

The Bear Roars in Africa!

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The Russian bear is on the move. Quietly. In Africa. Russia's affair with Africa dates back to the Cold War era when, as the Soviet Union, it supported liberation movements and like-minded



governments across the continent. At the time, it was considered the most influential of external actors. However, interest waned following the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. The federation ceased operations of many (but not all) of their embassies and consulates.

But now Russia has become a leading part of a movement to create a 'counterbalance' support for international law which is opposed to the new US 'rules-based' order. Russia's recent campaign in Ukraine and its role in the emerging force that is BRICS (including its ever-growing relationship with China) are both clear indications of its global intentions.

Political objectives and geopolitical influence

It appears that Russia's reasons for doing business in Africa go beyond mere revenue generation. The huge continent represents an attractive strategic alliance for Russia as it seeks to defend itself against the West. There is a strategy in action here that is part of an agenda to challenge and suppress Western geopolitical activities by providing and promoting alternatives to the West's 'democracy'.

In recent years, Russia has gone to great lengths to support its close allies, Khalifa Haftar in Libya, Faustin-Archange Touadéra in the Central African Republic (CAR), and coup leaders Colonel Assimi Goïta in Mali, and Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan in Sudan – to name but a few.

By training African soldiers on the continent and supporting militia groups, Russia broadens its geopolitical influence and continues to frustrate the West's counterterrorism policies. It is forging strong relationships and upholding a greater economical stronghold on Africa's natural resources.

Economic engagements and trade relations

Russia has evidently been expanding its geopolitical influence. Outwardly, Russia is looking to diversify its oil and gas dependence and create a stable presence on the continent. Russian businesses have operated in African oil and gas and mining sectors for many years and Africa's abundance of natural resources makes it an attractive place to invest. Energy company Rosneft has been investing in Egyptian oil fields and diamond mining company Alrosa in Angolan mines – and the Kremlin in various infrastructure projects.

In 2019, Russia hosted a joint summit in the resort city of Sochi which saw the congregation of some forty-three African heads of state. New diplomatic relationships were formed at this Russia–Africa summit and deals reported to be worth billions of dollars were signed.

Arms sales and military co-operation

According to a leaked document, Russia has been expanding its military presence on the continent since 2015, establishing military bases and signing co-operation agreements with twenty-one African countries. This is a significant increase from the four treaties previously in place. The document also noted permission for a Russian military base in each of the following countries: Egypt, the CAR, Eritrea, Madagascar, Mozambique and Sudan. It has been claimed that Russia has official and unofficial arrangements with these African countries, with up to 180 Russian army instructors training African soldiers. It is also alleged that twenty Malian soldiers are trained in Russia each year. This effort has been strongly assisted by private armies like the Wagner Group which has supported Khalifa Haftar in Libya. Wagner is very much seen as a tool to exert Russian influence and is alleged to base its operations in Africa.

Figures show that Russia is the top weapons supplier to the African continent, boasting a market share of 37.6%. The next biggest player is the US with 16%, then France with 14%, and China with 9%. The lion's share of the munitions go to Algeria, followed by Egypt, Sudan and Angola.

It must not be forgotten that Russia's military concerns are borne out of its own interests and activities in Africa. Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab remain a serious terrorist threat to Nigeria and Somalia respectively – but also to Russian business. Africa has welcomed military support and intelligence from the Kremlin in a bid to combat this terrorism. Russia has provided weapons and training to the armed forces of Mali and Niger (who are fighting Islamic groups in the Sahel region). Its support of the African Union is another example of its attempts to defend Russian interests.

Impact on African governance and security

Russia's activities in Africa are unlike any other external influence. Its unconventional methods – like deploying mercenaries, constructing disinformation campaigns and trading weapons for resources – pose many risks to the continent.

Russia's relations and deployment of proxies like the Wagner Group may well have created instability in some host countries which exacerbate existing security issues. In some cases, it seems that Russia's geopolitical interests have been given priority over African stability and security. No doubt this is justified in the halls of the Kremlin as part of the continuing need to oppose Western influence.

Conclusion

Russia has a long-standing relationship with Africa. Its continued involvement in geopolitics, arms deals, natural resources and military support is having a profound influence on African security. The Kremlin's activities are not fuelled by economical needs but are part of a long-term plan to expand Russia's geographical presence and improve its strategic position in relation to the West. In supporting illegitimate leaders and establishing relationships with the elite, Russia has a firm, influential grip on Africa's people and resources. Their backing of militia groups also frustrates the West's counterterrorism policies.

In recent years, Russia's own military presence has increased exponentially. The establishment of six military bases across the continent will strengthen its forces actively combating Islamic terrorism. But Russia's main priority is to protect its own interests and fortify its position on the global stage.

Future scenarios for Russia in Africa range from greater expansion and control, to being exposed as thieves and corrupters. On paper, it seems plausible that Russia's presence in Africa could damage the stability and security of an already troubled continent.

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