Commentary

THE RUSSIA-ETHIOPIA NUCLEAR PARTNERSHIP: A CATALYST FOR REGIONAL INFLUENCE AND MULTI-POLAR GEOPOLITICS

The Russia-Ethiopia nuclear partnership marks a significant shift in Africa's energy and geopolitical landscape, positioning nuclear power as both a developmental tool and an instrument of strategic alignment. Formalised in September 2025 between Rosatom and Ethiopian Electric Power, the agreement reflects Ethiopia's pursuit of long-term energy security, industrialisation, and technological autonomy amid rising domestic demand, climate-induced vulnerabilities, and strained relations with Western partners. Embedded within Ethiopia's accession to BRICS and engagement with the New Development Bank, the nuclear deal underscores Addis Ababa's recalibration towards a multipolar order and diversified alliances. For Russia, nuclear diplomacy has emerged as a key mechanism to expand influence in Africa by offering concessional financing, technology transfer, and integrated infrastructure solutions. Regionally, Ethiopia's nuclear ambitions intersect with existing Nile Basin rivalries, particularly with Egypt, raising implications for energy geopolitics within BRICS and the Horn of Africa. The paper argues that nuclear cooperation functions as a strategic infrastructure of alignment, reshaping regional power dynamics and global governance pathways.

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Introduction

On 25th September 2025, Ethiopia formalised an agreement with Russia to build a long-anticipated nuclear power facility, marking a pivotal shift in its energy trajectory. The deal was signed between the Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation (Rosatom) and Ethiopian Electric Power (EEP) in Moscow, witnessed by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and President Vladimir Putin[1].

This agreement is the culmination of a series of cooperative efforts spanning several years and outlines a clear action plan that includes signing an intergovernmental agreement, establishing a specialised working group for detailed project planning, preparing a feasibility

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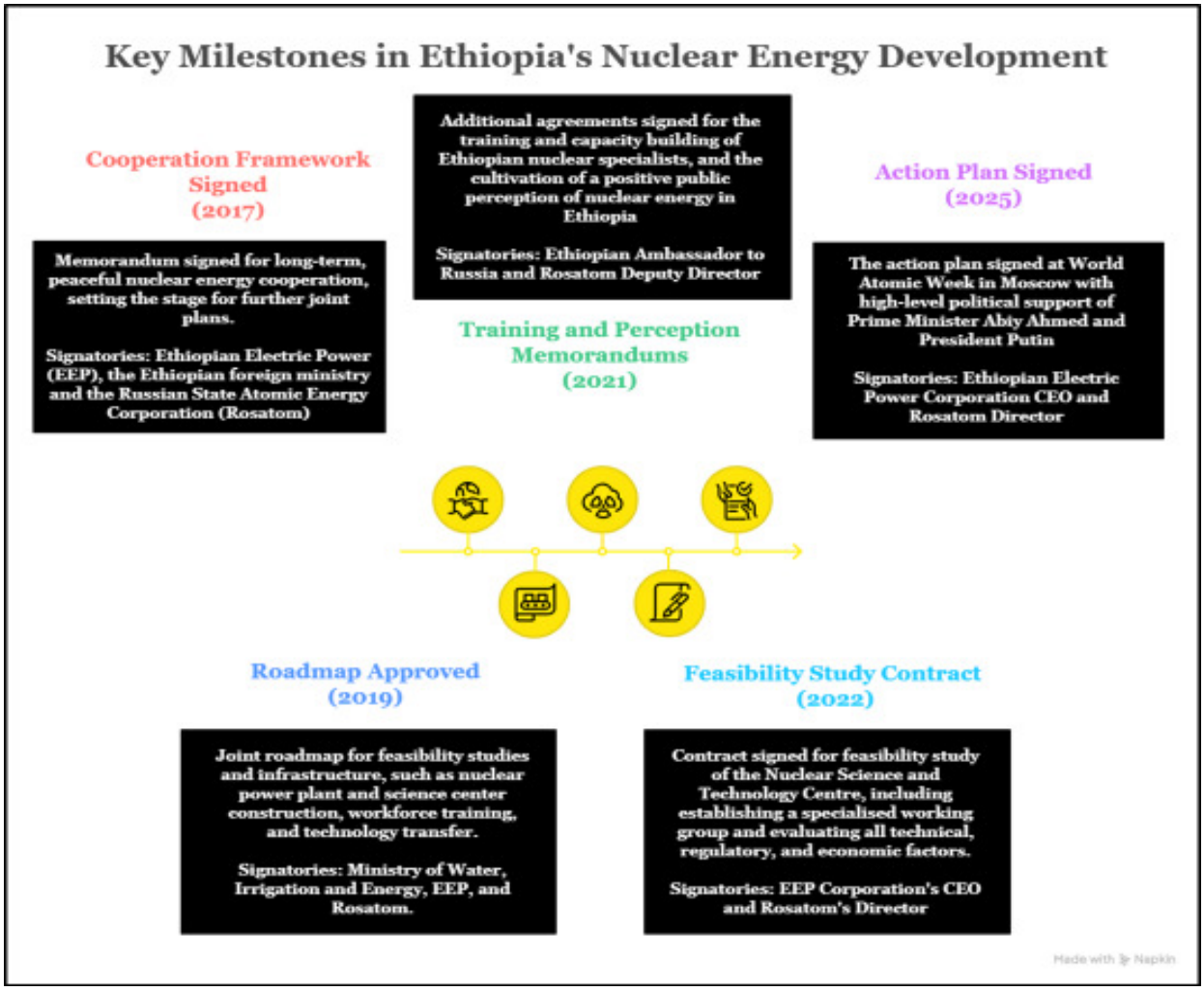
roadmap, supporting Ethiopia's nuclear infrastructure development, and enhancing the qualifications of Ethiopian scientific and technical personnel to use atomic energy peacefully.[2]



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This deal signals Ethiopia's intention to leverage nuclear energy as a catalyst for its sustainable development and energy security, as well as Russia's rise in influence in the wider African continent. Beyond the bilateral significance, Ethiopia's collaboration with Russia positions nuclear technology as a transnational infrastructure of alignment, an instrument for forging new forms of cooperation amid the evolving diffusion of global power.

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Within the broader dynamics of international politics, Ethiopia's pivot towards Russia complements its accession to BRICS in 2024, manifesting a strategic

recalibration of its global alliances towards a multipolar order where emerging powers of the Global South assert increasing agency through polycentric alternatives to the traditional multilateral institutions. This diversification strategy responds to strained ties with the West, notably the United States. It aligns Ethiopia with a rising bloc of countries, including Russia to seek alternative development and governance models. The nuclear deal thus serves not only energy and development goals but also signals Ethiopia's ambition to strengthen its inclusive growth, regional leadership role and geopolitical position, resonating with broader African efforts at gaining influence within global multilateral platforms and reshaping normative orders. The recent milestone in Russia-Ethiopia relations through their shared BRICS membership, vividly illustrates how nuclear energy cooperation can symbolise both technological progress and strategic diplomacy, contributing to Ethiopia's vision of sustainable industrialisation and deeper regional integration.

In this backdrop, this paper argues Russia's evolving strategic interests in Africa, particularly in Ethiopia within the BRICS framework. The nuclear deal, representing a significant shift in international alignments, exemplifies Ethiopia's agency and strategic deployment of nuclear energy as an instrument for inclusive and sustainable development, regional energy security, and geopolitical leverage.

Russia's Strategic Interests in Africa through Nuclear Diplomacy

Russia's deepening nuclear cooperation with African states reflects a calculated geopolitical strategy that capitalises on the vacuum created by the West's retrenchment from large-scale energy engagement on the continent. Anchored in concessional financing, technology transfer, and integrated infrastructure of alignment, Russia has cultivated an image of reliability among African governments grappling with chronic energy insecurity. At the centre of this approach is Rosatom, the state-owned nuclear corporation that functions as a key vehicle of Russia's "nuclear diplomacy."

Traditionally associated with security cooperation and resource extraction in West Africa, Russia's engagement is increasingly being framed in developmental terms across the continent. Nuclear cooperation has become a dual instrument of soft power and geopolitical leverage, extending beyond energy generation into medical, industrial, and agricultural applications. Rosatom, already responsible for nearly 70% of global nuclear power plant export projects[3], signals Moscow's ambition beyond military or extractive actor, as a comprehensive development partner for Africa's sustainable development.

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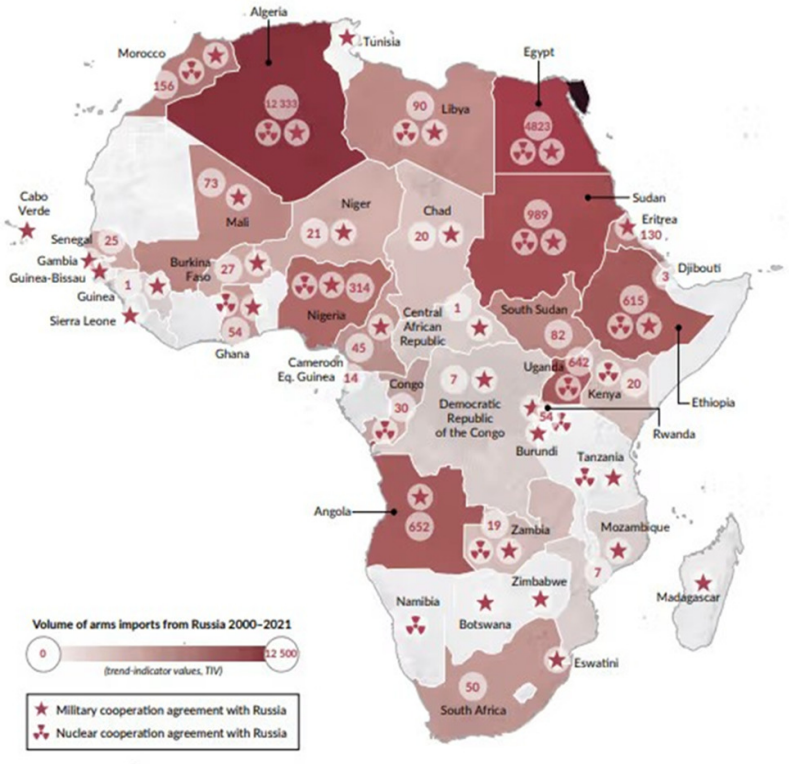
Although nuclear outreach predates the Russia–Africa Summits, its strategic significance has intensified amid global decarbonisation pressures.[4] As African governments pursue low-carbon and scalable energy options, Russia has positioned nuclear power as a clean and dependable alternative, reinforcing its appeal. Under President Vladimir Putin, these initiatives have expanded rapidly, with Rosatom now holding cooperation agreements with

at least twenty African states.[5] Importantly, several of these nuclear arrangements are embedded within wider security and political partnerships, deepening Russia's imprint on Africa's evolving energy and security architecture. This trend is exemplified by recent agreements with countries such as Niger and Ethiopia, concluded in late September 2025. In addition, rising populations in African countries are the most suitable for Russia's nuclear models. For instance, ROSTOM's latest high-capacity nuclear model of the VVER-1200 MW reactor fits Ethiopia perfectly, capable enough to meet its growing energy demands.[6]

In 2025, Russia–Ethiopia trade relations entered a new phase under the BRICS framework, marked by Ethiopia's confirmed accession to the New Development Bank (NDB). This milestone enabled cross-currency trade mechanisms and coincided with a threefold increase in bilateral trade volumes recorded in the first quarter of the year. These developments have opened substantive opportunities for cooperation across multiple sectors, including energy, agriculture, industry, and information technology.[7] Ongoing discussions between the two governments include joint initiatives for energy system modernisation, such as the installation of advanced Russian-manufactured equipment in Ethiopia's existing hydroelectric power facilities, the construction of industrial plants to strengthen national energy infrastructure, and the establishment of a Centre for Nuclear Science.[8] Collectively, these engagements illustrate the strengthening of bilateral ties between Russia and Ethiopia, particularly within the domain of energy diplomacy, with nuclear cooperation emerging as a central pillar of their expanding strategic partnership.



Source: https://africa.businessinsider.com/local/lifestyle/list-of-african-countries-with-a-nuclear-cooperation-agreement-with-russia/rp0jsh5

Ethiopia's Nuclear Power: Catalyst for Energy Security and Global Leadership

The Ethiopia-Russia nuclear deal is a result of comprehensive planning at the national level. Its first reference was made during the inauguration of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) as part of energy diversification to meet its domestic requirements, given its growing population as the second most populous African country. This project of constructing a mega nuclear power plant, equated to the GERD in terms of scale, is a subset of PM Abiy's $30 billion infrastructure initiative, which also includes an oil refinery, two natural gas facilities, and an airport.[9]

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There are three major reasons for Ethiopia's diversification of energy sources: domestic needs, regional dynamics, and geopolitical considerations. Domestically, the transition towards nuclear power complements Ethiopia's reliance on renewable resources like the GERD's hydropower, providing a stable, scalable, and long-term solution to mitigate climate-induced vulnerabilities and ensure reliable baseload electricity for its growing economy. Ethiopia has nearly 50% of its population lacking access to reliable electricity, and only 22% have legal grid connections.[10] This diversification is also a response to Ethiopia's rapidly rising population, which adds pressure to the electricity sector and amplifies existing vulnerabilities related to generation capacity and supply stability.

Following the nuclear agreement with Russia's Rosatom, Ethiopia has established a national regulatory body for nuclear energy. PM Abiy's cabinet approved of its first-ever Ethiopian Nuclear Energy Commission and appointed the Chief Commissioner as well.[11] The government specifies the peaceful and diversified uses of nuclear technology, including electricity generation, industrial use, healthcare, and agriculture.[12]

At the regional level, Ethiopia seeks to position itself as the principal energy hub in East Africa and beyond by diversifying its energy sources to include nuclear power. In line with the model set by the GERD, Ethiopia's long-term vision is to integrate nuclear energy into its domestic energy mix, both boosting national supply security and enabling renewed electricity exports to neighbouring countries.[13] Despite facing domestic energy challenges, Ethiopia's hydroelectric grid is already interconnected with surrounding nations such as Djibouti, Sudan, and Kenya, fostering regional energy trade and cooperation. However, climate variability exposes hydropower-dependent systems to substantial risks, underscoring the need to ensure reliable baseload supply and grid adequacy.

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Moreover, strengthening electricity infrastructure, particularly grid stability and transmission capacity, is central to sustaining Ethiopia's energy ambitions, yet remains an area requiring significant investment and upgrading. [14]

Nuclear energy, as a non-weather-dependent and large-scale source, offers Ethiopia a pathway to stabilise its energy balance, mitigate hydro-related vulnerabilities, and consolidate its role as a resilient regional supplier in the Horn of Africa. By advancing diversification, Ethiopia aims to enhance energy supply security and further its vision as the region's anchor for clean, reliable electricity. In addition, power export and cross-border interconnectivity build interdependence, for instance, countries that import Ethiopian power obtain a stake in each other's stability and policies. Energy interdependence is, therefore, a tool for building influence without coercion.

Geopolitically, Ethiopia's recent nuclear agreement with Russia exemplifies its adaptive reaction to the changing multipolar global order, in which diversifying strategic alliances has become critical for national growth. For instance, Ethiopia's suspension from the US funding via the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in 2022 affected Ethiopia on a large scale, being the largest recipient of the US assistance, thus deteriorating Ethiopia-US relations.[15] As a result, Ethiopia's admission to the BRICS in 2024 was a key achievement to increase its geopolitical power and decrease over-reliance on a single partner. This membership further bolsters Ethiopia's role as the headquarters of the African Union, reinforcing its stature on the global stage. Moreover, Addis Ababa's unanimous selection to host the 32nd Conference of the Parties (COP 32) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2027[16] underscores its expanding global profile and commitment to climate leadership. These diplomatic milestones align with Ethiopia's energy diversification agenda, signalling its ambition to be a model of African self-reliance, sustainable development, and influential global engagement.

Nuclear Power-led Regional Balance of Power: Ethiopia and Egypt within BRICS

Ethiopia's recent rise in diplomatic prominence is unfolding in parallel with its long-standing strategic rivalry with Egypt. Both countries acceded to BRICS in 2024, signalling their growing relevance within the emerging architecture of the Global South. Their simultaneous entry theoretically widens opportunities for structured dialogue and cooperative problem-solving. However, it also risks internalising regional antagonisms into the BRICS platform. The historical contestation over the Nile, heightened in the last decade by Ethiopia's construction of the GERD, has already exposed structural fault lines between Addis Ababa and Cairo. These tensions do not remain confined to hydro politics; rather, they increasingly intersect with broader energy geopolitics with an added dimension of nuclear energy, at a time when Africa faces an acute electricity deficit.[17] As energy becomes the defining resource of developmental power and political leverage, the ability to secure diversified, reliable, and technologically advanced energy sources, particularly emerging nuclear capabilities, will become central to determining regional influence.

Within this evolving landscape, Ethiopia's combination of demographic weight, strategic geography and increasingly diversified energy portfolio, especially its future acquisition of nuclear power technology through recent agreement with Russia, positions it to emerge as a regional power in the Horn of Africa and the wider Red Sea-Nile region. While the GERD established Ethiopia's techno-political credentials in hydropower, subsequent moves to expand and pursue civilian nuclear capacity together constitute a strategic shift: energy diversification that enhances economic resilience, political autonomy, technological maturity, diplomatic leverage and deepening like-minded strategic partnerships, such as with Russia. Ethiopia's decision to independently finance GERD with no support from the international financial institutions has set a precedent that not only strengthened its global narrative[18] but also highlighted the risks of overdependence on traditional partners increasingly regulated by 'trade weaponisation'. This is one of the major reasons for Ethiopia to diversify its partners and seek alternatives such as the BRICS's New Development Bank (NDB).[19] The post-GERD techno-political legitimacy improves Ethiopia's diplomatic bargaining position in the multilateral spaces such as BRICS, allowing it to shape regional agendas on infrastructure, energy, and development finance.

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By contrast, Egypt's earliest entry into nuclear power plant construction with Rosatom through the El Dabaa project, consolidates Cairo's position. Further, in July 2025, a supplementary nuclear agreement was signed between Egypt and another Russian company, Atomstroyexport, to fast-track the construction and operation of nuclear power plants in Egypt.[20] Cairo is a strategically significant member of the BRICS concerning the global trade and security dynamics of both the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, also controlling the Suez Canal. It is a much older part of BRICS as it had joined the BRICS's NDB in December 2021, contributing $1.2 billion.[21] In addition, Egypt has immense diplomatic capital in the Arab and African spheres, which makes it apt for its mediating role in the region.[22] Notwithstanding, it also provides Cairo the potential to challenge Addis Ababa, being witnessed in the current GERD conflict which could be entrenched with the potential nuclear energy competition in future.

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The emerging nuclear trajectories of both states risk extending their rivalry with further sub-set competition in nuclear energy as well as adjacent domains of high-technology energy infrastructure and intra-regional energy trade. Although Ethiopia, comparatively nascent, lags behind Egypt's industrial capacity, technological development and diplomatic reach, the former's strategic pivot towards the quest for energy sovereignty, technological modernisation, and long-term strategic autonomy with proven hydro power sovereignty, could recalibrate regional alliances and economic integration patterns.

Moreover, both countries, backed by Russia's Rosatom, are advancing ambitious nuclear energy programs that not only reflect their contrasting industrial capacities and technological development but also underscore competing visions for regional influence and energy sovereignty. The partnership with Russia, a common external actor providing nuclear technology and financing as an infrastructure of alignment, places Moscow in a unique position to moderate tensions and influence the regional power dynamic by balancing its interests through engagement with both countries.

Furthermore, this potential nuclear rivalry, perhaps have wider implications beyond bilateral competition. It tests BRICS' diplomacy coherence, given both Ethiopia and Egypt's growing interactions with Russia and the group's expanding African footprint. The nuclear race thus intertwines with broader geopolitical shifts, regional energy trade frameworks, and the negotiation of power within Africa's rapidly evolving energy landscape.

Conclusion

Ethiopia's nuclear agreement with Russia marks a decisive step in its broader effort to redefine its developmental and geopolitical trajectory in a multipolar world. Emerging from a backdrop of expanding Ethiopia–Russia cooperation, accession to BRICS, and strained relations with Western partners, the nuclear deal reflects Addis Ababa's deliberate shift toward diversified alliances and sovereign pathways to development. As Ethiopia pursues nuclear power to complement its hydropower strength, it aims to secure the key pillars of its vision for inclusive and sustainable national progress: long-term energy stability, industrial capacity, climate-resilient development and securing regional energy supply chains.

In the regional power play dynamics, Ethiopia's nuclear ambitions signal a recalibration of the balance of power in the Nile Basin. While Egypt retains a significant early lead in nuclear development and diplomatic capital, Ethiopia's assertive entry into the nuclear domain builds on its demonstrated hydro-political agency through the GERD. This positions Ethiopia as a rising regional actor capable of challenging long-standing hierarchies in the Nile Basin and the wider Horn-Red Sea region.

Russia's parallel nuclear cooperation-led infrastructure of alignment with both states places Moscow in a unique balancing role, shaping how this rivalry evolves within BRICS and regional energy politics. Ultimately, Ethiopia's nuclear ambitions, combined with its demographic weight and strategic geography, signal its emergence as a state seeking not only diversified energy security but also greater regional influence in an increasingly multipolar order.

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