



AFRICAN NARRATIVES

Russia's New Frontier in Africa: Ports as a Tool of Geopolitical Influence



Author:



Nashwa Abdelnaby

Political Researcher

Published by:
African Narratives



Summary

Through a strategic initiative to establish new ports in Africa, Russia is seeking to consolidate its presence on the continent by employing a new tool of geopolitical influence: logistical infrastructure. This move aims to strengthen economic and trade relations with key African countries and expand Russian influence in regions of growing strategic importance. Moscow has officially announced its intention to

build ports in Tanzania, Senegal, Algeria, and Egypt as part of a long-term approach to meet the rising demand for Russian goods and open new opportunities for Russian investment. This paper analyzes the motivations behind this initiative, its geopolitical dimensions, and the specific opportunities and challenges it presents, with a focus on the proposed port in Senegal.

Key Points

1. A New Tool for Russian Influence in Africa:

- The use of ports as strategic infrastructure enables the expansion of Russia's political and economic presence.

2. Economic and Commercial Objectives:

- Meeting the growing demand for Russian products and services.
- Opening markets and investment opportunities for Russian companies on the continent.

3. Diversifying African Partnerships:

- The initiative includes countries from North, East, and West Africa, indicating a comprehensive

Russian policy toward the continent that goes beyond traditional spheres of influence.

4. An Official Statement Reflecting the Seriousness of the Initiative:

- The announcement was made by a senior official, Roman Chekushov, which lends the plan an official and well-considered strategic character.

5. Geopolitical Dimension:

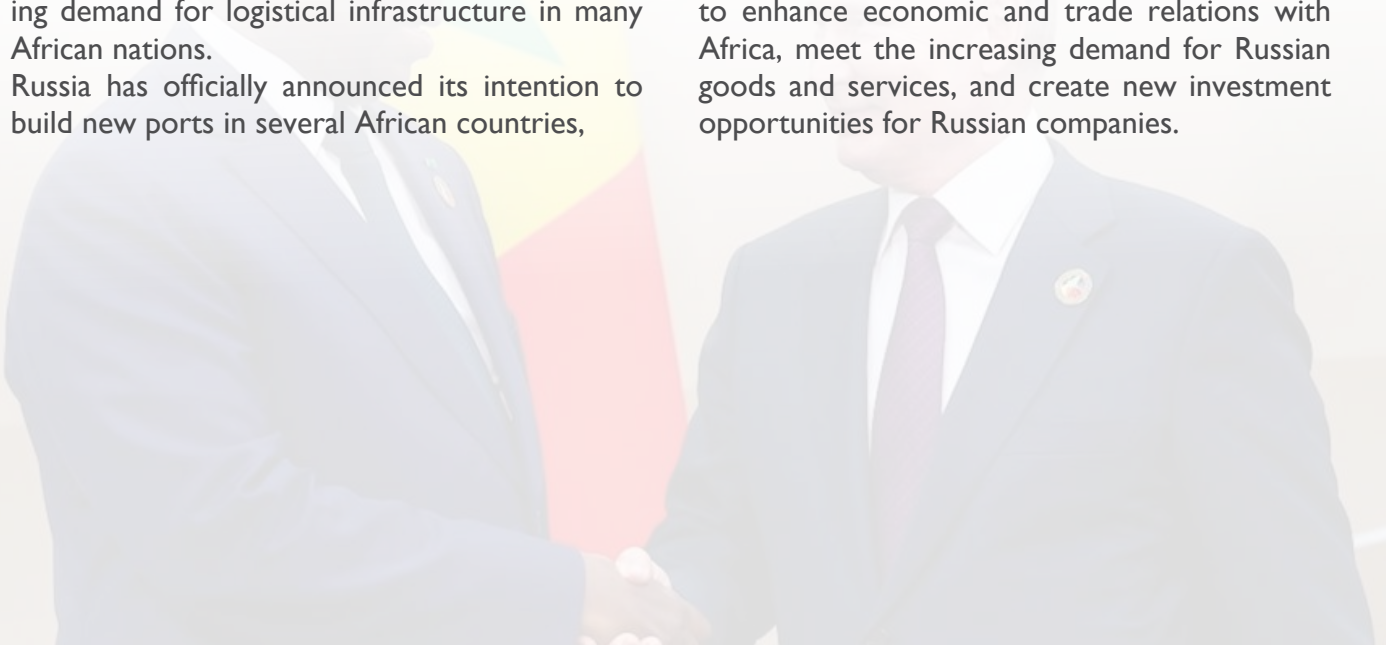
- The initiative comes amid global competition for influence in Africa, particularly in light of the retreat of some Western powers and the rise of new actors such as China and Turkey.

Introduction

Russia's initiative to establish new ports in Africa represents a strategic move with significant economic and geopolitical dimensions. The initiative aims to strengthen Russia's relations with African countries and expand its influence across the continent, while also responding to the growing demand for logistical infrastructure in many African nations.

Russia has officially announced its intention to build new ports in several African countries,

including Tanzania, Senegal, Algeria, and Egypt. This was stated by Roman Chekushov, Director of the Department of International Cooperation in Foreign Trade at the Russian Ministry of Industry and Trade, during his participation in an industrial exhibition in Uzbekistan. The initiative seeks to enhance economic and trade relations with Africa, meet the increasing demand for Russian goods and services, and create new investment opportunities for Russian companies.



I. Russia's Strategic Pivot to Africa

Russia's initiative to establish new ports in Africa is not a sudden maneuver but a calculated effort to reshape the geopolitical landscape in its favor. This strategy is part of a broader effort to build alliances across the Global South in pursuit of a more balanced international order. Russia's approach often involves filling security and political vacuums left by Western powers, allowing it to rapidly establish its influence and build a cooperation belt stretching from the Atlantic to the Red Sea.

Unlike the Western approach, which often ties long-term partnerships to political conditionalities, Russia's strategy focuses on tactical advantages, non-interference in internal affairs, and respect for national sovereignty. This has proven

attractive to many African nations seeking to diversify their international partnerships away from traditional Western dominance. .

Over the past two years, Russia-Africa economic cooperation has undergone a qualitative transformation. Africa's share of Russian exports increased from 2.5% in 2022 to 5% by the end of 2023, driven by growing investments in infrastructure and exports of key commodities like wheat, petroleum products, and machinery. This shift has been greatly facilitated by the new geopolitical reality that emerged after February 2022, with nearly all of Africa's 54 countries now expressing interest in developing multifaceted relations with Moscow.

II. The Port Initiative: A New Tool of Influence

Russia has officially announced its intention to build new ports in four key African countries: Tanzania, Senegal, Algeria, and Egypt. This was stated by Roman Chekushov, a senior official at the Russian Ministry of Industry and Trade, signaling a well-considered strategic plan. The selection of these countries reflects a deliberate strategy to create a comprehensive logistics network across the continent, with Tanzania and Senegal serving as eastern and western gateways, and Algeria and Egypt covering the northern corridor.

The significance of these proposed ports extends beyond commercial interests; they embody deep strategic dimensions. These projects serve as

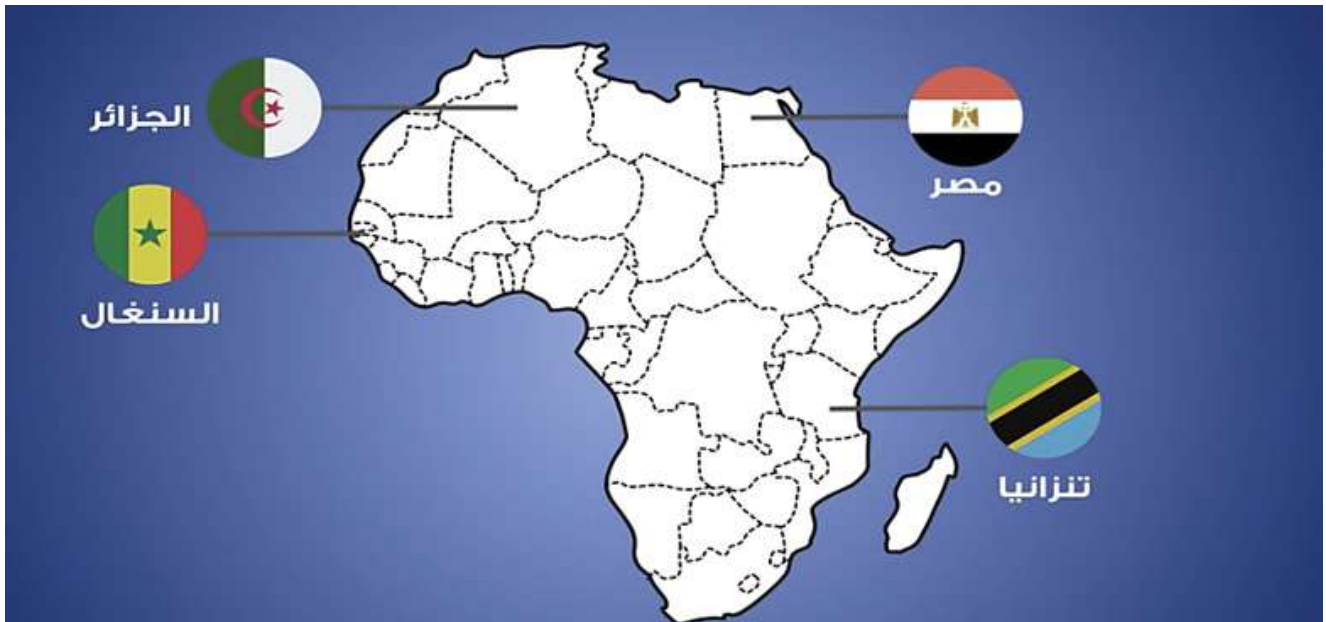
cornerstones for an integrated infrastructure network that strengthens Russia's influence, positioning it as both an economic and strategic partner. In this, Russia appears to be drawing inspiration from China's successful Belt and Road Initiative.

By providing modern port facilities, Russia aims to pave the way for major investment initiatives across various sectors, thereby contributing to economic growth in Africa. This approach presents a new model of international cooperation based on partnership and mutual respect, in contrast to what many African nations view as the historically exploitative colonial model of the West.

1 Russian firms submitting bids to build ports in Senegal: Russia envoy, June 3, 2024, <https://2u.pw/kfhwyh>

2 Russian firms submitting bids to build ports in Senegal: Russia envoy, 2 Jun 2024, <https://2u.pw/Zc5GxM>

3 Russia is considering the creation of a port in Tanzania, Senegal, Algeria or Egypt, 23.04.2024, <https://2u.pw/fAraw5>



The construction of Russian ports in Africa represents a strategic step within the broader changes in the international order. Russia aims to strengthen its economic and geostrategic influence on the continent and reshape global trade routes by developing new infrastructure that serves both its own interests and those of its African partners.

The importance of these ports goes beyond their role as logistical facilities; they serve as a foundation for building a new infrastructure network capable of supporting large-scale economic projects in the future. By providing modern, advanced port facilities, Russia seeks to pave the way for major investment initiatives across various sectors, thereby contributing to

economic growth in Africa.

Russia's investment in African infrastructure is not limited to enhancing economic ties—it also presents a new model of international cooperation based on equal partnership and mutual respect, in contrast to the Western colonial model that has historically exploited Africa's resources. Through these investments, Russia aims to empower African nations to achieve sustainable development and self-reliance by building advanced infrastructure that supports diverse economic sectors.

Russia rejects the exploitative colonial model and instead promotes a new pattern of cooperation grounded in equity, capacity-building, and respect for national sovereignty.

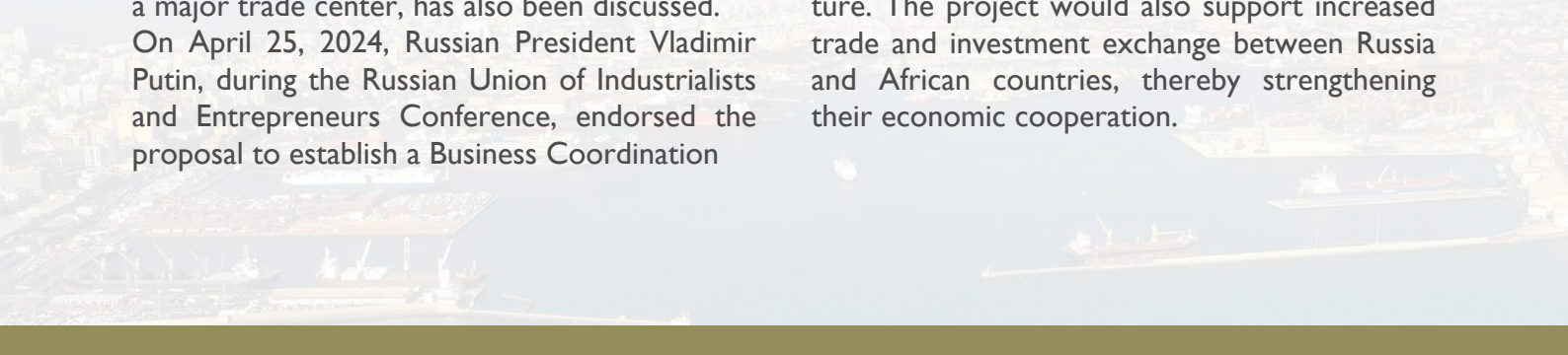
III. Case Study: The Proposed Russian Port in Senegal

Russia's efforts are currently focused on East Africa (Tanzania) and West Africa, with a special emphasis on Senegal. A port in Dakar could evolve into a comprehensive platform that meets the logistical and commercial needs of the continent, reducing dependency on Western-controlled infrastructure and strengthening economic cooperation. The idea of establishing a Russian grain hub in the region, which could develop into a major trade center, has also been discussed.

On April 25, 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin, during the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs Conference, endorsed the proposal to establish a Business Coordination

Center aimed at operating in new markets, including Africa.

In the context of this proposal, the Senegalese port of Dakar could evolve into a comprehensive platform that meets the logistical and commercial needs of the African continent. In addition to serving as a vital logistics hub, the port could become a key center for continental transportation, reducing dependency on Western infrastructure. The project would also support increased trade and investment exchange between Russia and African countries, thereby strengthening their economic cooperation.



This initiative represents a strategic step toward enhancing Russia's influence in Africa and diversifying its trade partnerships.

Furthermore, the idea of establishing a Russian grain hub in the region has been discussed for some time. Such a hub could develop into a major grain trade center, serving not only as an export platform but also as a fully integrated logistics center, offering a wide range of services related to the storage, transportation, and distribution of grain. Integrating this hub with the port would allow for greater efficiency in logistical operations, boosting the effectiveness and competitiveness of trade.

The idea of a Russian port in Senegal is gaining increasing momentum and deserves special attention. Let us explore the various aspects of this project in greater detail.

Port Infrastructure in Senegal

Senegal has long been a vital commercial hub on the West African coast, owing to its strategic location along the shoreline. With the increasing volume of trade in the region and the impact on some traditional trade routes, the demand for Senegalese port services has grown significantly. Currently, the country is witnessing substantial investments in developing its port sector, with four main ports in operation and ongoing construction of shipyards and new port terminals. Senegal holds a crucial strategic position in regional trade and is working to strengthen its status as a major logistics center in West Africa. The Port of Dakar was the nucleus for the establishment of modern Senegal's capital city. Its initial construction began with a quay and shipyard in a naturally sheltered bay, benefiting from natural harbors provided by Gorée Island

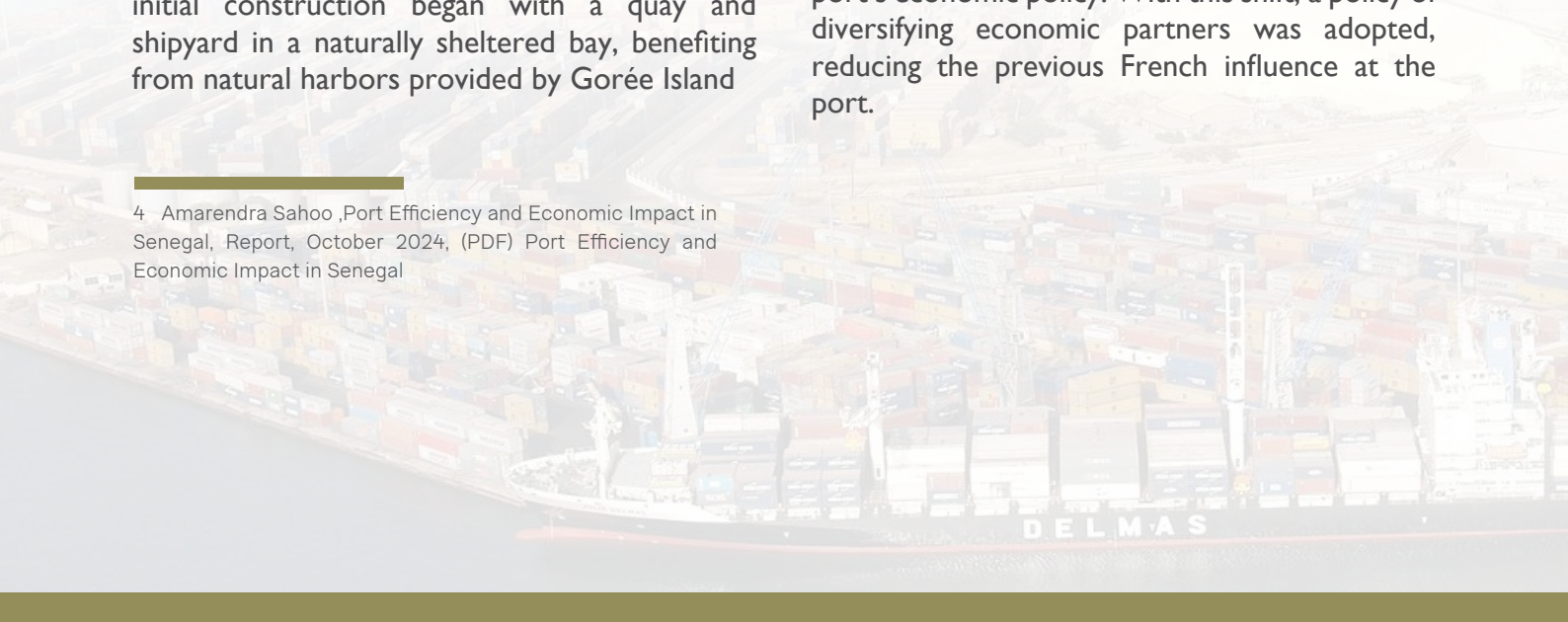
and Cape Manuel, paving the way for the city's growth and development. Today, the Port of Dakar is an independent government entity at the ministerial level, comprising separate port areas (terminals) and a naval base, which hosts among others, a unit of the French armed forces .

In 2022, the port witnessed active commercial traffic, with a total cargo throughput of 22.4 million tons, including more than three million tons of transshipment cargo. Container traffic exceeded 750,000 TEUs (equivalent to about 6.1 meters per container). Additionally, over 100,000 vehicles were delivered through the port, and more than 600,000 tons of fish products were exported.

The port is managed by a directorate that oversees the general administrative operations. The day-to-day operational activities of the port are managed by the Port Captain's Office. Customs procedures fall under the responsibility of the Customs Department. Security and order are maintained by an independent Police Commissioner and a separate Gendarmerie Brigade.

The port management has undergone a significant transformation, with the administration of many areas and terminals transferred to private economic operators. For example, the management of the fuel terminal was handed over to these operators for joint operation. The entire management of the container terminal was also transferred to the UAE-based company Dubai Ports World, resulting in a radical change in the port's economic policy. With this shift, a policy of diversifying economic partners was adopted, reducing the previous French influence at the port.

4 Amarendra Sahoo ,Port Efficiency and Economic Impact in Senegal, Report, October 2024, (PDF) Port Efficiency and Economic Impact in Senegal





ميناء داكار - السنغال

1. The Current State of the Port of Dakar

Senegal has long been a vital commercial hub on the West African coast. The Port of Dakar, an independent government entity, is central to the nation's economy. In 2022, it handled a total cargo throughput of 22.4 million tons and container traffic exceeding 750,000 TEUs.

However, the port has undergone a significant transformation, with the administration of many terminals transferred to private operators, most notably the UAE-based Dubai Ports World. This shift has diversified the port's economic partners, reducing the historical French influence. Despite its importance, the Port of Dakar is currently experiencing a severe crisis, having reached the brink of operational collapse due to congestion and capacity issues. This deteriorating situation is a key reason why Morocco's Atlantic Initiative for the Sahel countries, which aims to redirect trade through new logistical routes, has gained traction.

2. Expected Benefits of a Russian Port in Senegal

A Russian-led port project would offer wide-ranging opportunities to boost trade and investment,

contributing to sustainable economic growth for both Russia and Senegal. For a long time, the monopoly of the Port of Dakar has been a major obstacle to Senegal's economic development. Establishing new ports has become essential, and a partnership with Russia aligns with the new Senegalese government's vision of strengthening cooperation with diverse international partners.

3. The Legal Status of a "Russian Port"

When referring to a "Russian port," the term indicates that the project is financed and executed by Russia to achieve its strategic goals. Legally and structurally, however, this port would not differ from other ports in Senegal managed by foreign companies. It would not be a military base but a civilian facility subject to local laws and regulations, with no special legal status or privileges. The port would be an integral part of Senegal's economy, contributing to government revenues through taxes and fees, providing job opportunities, and supporting local businesses.

IV. Opportunities and Challenges for the Russian Initiative

Opportunities: The primary opportunity for Russia lies in addressing Senegal's urgent need for new port infrastructure. The crisis at the Port of Dakar creates a clear opening for a new international partner, and Russia's proposal fits neatly with the new Senegalese government's policy of diversifying its foreign relations.

Challenges: Russia faces a significant challenge in the shortage of qualified personnel to work on

complex African projects. While financial incentives may be attractive, only a limited number of Russian experts possess the necessary combination of language skills, local cultural knowledge, and practical field experience to manage such projects effectively. This human capital gap could hinder the development of the administrative and operational mechanisms required for successful port management.

V. Recommendations and Conclusion

To ensure the success of this strategic initiative, Russia must adopt a collaborative and transparent approach. The organizational structure of the port project should include representatives from all relevant parties—Russia, Senegal, neighboring countries, and regional trade organizations. This would ensure accountability and the development of joint operational mechanisms. Further-

more, the project requires in-depth feasibility studies to determine the optimal location and its integration into the national transportation network. This can be achieved through cooperation with international partners, including companies from China, the UAE, and Turkey, which can provide the technical support and expertise needed.





In conclusion

Russia's initiative to build ports in Africa represents a strategic shift from a purely security-focused engagement to one that leverages logistical and economic infrastructure as a new tool of geopolitical influence. This move offers a new model of partnership to African nations and positions Russia as a key player in the continent's future. The proposed port in Senegal serves as a critical test case for this new strategy, and its success will depend on Russia's ability to navigate the complex challenges of implementation while delivering tangible benefits to its African partners.