MILITARY RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND AFRICA, BEFORE AND AFTER THE WAR IN UKRAINE

by Abdelhak Bassou
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Cover: Russian President Vladimir Putin greets Angola’s President Joao Manuel Goncalves Lourenco and his wife Ana Dias Lourenco during an official welcome ceremony for heads of states and governments of member-states of Russia-Africa Summit in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, Russia, October 23, 2019. Sergei Chirikov/Pool via REUTERS

To prepare policymakers and investors for the onset of the African Century by supporting dynamic geopolitical partnerships with African states and multilateral institutions.
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Introduction

In a recent telephone conversation, Russian President Vladimir Putin officially invited Asissi Gotta, the military chief of the transition in Mali, to take part in the second Russia-Africa summit to be held in Saint-Petersburg. This summit is scheduled for July 2023, according to Mikhail Bogdanov, the special representative of the president of Russia to the Middle East and Africa and deputy foreign minister. Russia is openly optimistic that several African leaders will attend the planned summit, according to Russian Ambassador-at-Large Oleg Ozerov: “Russia expects that most African leaders will be present at the Russia-Africa summit in 2023... We are getting positive responses. I think most African heads of state will be at the forum.”

Despite Russia’s war with Ukraine, President Putin remains keen on maintaining and strengthening relations with Africa, and this planned summit is a follow-up, four years later, to the October 2019 meeting in Sacci attended by a multitude of African leaders. Russia’s determination to hold the Summit with African countries—amid its ongoing war in Ukraine and difficulties imposed on Moscow by Western sanctions—is either: the result of Africa’s importance to Russian foreign policy and, therefore, the meeting with African leaders must take place, regardless of conditions; because Russia needs African states to counter Western attempts to isolate it on the international stage; or because Russia seeks to show that its war in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed by the West do not impact the normal operations of the Russian state, which continues to hold normal relations with the rest of the world, including Africa.

It is a considerable challenge to bring together African heads of state in Russia, despite the United Nations (UN) vote by African countries last October, signaling a turning point in the relations between Moscow and African countries has expanded to include a range of areas. From mining to arms supply, nuclear technology, agriculture, and fertilizers, Moscow signed a multitude of treaties and agreements in an apparent desire to catch up with other powers. Will Moscow be able to continue maintaining this presence in Africa despite difficulties created by the war in Ukraine? What can Africa bring to the Russia in the context of this war? What consequences would victory, or defeat, have on Russia’s relations with Africa? This analysis attempts to answer these questions as best as possible, or to envision plausible potential answers.

Although Russian-African relations are discussed to provide a general framework for the study, only those relations that touch on the areas of security and military will be addressed in depth. These relations dominate cooperation between Russia and Africa, and it is also these relations that the war is likely to impact most.

This paper is broken down into three parts to address this issue:

• The first follows a timeline to map out the general context of Moscow’s relationship with Africa, across the board. This vision is significant in that Russia today seems to find inspiration for action in the resurgence of its grandeur, in a nostalgic impulse for both the Russian Empire and the Soviet era.

• The second part focuses on the military and security aspect of the relationship between post-Soviet Russia and Africa, an area that dominates all others in ties between Moscow and Africa.

• The third part deals with the ongoing war in Ukraine and its possible impacts on Russia-Africa relations.

Since post-Soviet Russia turned its attention to Africa in the early twenty-first century, the scope of cooperation between Moscow and African countries has expanded to include a range of areas. From mining to arms supply, nuclear technology, agriculture, and fertilizers, Moscow signed a multitude of treaties and agreements in an apparent desire to catch up with other powers. Will Moscow be able to continue maintaining this presence in Africa despite difficulties created by the war in Ukraine? What can Africa bring to the Russia in the context of this war? What consequences would victory, or defeat, have on Russia’s relations with Africa? This analysis attempts to answer these questions as best as possible, or to envision plausible potential answers.

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When the UK extended its dominion over most of the Nile in 1822, it fought to ally itself with Italy against France. Therefore, it ceded the port of Mtseswa to Italy. This handover met two major hurdles:

• Mtseswa was Ethiopia’s outlet to the Red Sea, and the country had always claimed its right to this gateway.

• The agreement between Italy and the UK enabled the latter to link its Mediterranean colonies to the Indian Ocean, something Russia could not accept, as Russia had always sought to contain British presence in Egypt and Sudan, and to prevent any junction between British colonies in the Mediterranean and in the Pacific.

Russian and Ethiopian interests converged, and this convergence gave Russia the opportunity to assert itself against its European antagonists and find an opening in Africa. Russia, which had until then ignored the Negus’s calls for help, revised its position and decided to reconsider its policy of indifference regarding Africa. A delegation from Emperor Menilik II was received in Saint Petersburg in 1895, and Tsar Nicholas II agreed to provide Ethiopia with assistance against Italy.

History retains the name of Nikolai Leontiev, the Russian military adviser in charge of training the Ethiopian emperor’s soldiers. He was also charged with recruiting and leading Russian volunteers into battle at the decisive battle of Adwa, marking Ethiopia’s landmark victory against Italy in 1896.

Russia stood to achieve a dual objective. On one hand, it impeded British and Italian ambitions in Africa. On the other, it paved the way for Russian incursion on the continent—a dream the Cossack Ataman Nicholas Ivanovich Achinov, a merchant from the city of Penza, attempted to realize as early as 1833.3

I. The Temporal Axis and Historical Context of Moscow’s Relations with Africa

1. Religion as a Vehicle for Dialogue as Early as the Fifteenth Century

Russia’s first relations with Africa were steeped in religion—namely, Christianity. Russians and Africans came into contact as early as the fifteenth century through pilgrimages to Jerusalem that inspired Russian travelers, and other Slavic writers visiting Africa and writing about their journeys, leading to a broader knowledge of Africa in Russia. Egyptians (Copts) and Ethiopians (Orthodox Church) were the first Africans to become familiar to Russians. Encounters between Africans and Russians did not, however, lead to official and lasting relations between state structures (kingdoms and empires), despite occasional events including a trip to Moscow by the patriarchs of Alexandria and Sinai in 1566 to solicit the tsar’s charity.

2. First Military Intervention: Action in Africa to Counter the Europeans

Russia’s military interaction with Africa occurred in the late nineteenth century, in Ethiopia. How and why?

As of the late eighteenth century, the United Kingdom (UK) and other European powers of the time hindered Russian expansion into the Middle East and Africa. The land of the tsars was resented by other Europeans and largely overlooked at the 1885 Berlin Conference on the partition of Africa. Faced with this rejection and an inability to deal with the Europeans, Russia turned away from Africa and concentrated its focus on Asia, the Arctic, and the Great North, while keeping an eye on colonial advances in Africa.

1 The first Russia-Africa summit was held in Sacci in October 2019.
2 Information and comments reported by several African media in July 2022.
3 “Moscow” is used here to mean the Russian Empire, the USSR, and present-day Russia at the same time.
The Russian Revolution of 1917 was presented in Africa as a vector for anti-colonialist doctrine, defending the oppressed against Western imperialism. However, the Russians realized as early as 1920 that the revolutionary conflagration they hoped Africa’s revolutions would fuel was not happening. Joseph Stalin eventually became convinced that Africa’s revolutionary leaders, who spoke more of African revolution than of international revolution, were unreliable, lacking in credibility, and willing to deal with the imperialists, whom they fought only verbally. Africans focused more on antagonism between poor and rich countries, with no concern for the principle of class conflict dear to the Soviets. In the eyes of the Soviets, Africa’s revolutions failed to grasp the meaning of revolution and the destiny of world civilization. As a result, there was little question at that time of Russian military effort or cooperation with Africa in this direction.\(^7\)

In 1955, the Soviet Union established the Warsaw Pact, which made the Soviet Union more confident in dealing with the West. It established a balance of power in Europe, and Moscow was no longer in fear that the West would take military action against it. As the Cold War set in, each side sought to deploy greater efforts in Asia and Africa to make up for delays caused by Stalin in relations with these countries, and not to allow the sister, yet enemy, revolution of Mao Zedong to dominate the struggle. The adoption of Soviet revolutionary doctrine, defending the oppressed against Western imperialism, had limited financial resources, North African countries—especially Algeria, Libya, and Egypt—were important clients of USSR weaponry. The adoption of Soviet revolutionary doctrine by a number of these countries also compelled them to align with Moscow in terms of military doctrine. Most military officers in these sub-Saharan and North African countries trained in Soviet military academies.

As the wave of independence grew and spread, African peoples still under colonial rule increasingly began to organize into liberation movements and felt the need for military and diplomatic assistance to attain independence. This gave Khrushchev the opportunity to establish contacts with these movements and provide support through weapons and training, as well as diplomacy, in the hope of making these countries satellites of the Soviet empire’s post-independence. Soviet aid to these movements was mostly in opposition to other Western-based movements, which preferred to emancipate themselves through negotiation and dialogue. This is how the USSR set about assisting so-called revolutionary liberation movements across several African countries.

- In South Africa, the USSR unconditionally supported the African National Congress (ANC) since its creation, and, to a lesser extent, the South African Communist Party (SACP).
- Moscow provided extensive military assistance to the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO); in this case, the USSR wanted to act against Western colonial forces, as well as remove this movement from Chinese influence.
- The USSR gave full support to the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), at the expense of the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA).
- In Namibia, the USSR initially helped the Southwest African National Union (SWANU), before transferring support to the Southwest African People’s Organization (SWAPO) when SWANU turned to China in 1963.
- In Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) benefited from Soviet aid, at the expense of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU).

Accordingly, a number of these movements, which took power in their countries after independence, maintained military ties to the Soviet Union—particularly in terms of arms supplies.\(^8\)

While sub-Saharan countries do not import much given their limited financial resources, North African countries—especially Algeria, Libya, and Egypt—were important clients of USSR weaponry. The adoption of Soviet revolutionary doctrine by a number of these countries also compelled them to align with Moscow in terms of military doctrine. Most military officers in these sub-Saharan and North African countries trained in Soviet military academies.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disappearance of the USSR, Russia was absent from Africa for nearly two decades, before returning to capitalize on the relationship’s Soviet legacy.


\(^8\) Not only did Stalin not take into account that sub-Saharan African countries were not the only ones to fulfill the Soviet state in the 1970s. Algeria, Libya, Mali, and Senegal were all under Soviet influence, as were Ethiopia after thebounding in empire. Africa had only thousand Soviet military officers in the 1970s.

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\(^10\) The Western psyche at this time was dominated by the views of Francis Fukuyama, who assumed a victory of the democratic and liberal world over all other ideologies in his book The End of History and the Last Man.

As history attests, Russia turns to Africa only in times of crisis or of rivalry with the West. Putin is no exception. The Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea brought severe Western sanctions against Russia. So, starting in 2014, Moscow remembered Africa and sought new economic, political, and military relations there, reinforcing existing ones, such as those with Algeria and Egypt.

This great return of Africa to Russia’s foreign policy is evident in military and security matters. While Russia signed only seven military cooperation agreements between 2010 and 2017, this number jumped to twenty from 2017 to 2021. More than half of these twenty agreements were signed with countries that had no previous military ties to Russia. After 2014, military cooperation came to the forefront of Russia’s new ties to Africa, seemingly dominating other areas such as agriculture, minerals, and civil nuclear technology.

Despite the talk of diversified cooperation, Russian officials rarely hesitate to put peace, security, and stability in Africa at the forefront.

Besides, arms contracts often enable other forms of military cooperation, including the use of African ports to house the way for Russian security contractors (which are genuine armies) to gain a foothold on the continent. These contractors frequently serve as proxies for Russia’s military when the latter does not deem it appropriate to be officially present.

The drive to develop all kinds of relationships with Africa, particularly military ones, culminated in the 2019 Sochi summit. At this meeting, and throughout the 2015–2019 period, Russia presented itself to Africans as strong and proud of its success in Syria, giving so far so as to talk of the quality of combat-tested Russian weaponry.

In the country of Bashar al-Assad, Russia defied the Western coalition against terrorism and, by means of horrific intervention, managed to keep its ally Bashar in power—in and, in spite of, the will of his people and the international community. Russia also presented itself as the power that defeated the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), and as a state that possessed and produced a safe and effective arsenal of weapons capable of turning the tide in favor of a president on the brink of collapse.

Africans attending the Sochi summit were in awe of Russian military might. This led to the signature of the aforementioned twenty contracted agreements for arms, training, and security and defense consulting.

Between this summit in Sochi and the upcoming one in Saint Petersburg, the war in Ukraine broke out, and Russian military capacities were again put to play. Were they as effective as in Syria? Are Africans still as in awe of Russian power as they were in 2019? What are the assumptions and scenarios for Afro-Russian military relations following the Ukraine war? The following section considers these questions.

12 According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, between 2015 and 2020,
13 During their tour of Africa in 2018, Sergei Lavrov and Nikolai Patrushev carried a message pertaining to the multifaceted nature of Russian assistance to African countries. Besides, arms contracts often enable other forms of military cooperation, including the use of African ports to house the way for Russian security contractors (which are genuine armies) to gain a foothold on the continent. These contractors frequently serve as proxies for Russia’s military when the latter does not deem it appropriate to be officially present.

14 Alexander Melnich, in his part, said the year that combined Russian military might, arms sales, and terrorism in Africa is supported by the West. In the West, Russia sees itself as strong and ready to counter and the West is not yet well equipped to counter Russia. In the West, Russia sees itself as strong and ready to counter and the West is not yet well equipped to counter Russia.
On the other hand, the positions of some African countries changed between the time of Crimea’s annexation in 2014 and the annexation of other territories in 2022. While no African country supported the annexation of Ukrainian territories in 2022, Zimbabwe and Sudan voted against the resolution condemning Russia in 2014. Egypt, Gabon, and Senegal, which abstained in 2014, voted to condemn the 2022 annexations. These shifts show that some African countries, although tied to Russia through a variety of cooperative relationships, do not endorse Russia’s use of violence to attack neighbors or annex parts of their territories. Some countries remain ambiguous in their positions. This was the case for South Africa, which, while not supporting the annexation of Ukrainian territories by Russia, does not rule out arms sales to the latter.10

The question of human rights does not seem to be as important for Africa as it is for the West, so it seemed that suspension from the international human-rights body was not a point on which Africans would risk alienating Russia. However, when it came to defending Ukraine’s territorial integrity, African countries were almost unanimous—if not in condemning and isolating Russia, then in not supporting it (see table below).

### African Countries’ Voting Records in Relation to the War in Ukraine

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mixed positions between abstention and absence</th>
<th>Against Russia and supporting the resolution</th>
<th>For Russia and against the resolution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstention</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. March vote: condemn the invasion and demand Russian withdrawal</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. April vote: suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. October vote: condemn Russia for annexing Ukrainian territories</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Table compiled by the author from media reports and the United Nations website.

10 Queried in writing by an opposition leader in October, South African Defence Minister Thoko Didiza-Moodie offered no clear answer on possible arms sales to Russia. She vaguely pointed out that South Africa’s arms contracting agency, Armscor, would be allowed, “from time to time,” to avoid itself of “commercial opportunities” with countries subject to international treaties, “including Russia.” These opportunities are subject to national security secrecy. In another instance of ambiguous behavior, South Africa’s government allowed the yacht of a Russian oligarch, targeted by international sanctions, to dock in Cape Town despite opposition from the city’s mayor.

3. The African Perception of Russian Military Power

### What Does the War in Ukraine Tell Us about Russian Military Power?

Observers are unanimous in their assessment. The Russian army, which was considered the world’s second most powerful, proved to itself in Ukraine, where the conduct of Russia’s “military operation” revealed several shortcomings.

- The Blitzkrieg, dear to Soviet strategy and favored by Putin, failed or was poorly implemented by the Russian army. Ukrainian forces far inferior in number and equipment where able to contain the Russian army. Russia was, therefore, forced to alter its plans, accept being bogged down, and suffer significant losses.
- Russian intelligence was also ineffective. This was either out of fear of exposing reality to the master of the Kremlin regarding the hostility of Ukrainians to Russia, their resolve to defend their country, and the unwavering support of the West, or out of poor or weak analysis, not having accounted for the obstacles that Russia could encounter in invading Ukraine.
- The failure of Russia’s logistics became clear to everyone from the very start of the “operation,” with images of convoys stepping over one another while exposing themselves to Ukrainian strikes. Moreover, the under-equipment (or even lack of equipment) of mobilized reservists clearly shows the shortcomings and logistical weaknesses of the Russian army.
- The absence of noncommissioned officers in the Russian chain of command was widely felt, especially in the lack of discipline and poor execution of tactical plans.
- There was a lack of professionalism among general Russian army officers who, in using their own cell phones, made it possible for Ukrainians to locate and eliminate them.
- Russia’s armed forces lacked cohesion because of overlaps between an army of professionals, militias comprising mercenaries and prisoners (like the Wagner Group) and fighters (like those Ramzan Kadyrov) more inclined to propaganda than real combat.
- While Russian military equipment was highly praised by Kremlin officials for its proven effectiveness in combat theaters (especially in Syria), experts saw the precariousness of this equipment when faced with Western weaponry. Russia’s artillery, used in great measure by the Kremlin’s army, ceased to make a difference as soon as Ukraine received US Himars and French Caesar.
- Russia’s air force, though a striking force in Syria, was unable to secure the Ukrainian sky and unable to destroy the Ukrainian air force.

One is therefore justified in asking whether, in the face of such failures, Africans still have the same perception of Russia’s military power. As mentioned above, Africans held Russian weaponry and strategy in high regard at the Sochi summit. Moscow’s military image shined brightly because of its performance in Syria. Today, what effect will Russia’s setbacks have on that image?

The continent’s military leaders and experts—especially those who rely on Russia for weapons, training, and territorial defense—certainly monitor Russia’s military performance in Ukraine and are forced to ask themselves a few questions.

- How could Russia supply them with weaponry, if its defense industry cannot keep up with Moscow’s current war effort? Has Russia reached a point where it needs assistance from far less powerful countries, such as Iran and North Korea?
- How can one rely on planes incapable of monopolizing the skies of Ukraine, a country that is struggling with air defense?
- How can one count on Russia to train African soldiers when its own army proved its tactical and strategic mobility in Ukraine?

These questions are even more legitimate for African countries that rely on Russia, as Russia has an advantage that no African country has. Indeed, while Russia can compensate for its tactical, logistical, and strategic deficiencies through the threat of using tactical nuclear weapons in its arsenal, African countries can only rely on conventional weapons and strategies in their wars. But if such weapons and strategies, procured from Russia, are less effective than those supplied by the West, failure is inevitable.

Will African countries sourcing from Russia reconsider their positions? Will they change their minds and look to the West? Are the shortcomings that have arisen sufficient to call on African countries to switch suppliers and military partners? This does not yet seem to be the case.

- In April 2022, amid the war in Ukraine, Cameroon signed a military-cooperation agreement with Russia. This agreement covers the exchange of information on defense pol-

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icy and international security, development of relations in combined training, and training of troops.

- In August 2022, Mali received new military equipment from Russia, after a secret mission to Moscow earlier that year by the Malian Army chief of staff. Mali has long-standing relations with Moscow and is reportedly one of the countries for which the relationship continues against all odds.

- A number of countries with agreements with Russia prior to the war are now trapped in Russia’s quagmire. Madagascar is one such case.

- Countries such as Algeria or Egypt—the former relying on Russia for all its armaments, while a large part of the latter’s forces rely on Russian equipment—are trapped and can only continue their relationship with Russia.

The major risk for Africa is that of Russia, keen on preserving its image among Africans for the capabilities of its armaments and military training, pushing African clients with Russian equipment that embrace its combat doctrine to go to war against countries that get their supplies from the West and follow Western doctrine. Nothing appears less certain, as Russia is tied up in its war in Ukraine and a victory for its clan in Africa is highly unlikely. However, it is not excluded that the African countries monitor the outcome of the war in Ukraine more closely.

### Conclusion

Russia’s relationship with Africa is long-standing, dating back at least to the fifteenth century, but it only took on an institutional character at the end of the nineteenth century. At the time, Russia sent official military aid to Ethiopia and opened a diplomatic legation there.

The timeline of Russia-Africa ties indicates that the posture toward Europe in the first instance, and toward the West (Europe and the United States) in the second, determines the degree of Russian involvement and the timing of its actions in Africa. For the tsars, the Soviets, or Putin, Africa is a theater for confronting the West and countering European projects.

As far as the current war in Ukraine is concerned, and what positive or negative effects this could have on Russia-Africa relations, we should emphasize the following.

- It is premature to assess the effect of the present state of war between Russia and Ukraine on military-cooperation relations between Russia and Africa. Nevertheless, considering recent developments in this war, it is reasonable to anticipate several African questions on the sustain-

- However, whatever the outcome of the war or its consequences, some African countries will continue to maintain military relations with Russia because their arsenals are Russian (as in the cases of Algeria and Egypt), or because they are tied to Russia by agreements made before the war in Ukraine.
About the Author

Abdelhak Bassou is Senior Fellow at the Policy Center for the New South, Member of its Editorial & Research Oversight Steering Committee, and Affiliate Professor at the Faculty of Governance, Economic and Social Sciences (FGSES) of the Mohammed VI Polytechnic University (UM6P).

Specializing in security, strategy and defense studies, he previously occupied several offices within the Directorate General of the Moroccan National Security where he was Borders Division Chief from 1978 to 1993. He was appointed Director of the Royal Institute of Police in 1998, before serving as the Chief of Regional Security in Errachidia from 1999 to 2003, and Sidi Kacem from 2003 to 2005. In 2006, he became Head of the Central General Intelligence until 2009. Bassou contributed to the output of several endeavors of international organizations including the Council of Arab Interior Ministers from 1986 to 1992, where he represented the Directorate General of National Security in various meetings.

Since 2018, Bassou has been directing and editing the collectively written annual report on Africa’s geopolitics, originally titled ‘Miroir d’Afrique’ and published by the Policy Center for the New South. His works have been featured in numerous world-renowned think tanks and institutions, including a contribution in ‘Towards EU-MENA Shared Prosperity’ (Bruegel, 2017), Evolving Human Security Challenges in the Atlantic Space (Jean Monnet Network, 2019), and is also a recurring author and participant in the HEC-PCNS Strategic Dialogues and its corresponding written volumes.

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