

RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE IN AFRICA, A SECURITY PERSPECTIVE

by Sarah Daly



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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Preface

In partnership with the Policy Center for the New South (PCNS), the Africa Center is proud to present the joint report *Russia's influence in Africa, a security perspective* on the first anniversary of the war in Ukraine.

Africa emerged as a major player in this conflict on March 3, 2022, when seventeen African states abstained from voting on the United Nations General Assembly resolution condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The number of abstaining countries was surprising, as well as which specific nations abstained; some, like Morocco and Senegal, are known for their proximity to the Western camp. Moreover, unambiguous statements that accompanied nations' votes made their intentions patent: Some invoked the hypocrisy of the Western world, quick to save Ukraine while ignoring wars in Africa. Other nations expressed grievances regarding the treatment of African students at the Polish border in the early days of the conflict. Others still wished to preserve the Russia that fought on their side during wars of independence and fought the racist regime of apartheid in South Africa. Finally, some nations wished to remain non-aligned with either of the belligerents, so as not to threaten commercial relationships, or simply remain neutral towards a war that did not concern them.

Despite these intentions, Africa was quickly roped into the conflict. On June 3rd, Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Senegalese President Macky Sall, in his capacity as current Chair of the African Union (AU), to discuss blocked grain shipments that threatened to worsen food insecurity in Africa. Their meeting in Sochi was publicized internationally. The energy crisis and Europe's supply chain issues then drew the African continent as courted player in the conflict, with a string of natural resource discoveries from Senegal to Mozambique promising potential alternatives.

The beginning of 2023 ushered in an elaborate diplomatic dance that included visits by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Angola, South Africa, Eswatini, Tunisia and Mauritania. Qin Gang, China's new Minister of Foreign Affairs, visited five countries including Ethiopia and Egypt. Following suite, U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen made an unex-

pected visit to Senegal, Zambia, and South Africa. The Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Vice President Kamala Harris, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and the presidential couple then did the same. With the upcoming Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg and the BRICS Summit in Durban, hosted by South Africa, in summer 2023, the United States is determined to flex the resources at its disposal to plead its case. At the US-Africa Summit in December 2022, the country pledged to invest \$55 billion in Africa over the next three years, to reform the Bretton Woods institutions, and to help improve Africa's representation within the G20 and the United Nations Security Council. This summit - the first of its kind in eight years - followed the China- Africa summit held in Dakar in November 2021, the European Union-African Union meeting in Brussels in February 2022, the 17th CII-EXIM Bank Conclave on the India Africa Growth Partnership in July 2022, and the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) in August 2022. The United States, which had seemingly withdrawn interest in Africa under President Donald Trump's isolationist "America First" policy and had then given priority to the Indo-Pacific region and to Ukraine under President Joe Biden, had no choice but to re-engage. The nation is no longer merely concerned with managing emergency crises, but also seeking new strategic alliances. After a year of war in Ukraine, Africa has emerged as the epicenter of a new geopolitical order with two competing multilateral systems pitted against one another.

The Africa that the United States is seeking to re-engage with has changed significantly. **It is important to shift the paradigm and adopt a more creative approach to foreign policy. For a long time, a strategic approach to foreign policy that dates from the Cold War has dominated. This began when the West sought to contain communist advance in the continent, and persisted in the anti-terrorist struggle against Al Qaeda and the Islamic State organization. The deal was simple: the West would favor and trade with countries that supported Western priorities. This made it impossible for African states to remain neutral. Worse still, concerns for democracy and African economic emergencies were never a priority; we even saw autocratic regimes receive**

quiet support on the grounds that they were anti-communist or aiding in the fight against terrorism. This simplistic approach has done much to weaken the position of the West in Africa. It continues to influence African perceptions, by giving credence to Russian disinformation campaigns. Today, double talk and double standards are tolerated less and less and encounter increased scrutiny from young Africans who are quick to mobilize through social media. There is nothing more devastating to the West than to turn a blind eye to certain autocracies while vilifying others, or to legitimately oppose Russian aggression in Ukraine while largely ignoring the tragic situation in the Great Lakes for the past thirty years.

It is important to re-engage with an approach that foregrounds the needs of African populations and orients the actions of development agencies towards... development, while adopting a cooperative approach that respects the decision-making autonomy of African states. This is especially important because development impacts security, and its failures can tip impoverished populations into war. A myriad of issues, including the decisive role of women, youth employment, the pacification of community relations, local governance, global warming, and the opening of schools, must be addressed. It is imperative to provide effective solutions to these issues which, if left unresolved, will continue to drive African populations into the arms of dark forces.

The situation in the Sahel offers a striking illustration. After fighting a futile war against the terrorist threat for 10 years, French and European troops in Barkhane, Tabuka, and Sabre have been asked to pack their bags by the new rulers of Bamako and Ouagadougou, who rose to power following three military coups. The MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) has

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been minimally renewed and stands precarious. Popular protests of Western, and particularly French, interference have erupted throughout the region. Some protestors have been seen brandishing Russian flags and, more menacingly, there have been sightings of Wagner militia troops. Though ostracized in Europe for its war against Ukraine, Russia seems far more welcome on the African continent.

How deep are the roots of Russian influence in Africa? Thirty years after the end of the Cold War, what is Vladimir Putin's ambition in a region where he has signaled great interest? How can the West respond to this strategy of influence and sway young African opinions that seek a path to sovereignty for their continent? Is it possible for former European powers to overcome the mistrust that endures from the colonial period? What will cooperation with the United States entail? Historically, the United States has successfully convinced several parts of the world of the strength of its model. Will it succeed in reaching African hearts and minds today?

The authors of this report, Sarah Daly and Abdelhak Bassou, are fellows at the Atlantic Council and Policy Center for the New South and analyze Russia's role in Africa from a security perspective. Beginning from a historical understanding of Russian relations since the fifteenth century, they analyze the evolution and current dynamics of the nation's influence. With consideration for the security tools deployed by Russia on the continent (including training, technology transfer, defense agreements, militias, etc.), they examine the sustainability of Russian strategy in light of the uncertain war in Ukraine and African expectations. This report, published in both English and French for the first time since our collaboration began, is a valuable resource to understand the critical changes underway for the continent and their impact on the rest of the world.

Karim El Aynaoui
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Introduction

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 intensified the international community’s attention to the Kremlin’s political and security aims worldwide, particularly in Africa, where Russia continues to strengthen its footprint. Under President Vladimir Putin’s leadership, Russia has made a concerted effort to reinvigorate historical bilateral relations, forge new ties, and expand and improve existing ties with African partners. From a strategic point of view Russia’s overall aims in Africa are to:

- reassert itself as a global power in direct challenge to US hegemony and NATO through the projection of power and exercise of influence abroad;
- solicit and exercise mutual diplomatic and political support from and with African nations in multilateral and international bodies, notably the United Nations; and

- increase trade and facilitate Russian investment and commercial activities, particularly in extractive and military industries.

Russia’s security strategy is tightly interwoven with each of these aims and includes formal bilateral agreements as well as the deployment of state-linked, nominally private security forces. In practice, however, Russia acts outside of public and formal agreements—and has become not just a partner, but also a player in African security matters over the last decade. The war in Ukraine is likely to affect Russia’s security engagements on the continent, but so far has not prevented Russia from building, maintaining, and calling upon strategic ties in Africa.

How Moscow Pursues These Goals

Reasserting Russia as a Global Power

To build clout and credibility on the global stage, Russia has expanded and deepened ties with African nations through increased diplomatic engagement and sought to undercut and replace Western influence. In October 2019, Russia hosted in Sochi the first ever Russia-Africa Summit, which was attended by representatives from at least forty-five African countries, including more than forty heads of state. The summit resulted in a number of agreements on trade, education, aid, engineering and development projects, and military cooperation. In a signal that Russia continues to prioritize Africa and plans to increase its commitments to and on the continent, a second summit is scheduled for summer 2023 in Saint Petersburg. In the last five years, Russia also has increased the frequency of high-level bilateral visits to and from Africa. In 2017, Putin traveled to Egypt and discussed cooperation across a number of sectors, including intelligence sharing and the military, as well as the crises in Syria and Libya. The following year, he attended a summit of the BRICS emerging economies group (i.e., Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) in Johannesburg. In 2018, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov took three trips to Africa, visiting Angola, Namibia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, and Ethiopia. Since 2018, at least fifteen African leaders have attended bilateral meetings in Moscow.

In July 2022, Lavrov returned to the continent, traveling to Egypt, Ethiopia, the Republic of the Congo, South Africa, and Uganda to solicit support against imposition of sanctions on Russia. During his trip, Lavrov faced criticism for food insecurity triggered by the invasion of Ukraine, which disrupted production of grain in the region. Russian blockades further prevented their export to Africa, exacerbating risks of famine, raising food prices, and stoking social unrest across North and East Africa. The foreign minister deflected blame

for food costs and shortages onto Western nations. Anti-Western talking points are a staple of Russian propaganda in Africa, which contrasts colonial oppression and contemporary Western interventions with its own nominal respect for “sovereignty and territorial integrity and the right to self-determination without outside interference.”¹ Russia and its proxies invoke this simple yet effective rhetoric to subvert US and French influence with African leaders and publics.

In Mali, for example, Russia capitalized upon anti-French resentment to position itself as a preferable security partner for the ruling military junta—undercutting France’s leverage in pressuring the country back toward democratic rule following August 2020 and May 2021 coups. Russia accompanied its robust disinformation campaign to discredit France’s counterterrorism efforts with arms deliveries and the arrival of military “trainers.”² In 2021, Mali’s transitional government signed an agreement with the private military company (PMC) Wagner to provide “training, close protection, and counterterrorism operations.”³ In December of that year, Wagner deployed about 1,000 troops to Mali to assist in counterterror operations. France announced its drawdown from Operation Barkhane in August 2022. Smaller in both size and experience than the French detachment, the Wagner deployment is unlikely to rout the violent Islamist extremists who have plagued the country for a decade. In fact, the group already faces scrutiny for killing hundreds of civilians in Mali, which has the potential to worsen rather than alleviate the problem of violent extremism.⁴ Nevertheless, Russia has succeeded in wooing Mali’s leadership, and is making inroads in Burkina Faso and other neighboring countries. The Mali example demonstrates how Russia blends pushes for soft and hard power in so-called hybrid operations.

While this level of engagement between Russia and Africa represents a significant increase relative to the level of ten years ago, Russian activity in Africa is nothing new. The Kremlin’s strategy toward the continent revitalizes and

1 “Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (Approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016),” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, December 2, 2016, <https://www.russiamatters.org/sites/default/files/media/files/Foreign%20Policy%20Concept%20of%20the%20Russian%20Federation%20%28approved%20by%20President%20of%20the%20Russian%20Federation%20Vladimir%20Putin%20on%20November%2030%2C%202016%29%20-%20Asset%20Publisher%20-%20The%20Ministry%20of%20Foreign%20Affairs%20of%20the%20Russian%20Federation.pdf>.

2 Cedric Terrasson, “Update: Russia’s Shadow Falls Over Mali,” EA WorldView, June 2, 2022, <https://eaworldview.com/2022/06/russia-shadow-falls-over-mali/>.

3 “Lavrov Defends Russia’s Role in Sahel, Confirms Wagner Plans,” Africa Times, September 26, 2021, <https://africatimes.com/2021/09/26/lavrov-defends-russias-role-in-sahel-confirms-wagner-plans/>; and Raphael Parens, The Wagner Group’s Playbook in Africa, Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 18, 2022, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/03/the-wagner-groups-playbook-in-africa-mali/>.

4 Elian Peltier, “Main Target of Russian Mercenaries in Africa Is Civilians, Report Says,” *New York Times*, August 30, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/30/world/africa/wagner-group-civilians-africa.html>; Wassim Nasr, “How the Wagner Group is Aggravating the Jihadist Threat in the Sahel,” *CTC Sentinel*, 15, no. 11 (November/ December 2022), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/how-the-wagner-group-is-aggravating-the-jihadi-threat-in-the-sahel/>

expands upon relationships established during the Cold War, when the Soviet Union contributed first to liberation struggles and then supported political and socioeconomic development projects following the transition to independent African states, Mali included. While Russian-African relationships receded significantly following the fall of the USSR, many African leaders (both political and social) maintain personal or political ties with Russia. Russian and African leaders alike capitalize on their shared history, referencing cultural ties in bilateral calls and meetings.

Moscow's soft power push represents a significant portion of its engagement in Africa, but Russia is also keen to project hard power beyond the “near abroad” of the former Soviet bloc, the Balkans, and the Arctic. To this end, Russia has pursued security engagements in the Middle East and North Africa as a means of gaining mobility and exerting pressure along NATO's southern flank. Because of its strategic importance, the USSR had maintained multiple military bases in North Africa and the Horn of Africa. Today, Russia is allegedly pursuing new basing opportunities in this region, particularly along strategic maritime corridors. Reports have cited Russian interest in base agreements in Egypt, the Central Africa Republic, Eritrea, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Sudan.⁵ Since 2018, Russia has sought permission to establish a naval logistics center in Port Sudan on the Red Sea. Despite continued wooing through several regime changes in Sudan, the two countries have been unable to finalize the deal, and it remains in limbo.⁶ China, France, and the United States maintain bases in nearby Djibouti.

To date, Russia has no permanent bases in Africa. That said, Russia and its private military companies (PMCs) have reportedly operated in Libya from Egyptian bases since 2017, although both Russia and Egypt deny this.⁷ Since 2021, Russia has controlled and operated four bases within Libya, and has reportedly used at least one of those bases to transport material to Mali. Russian contractors have also

constructed and run bases to facilitate military transports in Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR).

Soliciting and Exercising Mutual Diplomatic and Political Support in the UN

In addition to direct challenges to US and NATO influence, Russia aims to realign power in the UN. Mutual support in the UN is a key pillar of Russian relations in Africa. Given Russia's permanent seat on the Security Council, and Africa's three rotating seats, cooperation through UN peacekeeping and voting has boundless potential for mutual benefit, albeit sometimes at the expense of norms on human rights or good governance. Russia has advocated for the primacy of state sovereignty in responding to subnational conflicts, and African partners have appealed to Russia's diplomatic support to resist multilateral or international interventions. It has repeatedly advocated for the sanctity of noninterference in internal affairs, even if its own security interventions do not uphold these values, as Russia and its proxies act in their own interests on the continent.

Russia has been a longtime contributor to UN peacekeeping operations since the dissolution of the Soviet Union (as the USSR had voted against and opposed funding for UN peacekeeping interventions). In the 1990s and 2000s, it contributed hundreds of troops to the UN missions in Sierra Leone, Sudan, Darfur, CAR, Chad, and South Sudan. Since 2010, Russian troop contributions have dwindled; today, most Russian participants are experts, observers, and police, who rarely number more than a dozen in any location. But staff officers have served individually and in small groups in the Congo, South Sudan, and since 2020, CAR.⁸ In CAR, the collaboration of the UN's Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) with Russian PMCs has become a concern. In some respects, it appears that Russia has shifted from contributing troops to UN missions to

fielding a for-profit PMCs in insecure regions. While Russia's personnel contributions to UN missions are low in number, its permanent seat on the Security Council helps Moscow wield power related to the approval and conduct of peacekeeping operations writ large. Given that 50 percent of UN missions deploy to Africa, Russia's diplomatic stake may be even more relevant to its aims than its physical contributions.

For example, in 2019 President Putin thanked Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed for cooperation at the UN General Assembly. The following year, Russia (alongside China) delayed UN calls for the cessation of hostilities in the Tigray region of Ethiopia and prevented timely UN proclamations on famine conditions and demands for the delivery of humanitarian aid. Although the Russian foreign ministry had urged a cease-fire in the region, state media outlet TASS reported in August 2022 that Ethiopian officials were satisfied that “Russia understands very well that the conflict in Tigray is a domestic problem that should be resolved by the Ethiopian government without any external interference.”⁹ President Félix Tshisekedi of the Democratic Republic of the Congo has similarly thanked Putin for his efforts at the UN, saying: “Every time the Security Council reviews issues on its agenda, Russia invariably supports our country's official position.”¹⁰

Now that Russia is on the receiving end of UN threats and sanctions, it must rely on diplomatic support from African nations, which comprise the largest regional voting bloc in the UN General Assembly (UNGA). During the March 2022 UNGA vote on the resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, seventeen African nations abstained from the vote, with one (Eritrea) voting against. The seventeen abstentions came from a mixture of longtime allies and new-found friends.¹¹ Ethiopia and Guinea, along with six other African countries, did not vote. The breakdown of countries by vote type showed that democratic and West-aligned nations tended to vote for the resolution, except those with historic “close military and ideological ties” to Russia, while authoritarian and hybrid regimes tended to abstain, except

those closely linked to or dependent on the West for security assistance.¹²

	Favor	Against	Abstain
March 2014	19	2	27
December 2019	1	3	20
December 2020	2	1	18
March 2022	27	1	17

That said, the votes on the 2022 invasion of Ukraine are not dissimilar to previous votes by the fifty-four African member nations on UN resolutions condemning Russia's annexation of the Crimea. While some countries consistently vote with Russia, such as Zimbabwe and Sudan, the composition of groups is neither wholly stable nor wholly fluid. A 2021 study on voting patterns of the three African seats on the UN Security Council found insufficient evidence of alignment or nonalignment with Russia on security matters.¹³ Subsequent votes related to Russia's war in Ukraine have drawn similarly mixed results (as shown by vote or abstention), denoting that Russia's efforts to cultivate loyal allies in the UN have not been an unmitigated success—even if Russia claims it is: Lavrov has congratulated and thanked “African friends” who did not back sanctions against Russia, tweeting that the move signaled independence from the “neocolonialist course of the West.”¹⁴

5 Peter Suci, “Russian Military Looks to Establish Six Military Bases in Africa,” *National Interest*, August 11, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/russian-military-looks-establish-six-military-bases-africa-166685>; “Central African Republic Considers Hosting Russian Military Base,” *Guardian*, October 25, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/25/central-african-republic-russia-military-base>; Eren Ersozogl, “Russian Military Base in Mozambique: Intent, Impact & Impediment,” *Grey Dynamics*, April 15, 2021, <https://greydynamics.com/russias-military-base-in-mozambique-intent-impact-impediment/>; and Abdi Latif Dahir, “Russia Is the Latest World Power Eyeing the Horn of Africa,” *Quartz Africa*, September 3, 2018, <https://qz.com/africa/1377434/russias-sergey-lavrov-confirms-plans-for-logistics-base-in-eritrea/>; “No Foreign or Russian Military Bases in Egypt: Presidency,” *Egyptian Streets*, October 11, 2016, <https://egyptianstreets.com/2016/10/11/no-foreign-or-russian-military-bases-in-egypt-presidency/#~:text=Earlier%20this%20week%2C%20Russian%20newspaper%20Izvestia%20reported%20that,said%20that%20other%20military%20facilities%20are%20also%20possible>; and “Russia Negotiating Deal for its Warplanes to Use Egyptian Bases,” Associated Press (AP), Deutsche Presse-Agentur, and Reuters (reporting) via Voice of America (VOA), December 1, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-negotiating-deal-for-its-warplanes-to-use-egyptian-bases/4144949.html>.

6 “Russia Signs Deal with Sudan to Establish Logistics Center for Its Navy in Port Sudan: Implications and Possible Application,” Emirates Policy Center, December 29, 2020, <https://epc.ae/en/details/featured/russia-signs-deal-with-sudan-to-establish-logistics-center-for-its-navy-in-port-sudan-implications-and-possible-application>; and Amy MacKinnon, Robbie Gramer, and Jack Detsch, “Russia's Dreams of a Red Sea Naval Base Are Scuttled—for Now,” *Foreign Policy*, July 15, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/15/russia-sudan-putin-east-africa-port-red-sea-naval-base-scuttled/>.

7 “No Foreign or Russian Military Bases in Egypt: Presidency,” *Egyptian Streets*; and “Russia Negotiating Deal for Its Warplanes,” VOA; Phil Stewart, Idrees Ali, and Lin Noueihed, “Russia Appears to Deploy Forces in Egypt, Eyes on Libya Role,” Reuters, March 13, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-libya-exclusive-idUSKBN16K2RY>; and “Russia and Egypt Refute Reports of Russian Troop Deployment on Libyan Border,” RT, March 14, 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/380662-russia-libya-egypt-troops/>.

8 For data related to UN peacekeeping mission contributions, see “Troop and Police Contributors,” United Nations Peacekeeping (website), <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>.

9 “Ethiopia Grateful to Russia for its Position on Tigray Crisis, Ambassador to Moscow Says,” TASS, August 23, 2021, <https://tass.com/world/1329199>.

10 “Meeting with President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo Felix Tshisekedi,” Office of the President of Russia, October 23, 2019, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61886>.

11 Those abstaining included Algeria, Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Republic of the Congo, Senegal, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

12 “Russia-Ukraine War: Decoding How African Countries Voted at the UN,” *Conversation*, March 8, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/russia-ukraine-war-decoding-how-african-countries-voted-at-the-un-178663>.

13 Priyal Singh and Gustavo de Carvalho, “Walking with the Bear? Russia and the A3 in the UN Security Council,” South African Institute of International Affairs, October 26, 2021, <https://saiia.org.za/research/walking-with-the-bear-russia-and-the-a3-in-the-un-security-council/>.

14 The voting history shown above does not account for absences or inaction; for details, see “General Assembly Adopts Resolution Calling Upon States Not to Recognize Changes in Status of Crimea Region,” United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, GA/11493, March 27, 2014, <https://press.un.org/en/2014/ga11493.doc.htm>; “General Assembly Adopts Resolution Urging Russian Federation to Withdraw Its Armed Forces from Crimea, Expressing Grave Concern About Growing Military Presence,” United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, GA/12223, December 9, 2019, <https://press.un.org/en/2019/ga12223.doc.htm>; Carlos Mureithi, “How African Countries Voted on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine,” *Quartz Africa*, March 7, 2022, <https://qz.com/africa/2138584/how-african-countries-voted-on-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>; and see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, “FM #Lavrov: Russia greatly appreciates the fact that despite unprecedented & crude pressure [from the West], our African friends, like the overwhelming majority of international community, have not joined anti-Russia sanction,” Twitter, October 25, 2022, https://twitter.com/mfa_russia/status/1584995922957959169.

Increasing Trade, Investment, and Commercial Activities

A key aim of Russia’s engagement across the African continent is to bolster economic and commercial cooperation. This takes the form of increased trade, cooperation on energy, and contracts to prospect for and extract natural resources (including precious metals, minerals, and hydrocarbons)—and often involve enterprises fully or partially owned by the Russian state. Trade has historically served as a primary point of entry for Russia in Africa. In the mid-2000s, Russia began revitalizing Soviet-era relationships by focusing on economic ties in northern Africa and with South Africa, which joined the BRICS group in 2008. Today, Russia has four trade missions in Africa—in Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, and South Africa—and these four countries are Russia’s largest trade partners on the continent and some of its largest security partners as well.

Russia has considerably expanded trade in Africa in the past decade. Trade volumes between Russia and Africa have doubled since 2015, and now total around \$20 billion per year.¹⁵ While African countries export raw goods, minerals, and agricultural products to Russia, they import foodstuffs, fertilizers, metals, petroleum, finished goods, and defense material. In the near term, because of sanctions related to the war in Ukraine, Russia may become more reliant on African partners to supply goods that it previously imported from the EU. Russia has also undertaken and bankrolled projects aimed at further increasing trade and facilitating economic cooperation in Africa, such as the \$7 billion Russian industrial zone near Port Said along the Suez Canal. Russia has pursued energy development projects, negotiating agreements on nuclear energy between state corporation Rosatom and at least sixteen countries in Africa.

Similarly, Russian oil and gas companies Gazprom, Rosneft, and Lukoil have made inroads across the continent for exploration and development projects in at least ten countries.¹⁶ So far, Russia’s interests in African energy have not yielded significant returns or results in terms of infrastructure, supply chain development, or completed projects. With its own domestic supply of oil and gas, Russia’s aims in the energy sector in Africa might be described as opportunistic; Russia

can secure contracts that enrich state and private corporations and well-placed elites, and exert more control over the global oil supply. The abundance of oil and gas reserves in Africa holds great potential at a time when international relations have thrown energy supplies into flux. Until Russia cut off oil to Europe, many Western countries lobbied African nations and their investors to curtail the development of fossil fuels in the interest of climate change. The oil crisis has turned their attention back to Africa’s energy reserves, where Russia stands ready to assist and benefit, and where African nations are eager to monetize untapped resources.

In some circumstances, Russia offers low-cost security services to countries in exchange for lucrative contracts in energy or extractive industries. These services are typically rendered by a dense network of nominally private military and security companies and commercial entities that operate parallel to official Russian military and intelligence organizations—and are owned by close associates of Putin.¹⁷ Russian PMCs have been active in as many as nineteen countries across Africa, rendering a wide array of services ranging from training and advising local security forces to propagandizing and electioneering. These deployments often coincide with concessions to Russian companies for precious mineral extraction, hydrocarbon exploration and extraction, and the sale of Russian arms and weapons—although the latter are often laundered through sales to commercial entities. The opacity of these transactions reflects the Soviet military doctrine of *maskirovka*, which entails the use of “camouflage, denial, deceit, misdirection, and operational dexterity,” and make them difficult to disentangle or assess, according to a US white paper.¹⁸ The interlinkages between paramilitaries and commercial entities allow Moscow to execute hybrid operations across sectors in foreign countries with less scrutiny than conventional trade or military cooperation agreements.

For example, PMC Wagner’s deployment to Mozambique to support counterterror operations in Cabo Delgado in 2019 coincided with an energy deal for Russian energy firm Rosneft, as well as debt forgiveness, port access for Russia’s navy, and political strategy and influence campaigns ahead of President Filipe Nyusi’s reelection in 2019.¹⁹ The cross-pollination of contracts positions Russia to financially and politically profit from insecurity in Africa, but has had devastat-

ing results for human rights, particularly when these PMCs secure private resource holdings or quell local political opposition, such as in CAR and Sudan.

These proxy forces played an active role in Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, as they are in ongoing conflicts in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, CAR, Mozambique, and Mali. Reports of abuses and atrocities, including targeted killing of civilians, abound wherever these PMCs deploy. Russian contractors have gained political, economic, and military access in CAR,

and have been instrumental in a challenge by Khalifa Haftar, military chief of eastern Libya, to the UN-backed government in Libya; however, their counterterrorism operations fell woefully short in Mozambique and face significant challenges in Mali. Despite the precarity of Russia’s position in the global community due to the war in Ukraine, and its poor and problematic performance in kinetic operations on the continent, it shows no signs of slowing its push to project power through PMCs and corporate proxies in Africa.

15 José Narajo, “Weapons, Mercenaries, and Trade Deals: Russia Grows Stronger in Africa,” *El País*, May 5, 2022, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2022-05-05/weapons-mercenaries-and-trade-deals-russia-grows-stronger-in-africa.html>

16 Examples include Algeria, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Egypt, Ghana, Libya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Republic of the Congo, and South Africa.

17 Jack Margolin, “Paper Trails,” Center for Advanced Defense Studies, June 13, 2019, <https://c4ads.org/commentary/2019-6-13-paper-trails/>.

18 Malin Severin, “Russian Activities in Africa,” in *Russian Strategic Intentions: A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper*, US Department of Defense and the Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, May 2019, 70-75, <https://www.politico.com/f/?id=0000016b-a5a1-d241-adff-fd908e00001>.

19 Sergey Sukhankin, “Russian Private Military Contractors in Sub-Saharan Africa: Strengths, Limitations and Implications,” *Russie.Nei.Visions* 120, Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI), September 2020, 22, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/sukhankin_russian_private_military_contractors_africa_2020.pdf, and “Mozambique, Russia Sign Energy, Security Deals,” *Outlook India*, August 22, 2019, <https://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/mozambique-russia-sign-energy-security-deals/1602542>

How Russia Pursues Hard Power Aims in Africa

While Russia integrates defense and security into its foreign policy aims in Africa, it seeks to achieve its hard power aims through a variety of formal defense and security engagements in Africa, including military-technical cooperation agreements, arms and weapons sales, training and education, and selling PMC services to conflict-ridden countries. Each of these lines of effort reinforce Russia’s non security aims and provide opportunities for Africa nations to diversify their security partnerships to meet growing threats of insecurity across the continent. Official Russian foreign policy describes its goals for security assistance to Africa as diplomatic: to facilitate mediation and resolution, and to reach formal agreements for security training and advising.²⁰ Nevertheless, in practice, Russia’s use of proxy forces in African conflicts belies its stated commitments to noninterference and diplomacy. Through both its official and private security assistance in Africa, Russia protects its clientel relationships, commercial interests, and allows African leaders to circumvent sanctions and external pressures.

Military-Technical Cooperation Agreements

Over the last decade, bilateral agreements between African states and Russia have increasingly integrated stipulations for security and defense. This includes military-technical cooperation agreements, which establish the mechanisms for arms and material transfers, as well as training and education—all of which benefit Moscow politically. In Sochi, Putin boasted that Russia had signed such agreements with more than thirty African countries.²¹ In some cases, Russia supplants Western security assistance when states face arms

embargoes or sanctions. For example, Russia renewed its bilateral security cooperation with Sudan in February 2022, four months after the United States paused aid deliveries when the military deposed a civilian transitional government.²² In April 2022, Cameroon renewed a military cooperation agreement with Russia.²³ The United States cut military aid to Cameroon in 2019 on account of human rights abuses committed in Cameroon’s counterterror operations and crackdowns on anglophone separatists.²⁴ Russia also signed a military-technical cooperation agreement with Ethiopia following a May 2021 announcement that the United States would restrict security assistance to Ethiopia and Eritrea in light of the conflict in Tigray.²⁵ In most cases, however, Russian military-technical cooperation supplements African nations’ existing agreements with other partners. For example, Nigeria, a significant security partner for the West, signed a high-profile agreement with Russia in August 2021.²⁶

Arms and Weapons Transfers

Russian arms sales and transfers comprise a significant portion of military-technical cooperation agreements with African states, and offer mutual benefit. Africa can import needed equipment and arms (often at a competitive price and with few conditions), while Russia bolsters its defense industrial base and cements goodwill with partner nations. According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), since 2010, Russia has become a leading arms exporter to Africa and has sold equipment to at least twenty-four African countries. African states are big clients for Russia’s defense contractors: its third- and fourth-largest clients globally are Egypt and Algeria.²⁷ From 2017 to 2021, Russia accounted for 44 percent of major arms exports to Africa, but only 24 percent of arms exports glob-

ally.²⁸ In the year following the Sochi summit, Russia’s state-owned defense manufacturer reportedly signed contracts valued at \$1.7 billion in Africa.²⁹

Russia is establishing a foothold in the market for security material for clients in conflict-afflicted regions. In Africa, its three-largest buyers, Egypt, Algeria, and Angola, have maintained strong ties with Moscow since the Soviet era. The next three-largest buyers, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Mali, are all engaged in intensive conflicts. SIPRI notes that each of these countries “received no more than 49 percent of their major arms from a single supplier,” indicating that African nations maintain diverse sources of defense material, especially when meeting urgent security needs.³⁰ As with other military-technical agreements, some arms sales have been accompanied by debt forgiveness or have filled gaps ceded by Western partners. Russia stepped in to supply Egypt with material in 2013 when the United States cut off military sales following a coup and replaced an order of helicopters to Nigeria in 2014 following a US cancellation. Russia also abstained from UN Security Council votes on sanctions and arms embargoes against African nations, and has publicly opposed such measures including those regarding South Sudan in 2019 and the Central African Republic in 2020. This stance allows Russia to win allies among isolated leaders and undermine the effectiveness of multilateral efforts to disarm or defund parties to conflict.

Training and Education

Russia has also fostered bilateral military cooperation with African countries through professional military education and security force training. This takes the form of exercises and officer training in Russia, as well as in-country training of military and police personnel. Despite the war in Ukraine, Russia’s external facing military training and exercises have continued. The eighth International Army Games, an annual military exhibition and exercise hosted by Russia, took place in August 2022. Since its inaugural event in 2015, eigh-

teen African militaries have attended and participated in the games,³¹ which comprise competitive events like a “tank biathlon,” arms expos, and sideline bilateral meetings. In January 2023, Lavrov visited southern Africa and publicized plans for conducting joint naval drills with South Africa in February. According to Putin’s statements at Sochi, “military personnel from 20 African countries are studying at higher education institutions of the Russian Defense Ministry.”³² Meanwhile, Russian PMCs have deployed to train security forces in Africa. Replacing or augmenting conventional forces with private entities for this training allows Moscow to deny responsibility for subsequent missions and activities beyond training, advising, and assisting. Russia uses these contractors to funnel an array of strategic services to African leaders in exchange for commercial concessions and political support.

In 2017, Wagner forces began training Sudan’s Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The PMC provided services beyond the remit of military training, including orchestrating political strategy and information operations to keep President Omar al-Bashir in power in exchange for concessions to gold mines and basing opportunities in Port Sudan.³³ Following al-Bashir’s ouster, a network of private companies linked to the Wagner Group continued to work closely with Sudan’s forces. RSF’s commander, General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (also known as “Hemetti”), is second in command of the military junta currently governing Sudan; in late February 2022, Dagalo was on an official visit to Moscow when Russia invaded Ukraine and made statements defending Russia’s right to “act in the interests of its citizens and protect its people.”³⁴ Reports last year indicated that Wagner was working with RSF to export Sudanese gold to Russia through illegal and violent means.³⁵ More recently, however, Dagalo has signaled a possible shift in stance on Russia’s actions in Ukraine and its interests in Sudan as part of an appeal for Western support.³⁶

Similarly, Russia has used security training as a preamble to regime protection and natural resource extraction in the

20 “Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

21 “Russia-Africa Summit,” President of Russia (website), October 24, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61893>.

22 “Hemetti, Senior Russian Official Agree to Strengthen Military Cooperation,” *Sudan Tribune*, February 26, 2022, <https://sudantribune.com/article255750/>.

23 Nana Kamsu Kom, “Cameroon Signs Military Agreement with Russia,” *Journal du Cameroun*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.journalducameroun.com/en/cameroon-signs-military-agreement-with-russia/>.

24 “US Cuts Military Aid to Cameroon Over Human Rights Abuses,” AP, February 6, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/d2f384feacc74b9d8ab854de4575a5b7>.

25 Patrick Kenyette, “Ethiopia, Russia Signs Military Cooperation Agreement,” *Military Africa* (platform), July 14, 2021, <https://www.military.africa/2021/07/ethiopia-russia-signs-military-cooperation-agreement/>.

26 Olufemi Ojoye, “Nigeria Signs Military-Technical Cooperation Agreement with Russia,” Federal Republic of Nigeria, Ministry of Defence, August 29, 2021, <https://defence.gov.ng/2021/08/29/nigeria-signs-military-technical-cooperation-agreement-with-russia/>.

27 SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, data from 2010-2021, accessed September 20, 2022.

28 Pieter Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova, and Siemon Wezeman, “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2021,” SIPRI Fact Sheet, March 2022, 2, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/fs_2203_at_2021.pdf.

29 Inder Singh Bisht, “Russia Signs \$1.7 Billion in Defense Contracts with 17 African Nations,” *Defense Post*, June 8, 2021, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2021/06/08/russia-defense-contracts-african-nations/>.

30 P. Wezeman, Kuimova, and S. Wezeman, “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2021,” 2.

31 The nations are Algeria, Angola, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Guinea, Mali, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Republic of Congo, Rwanda, South Africa, Sudan, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

32 “Russia-Africa Summit,” President of Russia; and Kester Kenn Klomegah, “Russia’s Military Diplomacy in Africa,” *Modern Diplomacy* (platform), August 30, 2018, <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2018/08/30/russias-military-diplomacy-in-africa/>.

33 Sarah Daly and Miriam Roday, “Information Operations: An Understudied Facet of Russian Influence in Africa,” Institute for Defense Analyses, 2021, <https://www.ida.org/research-and-publications/publications/all/i/information-operations-an-understudied-facet-of-russian-influence-in-africa>.

34 “Sudan’s Hemetti Supports Russian Recognition of Separatist Ukrainian Regions,” *Sudan Tribune*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.msn.com/en-xl/news/other/sudan-s-hemetti-supports-russian-recognition-of-separatist-ukrainian-regions/ar-AAUf70X>.

35 Declan Walsh, “‘From Russia with Love’: A Putin Ally Mines Gold and Plays Favorites in Sudan,” *New York Times*, June 5, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/05/world/africa/wagner-russia-sudan-gold-putin.html>; “Wagner Mercenaries Terrorizing Sudanese Gold Miners,” *Africa Defense Forum* magazine, July 19, 2022, <https://adf-magazine.com/2022/07/wagner-group-terrorizing-sudanese-gold-miners/>; and Oscar Rickett, “Russia’s Wagner Group ‘Getting Rich in Sudan’ from Gold Mines and Government,” *Middle East Eye*, June 7, 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudan-russia-wagner-group-getting-rich-gold-mines-government-partnership>.

36 “Sudan’s Hemetti Seeks Close Cooperation with U.S. Administration: Report,” *Sudan Tribune*, November 15, 2022, <https://sudantribune.com/article266859/>.

Central African Republic. CAR has been embroiled in civil war since 2013, and hosts a UN peacekeeping mission. Russia first sent equipment and personnel to CAR in 2017, following stalled arms negotiations with France. The Kremlin’s official position is that a small group of Russian military advisers are present in CAR with UN approval to train and advise with the support of several hundred contractors. Nevertheless, their role in CAR swiftly expanded beyond security force training. Russian “advisers” have worked closely with MINUSCA peacekeepers, Rwandan troops, and the Central African Army to combat rebel groups, drawing concern from the UN over the nature and extent of their involvement. A former Russian intelligence professional, Valery Zakharov, manages Wagner’s CAR subsidiary and acted as a national security adviser to President Faustin-Archange Touadéra.³⁷ Zakharov has spearheaded peace negotiations with rebel groups and owns a large mining company in CAR.³⁸ In December 2020, following a renewed outbreak of conflict, Russia sent an additional three hundred military instructors to the Central African Republic, and while a CAR representative said they received soldiers and weapons, Russia denied that the forces were military.³⁹ Today, advisers from PMCs are maneuvering to erode democratic institutions by removing executive-branch term limits in CAR.

Moscow has profited from the arms sales, political influence, and mineral exploitation that result from security-force training contracts secured by private Russian military groups. Leaders in CAR and Sudan have benefited from the range of services offered by or through links to such enterprises, but the cost to civilians and democracy has been high. In both CAR and Sudan, Russian PMCs have engaged in kidnapping, murder, and intimidation under the banner of counterinsurgency, but often in service of silencing political dissent or protecting sites related to their own commercial interests.⁴⁰ The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) reported in 2022, for instance, that 52 percent of the Wagner Group’s targets in the Central African Republic were civilian—a higher percentage than rebel groups (42 percent)

and government forces (17 percent).⁴¹ The ACLED data also showed that Wagner forces were more likely to target civilians when operating separately from the army than when working together.⁴² The murky composition and leadership of these PMCs, in addition to Russia’s ability to vote against proposed UN investigations, makes it difficult to hold individuals and organizations, to say nothing of the Russian government, responsible for atrocities.

Combat Support

Russian private military companies have sold services to client states facing ongoing conflicts and requiring combat support while also wanting to avoid the oversight that comes with multilateral interventions. While in CAR, training and advising gave way to (or cover for) kinetic operations; in other cases, these Russian PMCs have been contracted specifically to intervene in violent conflict, notably in Libya, Mozambique, and Mali. Russia has touted its counterterrorism success in Syria to African clients, but PMCs have had little to no success in kinetic operations on the continent.

Under the aegis of Wagner, as many as 1,000 Russian fighters have fought with General Haftar’s forces against the UN-backed government in Libya since 2019. Despite evidence of Russian military planes traversing to and from Libya, as well as of financing and supplementing Haftar’s forces as early as 2014, the Kremlin maintains that it has no role in Wagner’s activities in Libya.⁴³ The PMC played a pivotal role in the Libyan National Army’s advance on Tripoli in 2019, before a sudden retreat in May 2020 to Russian-controlled bases in the east. During their retreat, Wagner forces laid land mines in civilian areas, drawing the ire of the international community and triggering an investigation into this and other war crimes.⁴⁴ Around August 2019, the Wagner Group secured a separate contract to support counterterrorism operations in northern Mozambique, and subsequently sent between 150 and 200 men to fight alongside the Armed

37 Mathieu Olivier, “CAR: Who Are President Touadera’s Russian Guardian Angels?” *Africa Report*, March 17, 2021, <https://www.theafricareport.com/72758/car-who-are-president-touaderas-russian-guardian-angels/>.
38 Olivier, “CAR: Who Are President Touadera’s Russian Guardian Angels?”
39 “Russia Sends 300 Military Instructors to Central African Republic,” BBC News, December 22, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-55412720>.
40 Philip Obaji Jr., “This Is How Russia is Pulling Off a Free-for-All Murderous Rampage,” *Daily Beast*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/this-is-how-russia-is-pulling-off-a-free-for-all-murderous-rampage-in-central-african-republic>; and Kyran Goodison, “Russia in the Central African Republic: Exploitation Under the Guise of Intervention,” *Philologia* 11, no. 1 (2019): 34-42.
41 Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, “Wagner Group Operations in Africa: Civilian Targeting Trends in the Central African Republic and Mali,” ACLED (website), August 30, 2022, Key Trends section, <https://acleddata.com/2022/08/30/wagner-group-operations-in-africa-civilian-targeting-trends-in-the-central-african-republic-and-mali/>.
42 Peter Fabricius, “Wagner Is Being Used in Africa as a Proxy to Target Civilians,” Institute for Security Studies, September 16, 2022, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/wagner-is-being-used-in-africa-as-a-proxy-to-target-civilians>.
43 Jalel Harchaoui, “The Pendulum: How Russia Sways Its Way to More Influence in Libya,” *War on the Rocks*, January 7, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/the-pendulum-how-russia-sways-its-way-to-more-influence-in-libya/>.
44 “Libya: Landmines Left After Armed Group Withdraws,” Human Rights Watch, June 3, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/03/libya-landmines-left-after-armed-group-withdraws#:~:text=The%20antipersonnel%20mines%20discovered%20in%20Tripoli%20in%20May,have%20transferred%20into%20the%20country%20in%20recent%20years;and%20Libya:Russia'sWagnerGroupSetLandminesNearTripoli>; and “Libya: Russia’s Wagner Group Set Landmines Near Tripoli,” Human Rights Watch, May 31, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/31/libya-russias-wagner-group-set-landmines-near-tripoli>.

Forces of Mozambique in Cabo Delgado province.⁴⁵ While a Russian Air Force transport delivered helicopters and equipment to Nacala, the Russian government emphatically denied that its military was involved in combat, and was only offering “consultation” per 2015 and 2018 military-technical cooperation agreements. The deployment lasted only two months; Wagner forces suffered losses, had difficulty maneuvering the bush terrain, and struggled to work across language and cultural barriers with Mozambican partners.⁴⁶

Despite the acknowledged failure in Mozambique, Russian PMCs subsequently secured contracts to combat violent

extremists in Mali. Given its dubious operational record and reputation for collateral damage, Wagner’s advance to new regions and conflict zones has generated significant concern across the international community, including at the UN and in the United States. But even though Russian private military entities may not lead to stability, let alone peaceful settlements of conflict, they are delivering political and strategic wins for client states and Moscow alike. Such deployments can delay or displace multilateral and Western interventions or assistance, facilitate rapport-building between Russia and foreign leaders, and facilitate profitable commercial contracts for natural resources and weapons.

45 “Russian Military Hardware Delivered to Mozambique,” *DefenceWeb*, September 27, 2019, <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/featured/russian-military-hardware-delivered-to-mozambique/>.
46 Pjotr Sauer, “In Push for Africa, Russia’s Wagner Mercenaries Are ‘Out of their Depth’ in Mozambique,” *Moscow Times*, November 19, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/11/19/in-push-for-africa-russias-wagner-mercenaries-are-out-of-their-depth-in-mozambique-a68220>; and Steve Balestrieri, “Russian Wagner Mercenaries ‘Out of their Depth’ in Mozambique,” *Special Operations Forces Report*, SOFREP Media Group, November 25, 2019, <https://sofrep.com/news/russian-wagner-mercenaries-out-of-their-depth-in-mozambique/>.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To subvert the liberalized international order, Russia has sought allies and influence in Africa. On the continent, Russia has revived and deepened Soviet-era ties and pursued outreach to new partners by investing in high-level diplomatic and political relations, and mobilizing the state-linked commercial agriculture, energy, and arms sectors to secure mutually beneficial trade deals. Moscow has courted African leaders through offers of: support to counter foreign intervention and interference; political consultancy; and bilateral military cooperation in order to secure rights to natural resources, arms sales, and military bases. Its defense and security engagements on the continent are embedded in many of these lines of effort, including those not explicitly tied to national security. Drawing upon a more limited pool of resources than during the Soviet era, Russia has developed new mechanisms for projecting power and integrating security into its bilateral engagements, notably through the use of parastatal PMCs and ad hoc hybrid operations.

Russia's pursuit of quick strategic wins over the past decade has delivered more problems than solutions for peace and stability in Africa. Its poor performance in Ukraine echoes its lackluster track record in African conflicts, while the economic fallout from the war has worsened inflation worldwide and triggered acute food insecurity in Africa. It is likely that leaders who depend upon Moscow for political legitimacy will continue to rely on Russian strategic cooperation, but Russia's diminished standing is likely to reduce its attractiveness as a partner for future soft and hard power initiatives in Africa. This creates an opportunity for other partners, including the United States, to reconsider their own approaches to security cooperation and assistance, and redouble efforts to support engagement across all sectors. While Russia's activities and trajectory in Africa highlight means of expanding engagement on the continent, the United States must focus on proactive, rather than reactive, initiatives that strengthen and improve existing relations and design new programs around the needs and goals of African nations.

The war in Ukraine has the potential to disrupt the flow of arms and mercenaries that has been underpinning bilateral cooperation between Russia and African states in recent years. The demand for resources to fund and field

forces in Ukraine, compounded by international sanctions, may require Russia to retrench its outlays in Africa. Russian forces' high rate of equipment loss in Ukraine and sanctions on Russia's defense industry diminish its ability to meet demand for both new equipment and spare parts. A number of African nations rely on Russian trade and defense material to meet their own development and security goals. This may, in part, explain some countries' reluctance to support sanctions despite statements disavowing Russia's violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity. It simultaneously suggests an opportunity for other equipment-producing countries to compete for African business.

Following the UN vote to condemn the invasion of Ukraine, a number of African countries that had abstained subsequently issued statements calling for peace and their respective heads of state engaged in bilateral phone calls with Putin, urging a diplomatic resolution to the conflict. Western initiatives to force African leaders to adopt a more aggressive stance risk alienating partners engaged in ongoing violent conflicts and dealing with food and economic crises. In April 2022, the US House of Representatives passed the Countering Malign Russian Influence in Africa Act, which proposed to monitor Russian activities across Africa, notably those linked with private military contractors, and would have allowed the US government to sanction PMCs and clients that facilitate their activities; it was referred to the Senate, but has not become law. The legislation was met with opposition from across the continent, including the sixteen-member countries of the South African Development Community (SADC), as well as vocal criticism from South African President Cyril Ramaphosa.

It remains to be seen how African states will respond to recently announced US Treasury sanctions on Wagner, its subsidiaries and representatives in Africa, and other companies in Russia's defense industrial base.⁴⁷ Policy measures aimed at reducing the influence that Russian proxies exercise in Africa should indeed target PMCs that violate human rights and other laws and norms. But the United States and the international community alike must consider how to identify and address the underlying drivers and demands for PMC services on the continent before resorting to punitive measures against African states that employ them. Such actions, particularly in the absence of alternative solutions, could

drive both potential and long-standing partners into Russia's waiting arms.

Since the outbreak of war in Ukraine, Russia has increased engagement in locations where the United States has cut or reduced ties based on existing regulations, for example in countries that were expelled from preferential trade agreements due to violations of human rights and/or the rule of law.⁴⁸ Where the United States and other countries have reduced security support bilaterally or through multilateral peacekeeping operations, such as in Mali, Russia has sent its proxies. Violations of Section 7008, Leahy Laws, and other restrictions on US foreign aid and security cooperation under Title 10 and Title 22 can trigger the suspension of critical assistance.⁴⁹ While it may be tempting to seek exceptions to these safeguards to deter and deny Russia from building footholds and worsening regional security challenges, the United States should heed research that warns against prioritizing competition at the expense of good governance, security force professionalism, and human rights.⁵⁰

Threading this needle poses challenges. Investing in improving the capacity of multilateral African standby forces, for example through the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), or SADC, can facilitate continued delivery of security support in at-risk regions where individual countries no longer qualify for bilateral assistance. These regional organizations also provide oversight mechanisms to support good governance and security force professionalization within the region, and have authority to mediate ongoing conflicts and reduce risks of future ones. Other opportunities to leverage multilateral security support include re-engaging on AU-NATO cooperation through the liaison office in Addis Ababa, following a hiatus precipitated by the combination of COVID-19 and conflicts in Ethiopia and Ukraine.⁵¹ Similarly, supporting the development of peacekeeping operations and troops in and from Africa can bolster the effectiveness of national and regional forces to meet security crises on the continent.

Overcoming hurdles to bilateral security cooperation will require longer term, sustained engagement by Washington with African partners. The December 2022 United States-Africa Leaders Summit resulted in a US commitment of \$55 billion for initiatives in Africa over the next three years, many of which address the root causes of violent conflict, such as democratic backsliding, climate change, and economic development. The United States should prioritize fulfillment of its commitments, and accelerate the funding and execution of identified initiatives such as support for democratic elections, security force professionalization, and clean energy transition. Addressing these challenges through consistent, holistic collaboration should also reduce the risk of violations that result in Section 7008 and Leahy Law aid suspensions in the first place.

While there does not appear to have been a full drawdown in Russian PMCs in Africa, Russia's shortage of manpower has led to predatory recruitment practices at home and abroad. In November 2022, *The Daily Beast* reported that the Wagner Group was recruiting Russian prisoners to fight, including a Zambian student who was subsequently killed in Ukraine.⁵² A separate *Daily Beast* report indicated that administrators and security forces were pressuring African students in southwestern Russia to join the army and/or Wagner.⁵³ Several outlets, including *The Addis Standard*, Voice of America, and Reuters, reported that Ethiopians were attempting to join Russian forces or PMCs to fight in Ukraine in April 2022, although both governments deny this. These practices are unlikely to engender goodwill between Moscow and African leaders more generally. In the meantime, Africans are paying attention to whether and how the rest of the world responds to the inequitable and predatory treatment of African students and refugees.⁵⁴ The international community must investigate the need to reform policies and practices that contribute to instances of bias or abuse. As part of its reengagement on the continent, the United States should take advantage of its own appeal by expanding soft power initiatives, particularly in sectors where Russia is ceding ground

48 Examples in 2022 include Ethiopia, Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso; see "2022 Biennial Report on the Implementation of The African Growth and Opportunity Act," US Trade Representative, Executive Office of the President of the United States, June 2022, <https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/files/reports/2022/2022AGOImplementationReport.pdf>.

49 For more information, see "Coup-Related Restrictions in U.S. Foreign Aid Appropriations," Congressional Research Service, *In Focus* series, IF11267, updated September 1, 2022, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF11267.pdf>; Stephen Watts et al., "Building Security in Africa: An Evaluation of U.S. Security Sector Assistance in Africa from the Cold War to the Present," (Santa Monica, California: RAND, 2018), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2400/RR2447/RAND_RR2447.pdf; and "Transfer of Defense Articles: Sale and Export of U.S.-Made Arms to Foreign Entities," Congressional Research Service, CRS Report R46337, April 30, 2020, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46337/2>.

50 Stephen Watts et al., "Building Security in Africa."

51 Retired Adm. James Foggo, "The Latest @ USIP: Africa's Security Challenges," United States Institute of Peace, December 12, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/blog/2022/12/latest-usip-africas-security-challenges>.

52 Allison Quinn, "Foreign College Student Jailed in Russia Ends Up in Body Bag," *Daily Beast*, November 15, 2022, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/russia-sends-zambian-student-to-his-death-in-ukraine-after-imprisoning-him>.

53 Philip Obaji Jr., "Russian University Accused of Hounding African Students to Fight Putin's War," *Daily Beast*, November 21, 2022, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/russian-university-accused-of-pressuring-african-students-to-fight-vladimir-putins-war-in-ukraine>.

54 Laura Ly and Nimi Princewill, "African Nations Condemn Reports of Racism against Students at Ukrainian Border," CNN, March 1, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/01/africa/africa-condemns-racism-ukraine-intl/index.html>.

47 "Treasury Sanctions Russian Proxy Wagner Group as a Transnational Criminal Organization," US Department of the Treasury, January 26, 2023, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1220>.

and/or demand on the continent is high, such as for higher education exchange and preferential trade.⁵⁵

Throughout the past year, Russia has maintained its diplomatic missions and activities, and continues to forge new security and commercial deals across the continent. Cheap hybrid operations, for example in disinformation, also continue apace. Russian troll farms in Africa now disseminate anti-NATO propaganda on Ukraine across social media to boost support for Russia among African publics.⁵⁶ To counter Russian information operations in Africa, the United States should follow through with whole-of-government support to strengthen democracy, civil society, and independent media in African nations. This can include collaborating with US-based digital and social media companies to ensure that countering misinformation and deplatforming malicious actors in Africa remains a priority. The international community can work to amplify and protect the reporting of journalists, researchers, and human rights workers that expose Russian abuses and misinformation campaigns in Africa. While addressing influence and information operations is important, it is equally (if not more) important to address the underlying grievances that Russian propaganda exploits. This requires privileging African perspectives in policy development, and acknowledging and learning from the mistakes that the United States, France, and other foreign powers have made, including corporate and other private-sector actors.

Where US officials are already working closely with African nations and militaries, they are sometimes unable to adequately meet requests or needs due to bureaucratic obstacles.⁵⁷ A key opportunity lies not in finding new modes of security cooperation but in improving existing programs and partnerships. The United States may benefit from aggregating research and reports on the limits of security assistance in Africa to distill actionable improvements and reforms for funding, structuring, and overseeing Title 10 and Title 22 programs. Finding means to provide more responsive, tailored security assistance on the continent can ensure that: 1) available funding for security assistance in Africa is fully

expended, and 2) US actors in Africa are empowered to collaborate on or provide solutions to pressing capability and supply gaps in addition to executing preplanned train and equip missions. The Department of Defense (DOD) and other agencies can leverage federally-funded research and development centers (FFRDCs) to conduct research and reviews, and should empower these organizations with the funding and access necessary to do so.

Framing security dynamics in Africa as a zero-sum competition among external powers deprioritizes the needs and capabilities of African states. Ironically, the shift in US security policy toward so-called great power competition led to the reallocation of funds away from counterterrorism and other security initiatives in Africa, despite increased threats from violent extremist organizations and climate change. Russia's resurgence on the continent over the past decade has corresponded with this downturn in US diplomatic and security engagement. The competition paradigm also obscures shared security goals among African nations, the United States, and other allies, namely the improvement of human security and promotion of stable, democratic governance.

The United States should elevate the perspectives of African leaders, civil society, and stakeholders on security (and other) matters and focus on these shared objectives. High-level exchanges, including the recently convened Washington summit as well as forthcoming visits to the continent by the US president and the secretaries of the Departments of Defense, State, and Treasury, etc. are important to restore and improve communication and trust between US and African leaders and populations. On the global stage, the allotment of more and permanent African seats on the UN Security Council, as well as admittance of the AU to the Group of Twenty would empower African nations to exercise authority and influence directly, rather than through great power intermediaries or patrons. These steps may also ensure more consistent and high-level attention to African relations and security crises in multilateral fora, notwithstanding conflicts or crises elsewhere in the world.

55 Sarah Daly, "Mind the Gap: COVID-19's Impact on Higher Education in Africa and Abroad," in *Africa Watch: COVID-19 Edition*, Institute for Defense Analyses, February 3, 2021, 5-7.

56 Danielle Paquette, "He's Pro-Russian, Anti-Zelensky and Rallying for Putin in West Africa," *Washington Post*, April 21, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/21/russia-west-africa-disinformation-burkina-faso/>.

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