



The Influence of Russia in Africa: Security, Resources, and the Wagner Factor

Recently, Russia has expanded its connections with the African continent more than any other power. At the same time, Russia has been accused of perpetuating neo-colonialism on the same continent due to its involvement in local political and economic affairs, as well as the role of the Wagner Group in security activities and resource exploitation. Many African countries defend Russia in front of the international community, asserting that its collaboration has been very beneficial for their development.

Beginning in the Soviet Era:

The beginning of relations between Moscow and Africa dates back to the Soviet era and is partly due to the fact that Russia was not a colonial power in Africa. The continent became a potential battleground for Cold War conflicts when "national liberation movements" were on the rise, and powers did not hesitate to intervene. Although the Cold War is characterized by the absence of direct military confrontation—hence the term "cold war"—frequent and violent conflicts did occur on the African continent. For example, in

Angola alone, the civil war left 2,077 deaths. Some scholars, like Vladimir Shubin, have described it as a "hot cold war."

The USSR did not hesitate to provide political support and practical assistance to all those whom it deemed were fighting for a just cause, such as the global "anti-imperialist struggle." The support received by southern African nations was particularly significant compared to others, as seen in cases like Ghana, Guinea, Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau, and ranged from financial and medical assistance to military education and diplomatic aid.

Soviet military presence in Africa increased throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The military, financial, and political support from Moscow was crucial in the liberation movements in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Namibia. Russia often faced the complexities of African politics, especially when various rival organizations sought its support. Initially, barter economic agreements prevailed, but by the 1970s, the USSR began to provide credits, resembling

the Western financing model in this later period.

Later, during the disintegration of the union and due to its consequent economic difficulties, the Soviet power of aid to the continent was limited. After the collapse, Russia had to focus on internal stability, economic restructuring, and the transition to a capitalist system, which diminished its ability to maintain its presence and influence on the African continent. Meanwhile, other powers like China and Western countries took the opportunity to fill the void left by the withdrawal and increased their economic and political relations with the continent through trade agreements and infrastructure investments.

A New Beginning

At the beginning of the new millennium, Russia revived its relations with African countries, increasing its influence in the region, which coincided with President Trump's decision to abandon efforts in counter-terrorism policies and cut development investments, particularly affecting several African countries. After Trump's rise to power, U.S.-Africa relations underwent a series of changes focused on a lack of involvement in continental affairs, a political and diplomatic void, and uncertainty about the new government's African policy. This approach marked a break

from previous policy, focusing more on security and counter-terrorism efforts, sidelining cooperation in areas of development and democratization. Additionally, the president's comments referring to certain African countries as "shithole countries" generated worldwide outrage, likely further damaging bilateral relations between the U.S. and each of the African nations.

Kremlin's Plan

Russia's ties and strategy are considered more informal compared to those of its opponents. Russia adapts to the continent's circumstances, capitalizing on them and being opportunistic. Its main objectives include expanding its influence in Africa, focusing on the Sahel region, while reducing Western presence on the continent, also aiming to sign trade agreements and military collaboration in search of immediate economic benefits.

President Putin inaugurated the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit, the second of its kind, with delegations from 49 African nations in attendance. The summit revealed a marked division in Africa regarding relations with Russia. On one side are countries seeking Moscow's support and maintaining close ties with Russia, mostly led by military governments that came to power through coups, such as Mali, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Eritrea, and Guinea

Conakry. A show of this affinity was the display of Russian flags and posters supporting Russia during the coup in Niger in July 2023.



Nigeriens participate in a march called by supporters of the coup leader on Sunday, July 30, 2023. The poster reads: "Down with France, long live Putin." Sam Mednick/AP

On the other hand, there are those seeking alliances that avoid negative impacts on their populations and maintain strong ties with European partners, characterized by governments elected through democratic processes. This situation reflects two distinct approaches to political orientation and strategic alliances on the African continent.

During the summit, key topics in Russia-Africa relations were discussed, including trade, arms supply, cybersecurity, and humanitarian support. A central issue was food security, as Russia's recent withdrawal from the "Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI)" in July 2023 has raised fears of a further decline in wheat availability for sub-Saharan Africa, a region highly dependent on

these imports for its food security. This initiative, which came into effect on July 22, 2022, meant that Russia would allow Ukraine to guarantee the shipment of its grain through its southern ports via the Bosphorus. According to the Montreux Convention signed in 1936, Russia oversees maritime traffic in the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, giving it the final say on the passage of goods through the straits. Although the BSGI operated during the 2022-2023 marketing year, allowing limited grain exports, restrictions imposed by the conflict caused a 55% drop in wheat exports from Ukraine and a 13% decline from Russia to the region (Glauber, Kim, Olivetti, and Vos, 2023).

With the end of the Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI) in 2023, food supply disruptions are expected to increase, making African countries even more vulnerable to food insecurity. To address this situation, during the summit, Russian President Vladimir Putin assured that "In the coming months, we (Russia) will be able to guarantee free supplies of 25,000 to 50,000 tons of grain to Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe, Mali, Somalia, the Central African Republic, and Eritrea," (countries that are the most vulnerable in terms of food security). So far, it has been reported that Zimbabwe has received its share of aid, including 25,000 tons of wheat and 23,000 tons of fertilizer. This aid

was specifically aimed at helping the country cope with a severe drought.

On November 9 and 10, African and Russian ministers are set to meet in the southern Russian city of Sochi to review the outcomes of the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit and discuss future plans. This upcoming meeting will be pivotal for Russian-African relations, shaping the region's immediate future.

Wagner Group

The Kremlin's modus operandi also includes non-traditional methods, such as support through military and private security companies (such as the Wagner Group), propaganda and disinformation campaigns to destabilize governments and fuel tensions, and backing authoritarian regimes and non-state armed groups. Recently, Russian ministers have frequently visited various African states, signing numerous bilateral agreements in military, economic, and security cooperation, as well as forgiving billions of dollars in African debt.

The Wagner Private Military Company (PMC) has played a crucial role in establishing ties between the Kremlin and various African nations. Known as the Wagner Private Military Company (in Russian: Частная военная компания Вагнер, ChVK Wagner), it is an illegal armed formation of mercenaries, defined as a "private military entity without a

legal form based in Russia" by the European Council. Dubbed "patriotic volunteers" by the Russian government (though at times they distance themselves from it), some members are suspected of numerous war crimes, particularly in Ukraine. They have a significant presence in Africa, especially in Libya, the Central African Republic, Sudan, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Mali.

Although it may seem that the group's goal is to destabilize governments, it is more about ensuring its future, provided that it is granted mining rights. The group offers military training to local forces, personal protection for leaders, and security for energy facilities. In this arrangement, African governments receive military aid to support democratic stability in their countries, while Russia gains access to valuable mining resources through privileges and licenses. However, the goal of establishing democracy, organizing elections, and returning to democratic institutions is often sidelined when Wagner Group uses human rights abuses to maintain peace, which can be counterproductive.

The Case of the Central African Republic (CAR)

Another case that deserves attention is that of the Central African Republic (CAR), which has recently gained considerable media attention.

This country, "Since its independence in 1960, has been characterized by political instability and frequent internal armed conflicts" (OFFICE OF DIPLOMATIC INFORMATION, 2023). Also being a landlocked country with a low population density (7.5 inhabitants/km²), the state has clear limitations in power projection capacity. Its characteristics and state policies generally attract external intervention, such as Russian involvement.

CAR and Russia have collaborated in security and military training since late 2017, when President Touadéra requested assistance due to the ineffectiveness of MINUSCA (the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic), with security provided to locals by the Wagner Group. Russia also participated in the 2019 peace process, supporting the signing of the Khartoum Agreement, mediated by the African Union, which sought to end the conflict in the Central African Republic through a ceasefire and the reintegration of former combatants. Their most notable deployment was supporting the country in organizing the December 2021 presidential elections, providing logistical and security support to Touadéra's government to ensure that, against all odds, the elections could take place. These joint efforts have been successful, bringing about significant

and observable improvements in the country's security. However, on the flip side, these interventions have been linked to human rights violations. Reports indicate disproportionate attacks against the local population, many of whom were unrelated to insurgent groups, primarily Muslim and Fulani. There have also been reports of attacks against journalists who sought to report on Wagner's activities in the Republic.



Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group standing guard during a parade in Bangui, Central African Republic, in 2019.

Source: Ashley Gilbertson for The New York Times

In return for Russia's support in security and trade, the Central African Republic offers diplomatic backing to Russia and unrestricted access to mines and resources. The Central African Republic indirectly supported Russia diplomatically by joining the group of 35 countries that abstained in the UN General Assembly vote on March 2, 2022, thereby avoiding a call for Russia's unilateral withdrawal

from Ukraine, as well as in subsequent votes on the conflict. The Central African government granted mining licenses to various Russian companies, such as Lobaye Invest SARLU, even canceling a Canadian company's license in one case to transfer it to a company with Russian ties.

Some scholars argue that Russian interventions in CAR align with the concept of “proxy neocolonialism.” This phenomenon occurs when a powerful external state indirectly controls a weaker country through local elites or regimes. In exchange for security or financial support, the local regime grants access to resources and political influence, prioritizing the benefactor’s interests over the needs of its own population. This creates dependency, undermining the autonomy and development of the weaker state. This explanation accurately applies to the case of CAR and Russia, as the Central African government depends on Russian protection and support, mainly provided through the Wagner Group, in exchange for allowing the exploitation of natural resources such as gold and diamonds. This arrangement strengthens Russian control in the country and prioritizes its economic and political interests while limiting CAR's development and autonomy by keeping it subordinate to a foreign power.

Conclusion

To conclude, Russia's strategy in Africa presents itself as a multifaceted approach that combines both conventional methods, such as diplomacy, and unconventional tactics, through the Wagner Group. While this group has been accused of abuses of power, it has also proven to be a crucial ally for many African governments in their quest for stability and security, as seen in the case of the Central African Republic. This double-edged approach highlights the complexity of Russian-African relations and raises questions about the long-term implications of its influence on the continent. The meetings between Russian and African ministers this November will be key to determining the future of these relations and the success of the proposed Action Plan's applications.

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