRICS New Development Bank, which funds development projects. At the 1-6 August second BRICS International Youth Camp, Lavrov talked up the BRICS as "an example of a true multilateral and multipolar diplomacy".

Afghanistan: Economic reconstruction is key to peace

On 25-26 July the Uzbekistan government hosted a summit for Afghan development with around 100 delegates from almost 30 nations, including representatives of the Taliban government. The host government issued a summary report saying the intention of the gathering was "to promote the integration of Afghanistan into interregional economic processes, to promote the implementation of socially significant and infrastructure projects, including the formation of transregional transport, energy and other corridors."

The Trans-Afghanistan Rail corridor and border-nation electricity corridor were discussed. The 573-kilometre rail corridor would extend the Afghan rail network from Mazar-e-Sharif—a regional hub in northern Afghanistan, close to both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan—to Kabul and then to Nangarhar province in eastern Afghanistan, where the railway would cross the border with Pakistan at Torkham and run into Pakistan via Peshawar. The Pakistan rail network can then move goods to the seaports at Karachi, Gwadar and Qasim. Travel time from Uzbekistan to Pakistan would be reduced from 35 days to 3-5 days, *The Diplomat* reported 26 July. Uzbekistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan drew up construction plans for the project in early 2021 and feasibility studies were launched in July, with the assistance of Russian Railways. The security situation in Afghanistan, the country's frozen foreign reserves, along with difficult terrain and gauge changes, have hampered progress.

The Surkhan-Puli-Khumri power transmission line, running from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan, was discussed,



The first section of a Turkmenistan-Afghanistan rail link. Photo: AFP/Igor Sasin

along with creation of a cargo transport and logistics hub at Termez, Uzbekistan. A training centre in Termez would be transformed into an educational cluster for training Afghan personnel. Additionally, the Central Asia-South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (CASA-1000) would bring excess electricity from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan's seasonally abundant hydroelectric power to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The project was put on hold when the Taliban took power, but construction has now resumed with an estimated completion date of 2024.

The conference also called for the United States to release Afghanistan's frozen US\$9 billion foreign reserves. The impact of broader Western sanctions was evident when Afghanistan recently attempted to resume its export of nuts and dried fruit—the sanctions blocked Iran's payments and prevented the exchange.