

## Commentary

### RUSSIA'S FRONTIERS OF INFLUENCE IN AFRICA: GEO-STRATEGIC ECONOMIC INTEREST, REGIME SECURITY, AND COUNTERINSURGENCY

Africa has become a critical arena for geopolitical rivalry, with Russia seeking to expand its footprint despite facing diplomatic and economic isolation following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Although often viewed as opportunistic, Russia's involvement in Africa is deeply intertwined with its Cold War legacy, during which the Soviet Union provided support to anti-colonial movements and socialist regimes. Moscow's current engagement is structured around three primary objectives: advancing economic interests, ensuring regime security, and conducting counterinsurgency operations. By leveraging critical mineral agreements and military cooperation, Russia has gained strategic access to valuable resources while reinforcing allied governments through private military groups, particularly the Wagner Group (now rebranded as Africa Corps). However, the long-term viability of this strategy remains in question, as the ongoing war in Ukraine, evolving geopolitical shifts, and the uncertain effectiveness of Russian military interventions pose significant challenges. While these partnerships offer immediate benefits to African regimes, their sustainability is doubtful, highlighting the necessity for broader multilateral frameworks to address Africa's security and developmental needs.

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In recent years, the African continent has emerged as a centerpiece for geopolitical contestation for influence between global powers, particularly among the United States, China and the European Union (EU). Following the end of the Cold War and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's involvement in Africa dwindled. However, a turning point in Russia's engagement in Africa occurred when Moscow invaded Crimea in 2014. The invasion resulted in Russia's regional and international isolation prompted by Western countries who protested "Russia's imperialism" leading to

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numerous Western sanctions on Moscow's elite and the Russian economy. To reassert itself on the global scale and evade global isolation, Russia started searching for areas to secure and establish its influence particularly in the global south, and Africa emerged as the perfect arena. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 further increased the level of global isolation. However, Moscow viewed it as an opportunity amidst global isolation to further expand its influence in Africa. Today, Russia has emerged as the favorable superpower on the continent among unconstitutional leaders, successfully displacing Western dominance, with rhetoric of exploitative neocolonialism. While Russia's increasing presence in Africa has been described as opportunistic, it has been able to establish a fundamental frontier of partnership (economic interest; regime security and counterinsurgency) as an entry point into the African geopolitical space.

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### History of Russia's influence in Africa

To a mere observer, Russia might seem to be perceived as a new player in the geopolitical struggle for Africa. However, Russia's current and recent engagement with the continent is rooted in deep history, which perhaps some observers argued provided unrestricted entry into the African political space due to historically established ties.<sup>1</sup> It can be observed that the Soviet Empire's influence on the continent during the Cold War until the fall of the empire is based on two premises: one, to compete for geopolitical influence with the Western bloc (United States, France and Britain); and secondly, to propagate Marxism-Leninism pathway of economic development in the continent.<sup>2</sup>

The Soviet Union empire's presence in the continent gained considerable marks during the anti-colonial struggle for independence by most African states from their colonial power in the 1960s. This period marked heightened cold-war tension between the United States and the USSR, where both sides were jostling for influence. The Soviet Union's presence was marked by significant support for the anti-colonial struggle for independence in countries such as Botswana, South Africa, Angola and Mozambique. The Soviet Union provided military and weapon support to these country liberation fighters, who were ostensibly led by socialist/communist ideologue leaders. It also established influence on the economic front by deepening economic ties and providing economic and technical aid to most African countries.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, it also provided free scholarships for African students and top party members to entrench Marxist-Leninist ideology into the African political arena. These educational sponsorship policies paved the way for the long-lasting ties between African leaders and the Soviet Union, which Russia is still enjoying the privilege of in present times.

In early 2000, Moscow started to emerge on the global stage by establishing small-scale footprint on the continent after stabilising political institutions and growing economic strength. Events in Europe, such as the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 and Ukraine in 2022, and the subsequent sanction and isolation by the West, have further shaped the

formation of Russia's strategy in Africa, with a significant concentration on the continent to evade international isolation, economic sanction, and project its power.

The first Russia-Africa summit happened in 2019, with a significant presence of the African leaders, as Moscow promised increased collaboration on political, economic, military, cultural, and technical cooperation. The second Russia-Africa summit took place in 2023 amidst Moscow's war in Ukraine and its on food insecurity in Africa.<sup>4</sup> Despite that, Russia has emerged as a reliable partner for most African countries, securing military, trade and economic ties. Russia currently has military cooperation with 43 African countries and is also the leading major arms supplier to the continent.<sup>5</sup>

It is also important to note that Russia's increasing influence in the continent did not occur in a vacuum. While it has been categorized as opportunistic, Moscow has also built and revived pre-existing relations with Africa, thus making its inroad in the continent a smooth ride.

### **Russia's Frontiers of Influence in Africa**

Many scholars and observers have identified the rationale for Russia's increasingly emerging footprint on the continent in the past few years. This author seeks to characterise the strategies employed by Russia in Africa as 'frontiers' which have served as the driving force of Russian presence in Africa. Frontiers in this essence are classified as pathways that have been a common theme in post-2015 Russia's exceptional emergence and presence. These frontiers have become the basis that both Moscow and their African partner countries have used to justify Russia's presence in their countries. These frontiers follow a systemic pattern, with each building upon the previous one, exemplifying a mutually beneficial partnership.

### **Geo-Strategic Economic Interest**

Russia's economic interest in Africa in the pre-2010 era heavily concentrated on establishing trade ties and strengthening bilateral trade agreements and economic activities. Despite that, its trading activities amount with the continent are relatively low compared to other large trading partners such as the United States, China and the EU. In 2022, Russia's trading activities on the continent, in terms of its import values, account for less than 2 per cent.<sup>6</sup> However, in the post-2010 period following the invasion of Crimea and Ukraine, there has been a major shift in Moscow's economic interest. It has largely pivoted toward securing control of the continent's critical minerals. Africa accounts for a large deposit of critical minerals. As the world race toward renewable energy transition and competition over the control of these renewable technologies' materials, Russia has positioned itself at the center of securing these minerals, in part due to the race with the other global powers for the control of the minerals, and due to shortages and difficulties in accessing these raw materials for its nuclear project.<sup>7</sup>

To gain control of these minerals, Moscow has signed a mineral resource deal with roughly 20 African states, mostly through Russian government-controlled mining companies. Several

African countries remain at the top of extraction of these minerals for Russia including Sudan, Mali, Madagascar, Zimbabwe, Guinea, Namibia, DR Congo, Burkina-Faso and many more. In some of these countries, Moscow has quite a sizable presence in the mining industry. For instance, it controls about 25 per cent of bauxite in Guinea, critical for its aluminium production, in Zimbabwe as it owns about 50 per cent of the Platinum, among others and the extraction of these minerals is done by Russian based companies, particularly those with ties to the Kremlin.<sup>8</sup>

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However, this access to critical minerals in many ways is strategic to Moscow's competition with other global powers, and also for the survival of its economy and the war in Ukraine, as these minerals are easy to bypass international sanctions strangling Moscow.<sup>9</sup> Russia has signed minerals deals mostly with African leaders desperate for the survival of their rule or in a fight against armed groups in these countries. In essence, the African states will grant minerals concession to Moscow in exchange for

Russia providing security guarantee to these African countries and their leaders with the help of Russian private military companies.

### Regime Security

The provision of regime protection to the African government is largely conducted by Wagner Group force, now known as Africa Corps, where it has used the opportunity to establish Moscow's footprint on the continent.<sup>10</sup> The first Russian regime protection in Africa occurred in Libya where it provided military support to aid and bolster Khalifa Haftar's ambition as a strongman in the country.<sup>11</sup> Ever since, regime protection has extended to other countries such as Equatorial Guinea, Central Africa Republic, Burkina-Faso, and others.

Kremlin's regime protection can be interpreted in two ways, to protect fragile regimes from collapse, as a result of clashes with armed groups or internal regime rancour. This case of regime protection drove Russia's involvement in the Central African Republic, where Wagner forces were deployed to halt rebel group offensive on the capital in 2019, and over the past years, it has effectively pushed back rebel groups outside of the capital.<sup>12</sup> A similar scenario can be observed in Burkina Faso when President Ibrahim Traore came into power and survived two coup attempts. Realizing the internal difference within the army ranks, he requested regime protection from Russia's bear brigade before its eventual withdrawal in mid-2024.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, it is to provide regime security for long-term authoritarian rulers, or to defend their authoritarian ambition. This recently played out in Equatorial Guinea, with the deployment of hundreds of Wagner forces to the country, to protect the president, and train the presidential guard.<sup>14</sup> This occurred amidst growing concern about the four-decade long-serving ruler's possible regime collapse. A similar case can be observed in Sudan during the reign of the long-term ruler Omar al Bashir, where around 500 Wagner forces were

deployed in 2017 and also participated in the 2019 violent crackdown of the pro-democracy demonstration against the long-term ruler.<sup>15</sup> There is also concern from observers that Chadian leader Mahamat Derby might potentially reach out to Russia to strengthen its regime stability, after severing ties with Western partners.<sup>16</sup> This form of transactional relations between African regimes and Russia's military forces does not only occur in the regime security realm, it also extends to counter-insurgency assistance, particularly in the Sahel region.

### Counterinsurgency

Russia's opportunistic strategy has mostly played out in this area in the past few years, particularly in the Sahel region, as countries battle armed groups with violent activities amidst dire political instability and strained relations with traditional Western partners. As Western military engagement in the fight against armed groups in the region declines, Russia's erstwhile Wagner Group moved in to fill this security vacuum.

The Wagner Group's counter-insurgency operations can first be traced to its contract in Mozambique, where it first deployed Wagner forces to combat armed groups affiliated with the Islamic state in the mineral-rich region of Cabo Delgado in northern Mozambique.<sup>17</sup> However, it eventually withdrew due to its inability to combat the Islamic extremists. In recent years, we have witnessed a significant shift in Russia's counter-insurgency assistance towards the coup-affected Sahelian states of Mali, Burkina-Faso and Niger. In Mali, around one thousand Wagner forces were deployed in the country to combat the jihadist threat, and the Tuareg secessionist group.<sup>18</sup> Their operations against the groups have aided the success of the capture of the Tuareg separatist stronghold of Kidal.<sup>19</sup> On the contrary, they suffered significant losses in these operations and was widely accused of perpetrating war crimes against the local population, raising concern about Wagner's effectiveness in combatting the insurgent violent activities.<sup>20</sup>

### A sustainable frontier or not?

As African regime continues to increase ties with Russia and its Wagner private military company for regime protection and counter-insurgency military assistance, while it has been relatively successful in these areas, there are growing concerns about how sustainable these frontiers of partnership are in the longer term. The author has identified factors that could hamper these frontiers of Russia's engagement on the continent, particularly in the provision of regime security and counter-insurgency assistance.

First, the Russian war in Ukraine and geo-political tension around the world will continue to significantly impact Russia's posture on the continent. As the war in Ukraine rages on, with no sign of de-escalation, the allocation of military resources and manpower to commit to the warfront in Europe will impact Russia's presence in Africa. As Russia continues to battle losses of soldiers on the battlefield and deter and resist further Ukrainian forces' incursion into Russia's territory, Moscow will likely continue to seek Africa Corps forces, to serve as reinforcement on the frontline.<sup>21</sup> The reported withdrawal of Wagner forces from Burkina-Faso and Libya to bolster Russia's position on the battlefield in Ukraine is a call for concern as long as the war rages on.

On the other hand, Geopolitical events around the world can undermine its influence. The case of the overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria, reveals two areas of concern. First, the withdrawal of Russian forces from its air and naval bases in Syria, which serve as a resupply hub for Wagner forces operating in sub-Saharan Africa, and the complete loss of these bases will impact its military assistance in the region. Secondly, it reflects the unreliability of Russia to provide adequate regime protection in the face of greater opposition resistance, as in the case of the opposition group offensive against the Assad regime.<sup>22</sup>

Lastly, the inability of Russia's Wagner to provide adequate security in battling the anti-insurgency campaign. While it has been successful in halting rebel advancement on the capital of the Central African Republic, reclaiming more territory for the government, and aiding the Malian junta in recapturing and establishing control of Kidal, the recent defeat in the face of this onslaught in Mali reveals it does not possess the military capacity and preparedness to resist and contain the violence. If such defeat persists in the long term, it might probably be forced to withdraw, akin to its withdrawal in Mozambique following heavy losses from the insurgents.<sup>23</sup>

It is therefore important to acknowledge that the transactional relationship between African regime, leaders and agencies provides short-term and unreliable support for its purpose. Instead, multilateral efforts and support should be garnered to ensure adequate security and uphold democratic values for sustainable peace and security for the continent.

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