

Russian Nuclear Diplomacy in the Global South, and How to Respond to It

by João Paulo Nicolini Gabriel

Since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has managed to overcome most of the strict sanctions imposed by Western economies, largely due to its ability to maintain economic relations with emerging powers in the field of energy, particularly oil, gas and nuclear. The atomic sector is spearheaded by the worldwide presence of Rosatom – a Russian company that heads a conglomerate of more than 300 companies responsible for the manufacture and sale of nuclear technologies for both civilian and military uses.

In recent years, Russia has emerged as a partner in providing nuclear technologies to countries in the Global South, gradually expanding its presence in Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. This strategy hinges on Moscow's ability to find new diplomatic and trade partners by negotiating with these countries without imposing severe non-proliferation conditionality (such as

the United States' 123 Agreements¹) and selling a wide range of nuclear-related technologies – being the only supplier worldwide of all the necessary elements to establish a nuclear programme.²

For Global South countries, Russia has become a potential provider of nuclear-related technologies. Therefore, Moscow employs Rosatom as a diplomatic tool to garner support within the United Nations to avoid further sanctions – what the literature calls “international clientelism” where Russia builds diplomatic ties and partnerships with countries to receive support for its positions during global governance negotiations.³

¹ The 123 Agreements are bilateral nuclear cooperation agreements between the United States and other countries, facilitating peaceful nuclear cooperation while ensuring non-proliferation through safeguards.

² Kacper Szulecki and Indra Overland, “Russian Nuclear Energy Diplomacy and Its implications for Energy Security in the Context of the War in Ukraine”, in *Nature Energy*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (April 2023), p. 413-421 at p. 414, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41560-023-01228-5>.

³ Thales Carvalho and Dawisson Belém Lopes,

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Rosatom has won numerous bids for the sale of reactors, positioning itself as the leader in terms of the number of simultaneously implemented nuclear reactor construction projects, with 3 units in Russia and 33 abroad at various stages of implementation.⁴ Likewise, it controls approximately 20 per cent of the global market of conversion and enriched-related materials, something that made it an important partner of scientific groups from the US and European countries regardless of the Russia-Ukraine War⁵ – for example, participating in the ongoing construction of the Facility for Antiproton and Ion Research (FAIR), an international accelerator facility to perform cutting-edge research in Germany.⁶

Similarly, since 2023 Rosatom has been the exclusive supplier of enriched uranium-related products to Brazilian nuclear facilities.⁷ This landmark agreement is the first long-term

⁴ “International Clientelistic Networks: The Case of Venezuela at the United Nations General Assembly, 1999–2015”, in *Latin American Politics and Society*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (August 2022), p. 37-66, DOI 10.1017/lap.2022.11.

⁴ Rosatom website: *Projects*, <https://www.rosatom.ru/en/investors/projects>.

⁵ Darya Dolzikova, “Atoms for Sale: Developments in Russian Nuclear Energy Export”, in *RUSI Special Reports*, 14 February 2023, p. 7-8, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/atoms-sale-developments-russian-nuclear-energy-exports>.

⁶ “Russia to Supply Unique Equipment for FAIR Research Accelerator Being Built in Germany”, in *TASS*, 16 November 2015, <https://tass.com/science/836929>.

⁷ Ivan Dybov, “Opening New Horizons for Cooperation”, in *Rosatom Newsletter*, No. 262 (February 2023), <https://rosatomnewsletter.com/?p=16907>.

partnership with Brasília, replacing previous imports from Canada and European consortiums. These factors come precisely at a time when Rosatom seeks to expand its relations with BRICS countries to increase its participation in the sale of nuclear subsidies for the production of radioisotopes in these nations and to secure financing from the BRICS New Development bank.⁸

The increasing presence of Rosatom in the Global South

Rosatom currently controls approximately 70 per cent of the global export market for the construction of nuclear power plants.⁹ Its expansion in the Global South occurs within the context of emerging powers seeking to boost their energy production through nuclear means.

Middle Eastern and North Africa (MENA) region

On 27 April 2023, Turkish President Erdoğan expressed gratitude to Putin regarding the inauguration of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant – Turkey’s first nuclear power reactor.¹⁰ It will start operating in 2025 with four VVER 1200 pressurised-water reactors and will be responsible for around 10 per cent of the total national production of electricity. Located in Turkey’s southern Mersin

⁸ “Rosatom to Get Financing for Projects from BRICS Bank”, in *Interfax*, 31 July 2023, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/93126>.

⁹ Alexandra Prokopenko, “Rosatom: A Difficult Target”, in *EIRP Russia’s Global Energy Role Working Papers*, No. 1 (May 2023), p. 3, <https://innovationreform.org/?p=3049>.

¹⁰ “Erdogan Thanks Putin for His Help on Turkish Nuclear Plant”, in *Al Jazeera*, 27 April 2023, <https://aje.io/tm54z9>.

province, the nuclear power plant was constructed by Rosatom – whose subsidiaries financed 93 per cent of the project.¹¹ This development has had created tension with the Western bloc, as Turkey, a member of NATO, sought Russian technology to advance its civil nuclear programme regardless of the sanctions imposed because of the Russia-Ukraine War. Likewise, Rosatom has provided Egypt with four VVER reactors for the construction of its first nuclear power plant – the second on the African continent – in a contract worth approximately 30 billion US dollars. The Russian government has also agreed to provide funding for 85 per cent of the cost.¹²

In North Africa, a region grappling with rapid population growth and a growing need for sustainable energy sources, Russia has initiated strategic dialogues to bolster nuclear cooperation. Countries like Morocco, Libya (whose nuclear reactor – temporarily shut down – was produced by the Soviet Union) and Tunisia, seeking to diversify their energy portfolios away from fossil fuels, have become focal points for these discussions.¹³

Rosatom has been at the forefront of these dialogues, leveraging

¹¹ Rosatom, “Investment Management”, in *Public Report of State Atomic Energy Corporation Rosatom for 2016, 2017*, <https://ar2016.rosatom.ru/?/en/162-investment-management>.

¹² Marina Lorenzini, “Why Egypt’s New Nuclear Plant is a Long-term Win for Russia”, in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 20 December 2023, <https://thebulletin.org/?p=109481>.

¹³ Chiponda Chimbela, “African Countries Start Mulling Nuclear Energy”, in *Die Welt*, 22 October 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/a-50872702>.

memoranda of understanding (MoUs) and commercial negotiations to explore potential nuclear projects and collaborations. While aiming to address the region’s energy demands, these engagements also align with Russia’s broader geopolitical and economic interests in the MENA region.

Sub-Saharan Africa

In a similar vein, different countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya and Ethiopia, have nuclear-related diplomatic and commercial agreements with Russia. Rosatom has actively engaged in the region, offering scholarship opportunities for local students to complete engineering studies in Russia.¹⁴ In this regard, Russia seeks diplomatic rapprochement with Nigeria based on cooperation in uranium exploration and the establishment of a nuclear power plant financed through Russian credit lines.

Moscow has pursued preferential access to rare earth and uranium mines on the continent, as seen in agreements with Tanzania and Namibia. South Africa, a key member of the BRICS, is another notable case. The ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), has close relations with the Kremlin since the Cold War, and the country needs to generate more electricity to address the recurrent blackouts. In 2023, Pretoria decided to boost nuclear energy production, with Rosatom poised as a top contender. Plans for

¹⁴ Rosatom, “Rosatom: Bringing Better Education to Africa”, in *Rosatom Newsletter*, No. 223 (December 2019), <https://rosatomnewsletter.com/?p=11863>.

new nuclear plants, however, face opposition, also due to corruption allegations surrounding a previously cancelled agreement.¹⁵

In all, Sub-Saharan countries have drawn closer to Russia, serving as both a diplomatic support and a market for Russian products.¹⁶ While financing the growth of these nations by supplying nuclear technology, Russia receives diplomatic support in return, especially in the United Nations General Assembly. For instance, South Africa has supported Russia in UN votes, casting votes against several resolutions condemning Moscow and becoming embroiled in controversies regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict.¹⁷

South Asia

Russia's nuclear diplomacy has extended to the Asian continent too – especially South Asia. In the case of India, the construction of Units 3, 4, 5 and 6 at the Kudankulam nuclear power plant revives a long-standing partnership dating back to agreements with the Soviet Union.¹⁸ Likewise,

¹⁵ Gerald Imray, "South Africa to Build New Nuclear Plants. The Opposition Attacked the Plan over Alleged Russia Links", in *AP News*, 12 December 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/83f81ae6efd328a532b0f0b16370f730>.

¹⁶ Aanu Adeoye, "UN Vote on Russia Invasion Shows a Changing Africa", in *Chatham House Expert Comments*, 7 March 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/28423>.

¹⁷ Crystal Orderson, "A 'Russian Love Affair': Why South Africa Stays 'Neutral' on War", in *Al Jazeera*, 2 June 2023, <https://aje.io/5o8re2>.

¹⁸ Indian Ministry of External Affairs, *Visit of External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar to Russia (December 25-29, 2023)*, 30 December 2023, <https://fsi.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37489>.

the Russian company operates in Bangladesh, with preparations underway for the construction of the Rooppur nuclear power plant, the country's first nuclear power facility. In Sri Lanka too, Russia is a potential candidate for building nuclear reactors as part of a recently released long-term project to boost local energy production in the country.¹⁹ Hence, in South Asia, Russia aims to leverage historical ties by offering technology and energy opportunities in the nuclear field to sustain commercial ties. Indeed, despite Western pressures, South Asia maintains significant trade with Moscow, thus mitigating the impact of sanctions on its economy.

Latin America

Finally, in Latin America, Russia is strategically pursuing expanded partnerships and seeking increased access to raw material markets. Notably, in Bolivia, a 450 million US dollars contract with Rosatom will lead to the construction of a lithium carbonate mining and production complex – a material that is essential for nuclear reactors' cooling and containment systems. Concurrently, Russia has extended nuclear collaborations with Brazil.²⁰

¹⁹ "Sri Lanka Seeks Investors for Nuclear Power Plants", in *Reuters*, 18 November 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/sri-lanka-seeks-investors-nuclear-power-plants-2023-11-17>.

²⁰ Brazilian Government, *ENBPar e Rosatom buscam cooperação para novas fontes de energia verde*, 3 October 2022, <https://www.gov.br/mme/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/enbpar-e-rosatom-buscam-cooperacao-para-novas-fontes-de-energia-verde>.

Once again, Russia clearly aims to bolster its diplomatic ties with these countries through nuclear energy. Former Brazilian President Bolsonaro, known for his right-wing policies, travelled to Moscow in 2022 to meet with Putin, signalling his intention to deepen diplomatic relations in the nuclear sector. Bolsonaro treated the information discussed during the trip as confidential, but the Brazilian press reported conversations with Russian companies to promote the interests of the navy and seek assistance with the certification of the fuel to be used in reactors for nuclear submarines.

The challenges that lie ahead, and how to address them

Russia has found in the nuclear market a means to buttress ties with countries in the Global South by providing high-technology elements to these nations. Through partnerships in the nuclear sector, Russia has not only strengthened its presence in the global energy landscape but has also enhanced its geopolitical influence, particularly in regions where emerging economies seek technological advancements and energy solutions.

Russia's strategic use of nuclear partnerships with countries in the Global South does not only increase its global influence, but also poses challenges related to technology transfer and economic dependency. Indeed, these partnerships often rely heavily on Russian technology and financing, raising concerns about recipient countries' autonomy and economic vulnerability.

To mitigate the risk of Russia leveraging nuclear partnerships to augment its influence in the Global South, Western partners could offer alternative innovative solutions aligned with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) guidelines – such as the 2009 US agreement with the United Arab Emirates. Encouraging technology transfer and local capacity building based on the existing rules, Western assistance may empower recipient countries to develop their nuclear expertise while reducing dependency on a single supplier. For their part, adhering to IAEA standards and developing diversified partnerships, countries in the Global South could better navigate challenges and foster sustainable nuclear development in the long term.

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