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**Sankofa: Reimagining the Non-Aligned
Movement in an Age of Geopolitical Rivalry**



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The contemporary geopolitical environment is becoming increasingly difficult for developing countries to navigate. The Russia-Ukraine war has evolved beyond a territorial conflict into a wider confrontation involving military alliances, sanctions, energy, trade, technology and finance, with consequences extending beyond Europe. For African countries, the concern is not only the war itself but how growing rivalry among powerful states may constrain their economic and diplomatic choices.

The familiar saying that when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers captures this vulnerability. However, today's geopolitical landscape differs from the Cold War. While the Cold War was largely structured around two competing blocs, contemporary international relations are more fragmented, with states maintaining multiple and sometimes competing partnerships. Yet these relationships can expose developing countries to the consequences of great-power rivalry, particularly as sanctions and other economic instruments increasingly extend beyond the countries directly involved in conflict. This situation raises an important question for Ghana and other African countries. How can they pursue international partnerships that advance their national interests without becoming entangled in great-power rivalry?

This article argues for a renewed form of strategic non-alignment based on diversified partnerships, principled diplomacy and policy autonomy. Drawing on Ghana's historical role in the Non-Aligned Movement and the principle of *Sankofa*, the article argues that Africa can look to its diplomatic past not to reproduce the Cold War, but to recover the principle of maintaining strategic independence in an increasingly contested international system.

FROM THE COLD WAR TO A MORE COMPLEX GEOPOLITICAL ORDER

The Non-Aligned Movement emerged from the experience of newly independent states seeking political autonomy within a world dominated by competing superpowers. The Bandung Conference of 1955 and the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961 reflected an effort by developing countries to protect sovereignty, oppose domination and maintain the freedom to pursue their own interests (Timossi, 2015).

Ghana's experience is particularly important. Ghana's Ministry of Foreign Affairs continues to identify adherence to the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement as one of the foundations of its foreign policy. The Ministry also explains that Nkrumah distinguished between neutrality and what he regarded as positive neutrality. Positive neutrality did not require political indifference; rather, it meant developing independent positions on international issues rather than automatically adopting the position of either major power bloc (see Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d)

Historical scholarship similarly shows that Nkrumah's non-alignment was connected to Pan-Africanism and the attempt to prevent Africa from becoming a theatre for external power competition. Gerits (2015) describes Nkrumah's approach as combining non-alignment with Pan-Africanism in an effort to avoid a repetition of crises such as the Congo crisis. Research on Ghana's subsequent foreign policy by Botchway et al., (2021) also suggests that although the principles of non-alignment remained important, Ghana's practice has necessarily been influenced by changing international circumstances and political leadership.

The contemporary environment is different from that of Nkrumah's time. There are no longer simply two clearly defined geopolitical camps. The result, however, may be more complicated rather than less dangerous. Competition now occurs simultaneously through military power, economic sanctions, energy, technology, financial institutions, diplomatic networks and access to markets (Abdulkarim et al., 2021; Umer, 2026). The challenge for developing countries is therefore no longer simply deciding which bloc to join. It is maintaining the freedom not to become structurally dependent upon any bloc. This is why the concept of strategic autonomy is useful. Strategic autonomy does not mean isolation, neutrality on every international question or equal distance from every major power (Latham, 2026). It means retaining sufficient political and economic space to make decisions according to national and regional interests.

UKRAINE, RUSSIA AND THE EXPANSION OF GEOPOLITICAL RISK

The war in Ukraine demonstrates how the consequences of great-power rivalry can extend beyond the immediate battlefield. The humanitarian situation in Russian-occupied areas of southern Ukraine illustrates the continuing severity of the conflict. Human Rights Watch reported in July 2026 that civilians in the occupied Kherson region, including Oleshky, faced severe shortages of food and medical care and dangerous conditions associated with ongoing hostilities and landmines (see Human Right Watch, 2026). The organisation estimated that approximately 2,000 people remained in Oleshky, including around 200 children, while organised evacuation mechanisms were largely absent. More recent reporting in September described continued difficulties in supplying food and medicine and desperate attempts by residents to leave as Russia attacks Ukraine's supermarkets and food facilities (see Daily Digest, 2026).

These conditions are important not because they demonstrate the humanitarian consequences of war, but because the conflict is increasingly producing a broader security environment in Europe. On 17 September 2026, Russia launched a major missile and drone attack against Ukrainian cities close to the Polish border. Poland scrambled aircraft and temporarily closed two airports, although Polish authorities reported that its airspace had not been violated (see Reuter, 2026). Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk

subsequently warned parliament that Russia could attempt drone or rocket attacks against NATO countries supporting Ukraine, although this represented a warning about a possible future threat rather than evidence that such attacks had already occurred (Nicol, 2026).

European governments are consequently strengthening their security architecture. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has proposed an Emergency Security Protocol for responding collectively to hybrid threats such as sabotage, cyberattacks and drone incursions, alongside a proposed European Security Council involving EU states and selected partners. European Defence Commissioner Andrius Kubilius has argued for a stronger European response to such threats (Gray & Bayer, 2026). The significance for Africa lies in what these developments reveal about the direction of international politics. The Russia–Ukraine conflict is no longer only a question of territorial conflict in Eastern Europe. It is contributing to a wider restructuring of economic and security relationships. This is precisely where developing countries must exercise caution.

SANCTIONS AND THE NEW GEOGRAPHY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Sanctions have become one of the most important instruments in this geopolitical confrontation. The EU states explicitly that its Russia sanctions are intended to weaken Russia's economic base, restrict access to critical technologies and markets, and reduce its ability to sustain the war. Its 21st sanctions package, adopted in July 2026, added individuals and entities, imposed further restrictions on Russian financial institutions and expanded measures affecting Russia's energy sector. The United States has also intensified pressure. On 18 September 2026, President Donald Trump signed a major Russia sanctions bill targeting Russian energy and defence sectors and its oil tanker network, while providing authority for tariffs affecting major purchasers of Russian energy.

For Russia, these measures have increased the importance of relationships outside Western markets. For developing countries, however, they create a dilemma. Cooperation with Russia may provide access to investment, energy, education, agriculture, minerals, technology or security cooperation, but transactions involving sanctioned entities can also generate financial and compliance risks. The implication is important: geopolitical conflict increasingly travels through economic networks. A country does not have to participate directly in a war to feel its consequences. This can be seen in Germany's experience. For years, Germany developed a close economic relationship with Russia, particularly through energy. Russian gas contributed to German industrial competitiveness, while political leaders including Gerhard Schröder and Angela Merkel pursued varying forms of engagement with Moscow. The construction of Nord Stream 2 represented the depth of this interdependence. After Russia's full-scale invasion of

Ukraine, however, the relationship was fundamentally transformed. Germany's earlier economic assumptions about Russia became politically and strategically difficult to sustain.

GHANA AND RUSSIA: A CONTEMPORARY TEST OF STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Ghana's relationship with Russia provides a useful case through which to consider this dilemma. Ghana and Russia have maintained diplomatic relations since 1958, with historical cooperation in education and other sectors. The relationship has roots in the Nkrumah period, when Ghana deliberately developed relations beyond the traditional Western sphere as part of its broader industrialisation and Pan-African agenda. The relationship has recently gained renewed momentum. During the Ghanaian Foreign Minister's August 2026 visit to Moscow, Ghana and Russia signed a visa-waiver agreement covering holders of diplomatic and service passports. The agreement was signed on 17 August 2026 and was described by Ghana's Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the first such arrangement between the two countries since diplomatic relations were established. Discussions also covered education, energy, agriculture, security and defence, minerals exploration and broader economic cooperation.

The agreement has nevertheless generated a perception that Ghana may be moving closer to Russia, particularly given the timing of the agreement. This perception cannot simply be dismissed. It comes at a time of heightened tensions between Russia and Western states, continued sanctions against Moscow, and Russia's efforts to deepen its engagement across Africa. The question is therefore not only what the agreement does, but why it is being concluded now and how Ghana's broader engagement with Russia is likely to be interpreted.

A diplomatic visa-waiver agreement is not a military alliance, nor does it by itself represent a geopolitical realignment. It is an instrument for facilitating official mobility and bilateral engagement. Ghana's interest in expanding trade, investment and educational exchanges with Russia can also be understood as part of a broader objective of diversifying its international relationships. However, Ghana will need to demonstrate through its wider foreign policy that diversification does not amount to alignment. This means maintaining meaningful relationships with the United States, European Union, China and other partners while cooperating with Russia where such cooperation serves Ghanaian interests.

The significance of the agreement, therefore, lies partly in its timing and the broader trajectory of Ghana–Russia relations. Ghana's challenge is not necessarily to disengage from Russia, but to ensure that expanding cooperation does not create the perception, or reality, of dependence on any single geopolitical partner. This is central to the

contemporary meaning of non-alignment: maintaining the diplomatic space to engage competing powers without becoming absorbed into their strategic rivalries.

SANKOFA AND THE FUTURE OF AFRICAN FOREIGN POLICY

Sankofa provides a useful way to reconsider the Non-Aligned Movement without romanticising its history. The lesson is not that Ghana should recreate the international politics of the 1960s. The international system has changed too substantially for that. Nor should non-alignment be understood as moral neutrality. African states cannot simply avoid questions of sovereignty, territorial integrity, international law or human security because taking a position may inconvenience a powerful partner. The lesson is instead the importance of maintaining political choice. For Ghana, this requires at least three forms of diversification.

First is diplomatic diversification. Ghana should maintain constructive relationships with competing powers rather than defining its foreign policy through permanent attachment to one geopolitical camp.

Second is economic diversification. Partnerships in energy, agriculture, minerals, education, technology and infrastructure should be distributed across multiple sources wherever feasible. The objective should be to prevent the deterioration of one bilateral relationship from creating a national crisis.

Third is institutional diversification through Africa. Strategic autonomy is difficult for individual African countries when they negotiate separately with much larger economies. The African Union therefore matters not simply as instruments of continental integration but as mechanisms through which African countries can improve their collective bargaining position.

This is where Nkrumah's legacy remains relevant. His understanding of non-alignment was connected to Pan-Africanism because political autonomy was difficult to sustain when African states remained individually vulnerable. Historical scholarship similarly identifies the combination of Pan-Africanism and non-alignment as central to Nkrumah's effort to protect African political space during the Cold War. The contemporary version of this argument is straightforward: Africa should diversify its external relationships while simultaneously strengthening its internal economic and political capacity.

CONCLUSION

The Russia-Ukraine war has exposed the vulnerability of developing countries to geopolitical developments occurring beyond their borders. The conflict has generated not only humanitarian destruction but also sanctions, financial restrictions, energy disruptions,

military escalation and a restructuring of international partnerships. European security institutions are being reorganised, Russia is seeking deeper relationships beyond the West, and major powers are increasingly using economic and technological instruments alongside conventional diplomacy and military power.

For Ghana, this environment requires neither automatic alignment with Russia nor automatic alignment with the West. It requires a foreign policy capable of engaging both while protecting national interests. The recent Ghana-Russia diplomatic and service passport agreement is therefore significant not because it proves that Ghana has changed geopolitical camps, but because it illustrates the difficult space in which African diplomacy now operates. Ghana wants investment, trade, education, energy, minerals and industrial cooperation. Russia is willing to offer some of these opportunities. At the same time, Russia's relationship with Western powers means that engagement with Moscow exists within a broader system of sanctions and geopolitical contestation. The central lesson is therefore not that Ghana should avoid Russia. It is that Ghana should avoid dependence.

This is where *Sankofa* becomes relevant. Looking back to the Non-Aligned Movement does not mean returning to the Cold War. It means recovering the principle that political independence is incomplete if external powers can determine the range of choices available to a sovereign state. The contemporary Non-Aligned Movement should therefore be understood as strategic autonomy rather than strategic isolation. African countries should engage broadly, diversify partnerships, strengthen continental institutions and assess the geopolitical consequences of their economic relationships. The elephants may continue to compete. The task for the grass is not to choose which elephant should win. It is to ensure that its survival, development and future are not determined by either elephant.

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