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Russia's Growing Presence in Africa: Mercenaries, Minerals, and Morality

Victoria Clement, PhD

Dr. Victoria Clement is the Russia military and political strategy subject matter expert at the Brute Krulak Center for Innovation & Future Warfare at Marine Corps University.

Russia is not interested in sincerely helping African nations, but in helping themselves to the natural resources of the continent.

~ General Stephen J. Townsend, U.S. Africa Command, 2022

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Even before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Moscow was asserting itself as the leader of a new world order. The Kremlin portrays itself in contrast to the West and is extending the civilizational struggle it is waging in Ukraine to other continents, such as Africa, as it endeavors to create a new multipolar world. It is using hybrid tools to revive an old presence on the African continent. Russian influence on the African continent is designed to catapult Russia from a regional power to a great power.¹ Of the current 193 United Nations (UN) member states, 54 are in Africa, giving the continent just more than one-quarter of the votes in the UN General Assembly. The General Assembly is one of the important arenas in which Russian president Vladimir Putin is making his stand against Western domination of the international world order. During the past decade, Moscow has been busily mounting economic, diplomatic, security/military, and even cultural influence across the African continent in concert with an aim to buttress its standing and to once again be recognized on the international stage as a great power (*derzhanost*).² To that end, it is pursuing influence in the Global South, specifically across Africa.

In some instances, this pursuit has amounted to a deepening of existing ties that were forged during the Cold War when the Soviet Union had productive relations with Egypt, Libya, Angola, and Mozambique, to name a few. In those days, the Soviet Union depicted itself as a friend to the peoples of Africa, an anticolonialist state that would aid them rather than subjugate them. Russia continues to play this anticolonial card today.

Historical Context: The Primakov Doctrine

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia largely turned inward, curtailing most of its activities in Africa. Moscow was forced to close nine embassies, three consulates, trade missions, and numerous student exchange programs in Africa.³ Russian president Boris Yeltsin's foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, a young, democratically minded reformer, counseled full accommodation with the West as Russia introduced market reforms and meaningful multiparty elections at home. But Yeltsin faltered, old-school hardliners muscled the democratic reformers aside, and Kozyrev was soon out of the Foreign Ministry.

In 1996, Yeltsin appointed Yevgeny Primakov, a nationalist with a grander vision of Russia's place in the world, to serve as his foreign minister. Primakov called for a major reorientation of Russian foreign policy whereby unipolarity and primacy of the West would be opposed rather than accommodated. Russia would now seek to establish a multipolar world, initially by joining with India and China to form a "RIC" triad. These large powers, with values quite different from the West, could then join with the Global South to hold their own seats at the table and resist American hegemony. Importantly, Primakov asserted that to pursue and attain such objectives, Russia must consider itself—and be seen by others as—a great power. Years later, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov coined the term *Primakov Doctrine* to refer to this seismic shift in Russian foreign policy and its key tenets.⁴

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Gray Research Center
2040 Broadway Street
Quantico, VA 22134
703.432.5260
www.usmcu.edu/mes

The reorientation of Russian foreign policy based on Primakov's tenets had important effects on Russia's reengagement with Africa that persist to this day. To some observers, Russia's activities in the late 1990s and early 2000s appeared haphazard, but this was not the case. To be sure, Russia's material resources through the 1990s and early 2000s were limited, so Russia behaved opportunistically. For example, Russia offered debt relief to Algeria at a particularly vulnerable moment in 2006 and debt and sanctions relief to Muammar al-Qaddafi's Libya, which was being pressed by the West.⁵ In some cases, Western states declined to sell arms to a nation or sell them only under conditions considered onerous by the recipient. Algeria and Egypt are two cases where Russia was happy to fill such a vacuum, and Russia remains a major supplier of arms to both countries today. For conflicts in which the larger international community will not supply arms (e.g., Ethiopia and Sudan), Russia may choose to gain favor with one of the warring sides by offering military hardware. In more recent years, Russia (or Russian private military companies) has become particularly adept at rapidly offering support to successful coup perpetrators (e.g., in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) or otherwise supplanting Western military and diplomatic presence when an entrenched leader weakens their commitment to democracy and becomes ever more authoritarian (e.g., in the Central African Republic and Guinea) or when Western influence weakens. To the casual observer, these various actions could appear to be merely reactive to circumstances on the ground; wholly opportunistic, nearly random. But when viewed within the framework of the Primakov Doctrine, they can be seen as consistent within a policy framework, serving the ends of a larger strategy. As Russia has grown in strength, its increased security, cultural, and social network activity has enabled it to enlist African friends and clients to resist diplomatic isolation, thwart economic sanctions, and project the extra-regional presence required of a great power.

Putin has rejuvenated old relationships and created new bonds as well. At the first Russia-Africa Summit in 2019, he announced that Russia was "ready to engage in competition for cooperation with Africa," and he later declared the second Russia-Africa Summit in 2023 to have represented a "breakthrough" for the continent, even though far fewer African leaders attended than had in 2019.⁶ Russia pursues relations with African states for three essential reasons: to demonstrate its global reach (reasserting *der-zhanost*); to gain access to minerals and nonferrous metals; and to maintain arms exports. Fundamentally, it aims to "displace Western interests, gain control over critical resources, and reduce its own vulnerability to sanctions."⁷

Mercenaries: The Wagner Group/Africa Corps

Perhaps the most visible manifestations of Russian power on the African continent are mercenaries such as the Wagner Group, which is now transforming into the Africa Corps. The Wagner Group emerged under the leadership of Dmitry Utkin, an officer in the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, in 2014 when Moscow initiated the Donbas War in Ukraine's eastern provinces. Wagner became the vanguard of Russia's fighting force there and allowed for a veneer of deniability. The Wagner Group raped, pillaged, and plundered while the Kremlin repudiated them. The mercenaries provide as-

sistance to African rebels and terrorist groups and support local governments as they distance themselves from former colonizers such as the French, without criticizing groups or governments over human rights agendas.⁸

The Africa Corps has recently deployed in Burkina Faso, Libya, Mali, the Central African Republic, and Niger. Although such groups have been described as private military companies (PMC), they have always had close relationships with the Kremlin.⁹ Indeed, according to Russia's constitution, neither PMCs nor the formation of "armed units" outside the jurisdiction of the state is legal.¹⁰ This explains why the Russian state has long denied association with the mercenaries. "It's [Wagner] not the state," Putin said, "It's private business with private interests tied to extracting energy resources, including various resources like gold or precious stones."¹¹ However, when Wagner Group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin garnered ever more attention in Ukraine in the summer of 2023, his PMC's relationship with Moscow became clearer. In a fit over a perceived lack of support for his mercenaries, Prigozhin fomented a mutiny and rode northward from Rostov-on-Don at the head of an armored column toward Moscow. This uprising was thwarted in a matter of hours, and Prigozhin soon met an untimely death in a plane crash. But his intense, public display of animosity toward Russia's military leadership sparked a major adjustment in the Kremlin's relationship to mercenary groups in general and Wagner in particular. Moving forward, the all-new Africa Corps will report directly to the Russian military, under the supervision of the Russian deputy minister of defense, Colonel General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov.¹² Created by the Ministry of Defense, the Africa Corps will not have as much autonomy as Wagner did, and it will be incorporated into state-run programs. This direct relationship will make clear the degree to which it is the Russian state, not vaguely defined shadowy figures, that is extracting wealth from African nations.

Minerals: Extracting Local Wealth

In 2022, the then-commander of U.S. Africa Command, U.S. Army general Stephen J. Townsend, assessed Russia's presence in Africa—"characterized by a band of mercenaries"—as a challenge that differed from the others that the West was facing on the continent. Russia acts in "a self-interested, exploitative and extractive way," Townsend said.¹³ Russia has established relationships across Africa, some overlapping with its security interests, to gain access to minerals and precious metals, often in an exchange of arms and/or security services for resources. These relationships support the goal of reviving Russia's great power status and allow it to fill its coffers despite restrictive sanctions.

Where is the Russian presence in Africa felt, and do General Townsend's comments still hold true? Here, a few illustrative examples demonstrate that the general's words indeed remain an apt description. This list begins with Guinea, where Russian diplomats support the county's repressive president, Mamady Doumbouya, who came to power in a coup in 2021, and where the Russian aluminum company Rusal, the second largest aluminum production company in the world, extracts one-third of the bauxite it needs for aluminum production to support such industries as transportation, construction, electrical engineering, machinery equipment, and consumer goods.¹⁴ Namibia, which holds uranium reserves, is important to Russia's nuclear energy projects. Moscow has signed

nuclear cooperation agreements with 20 countries, with plans to build nuclear power stations in Nigeria and Egypt. In Madagascar, the Kremlin set its sights on more uranium, along with nickel and cobalt, which are critical in lithium-ion batteries. In Sudan, access to oil buttressed Russia's support to former president Omar al-Bashir, before he was deposed in 2019.¹⁵ Sudan, Mali, and the Central African Republic are hunting grounds for "blood gold," which Russia smuggles out and refines in Middle Eastern states such as the United Arab Emirates, where it is then laundered. The proceeds help fund Russia's war in Ukraine.¹⁶ Fifty percent of Zimbabwe's sizable platinum deposits belong to a Russian consortium comprised of state corporations, while iron ore, critical for steel, comes from Liberia and Mauritania.¹⁷

Russia has combined its reach for minerals with diplomacy and military exports. At the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit, Putin announced that Russia had signed agreements for military cooperation with more than 40 African countries. Between 2019 and 2023, Russia became the primary arms supplier to African militaries, with four key markets in the region—Egypt, Nigeria, Algeria, and Kenya—accounting for more than 90 percent of the spending.¹⁸

Although, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, arms imports by African states fell by 52 percent between 2014–18 and 2019–23, this was due largely to decreases in imports to Algeria and Morocco. Arms imports by Sub-Saharan African states decreased by 9 percent, with China overtaking Russia as the region's main supplier of major arms.¹⁹ And what of China? While Russia's interventions in Africa could become an issue for China, which has its own myriad interests, Beijing has so far remained quiet on the topic.²⁰

Even if China continues to represent a larger presence than Russia on the African continent as measured by the dollar volume of trade or investment, the Kremlin is more active in deploying its security assets such as Wagner/Africa Corps and disinformation social media capabilities to support client leaders and work towards "state capture."²¹ Russia is quite forward-leaning in its diplomacy in Africa. Foreign Minister Lavrov visited Angola, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Eritrea, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, South Africa, and Sudan in 2023, after visiting the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Uganda in 2022. Deputy Minister of Defense Yevkurov visited Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Libya, Mali, and Niger in 2023—after Prigozhin's death in August—presumably as part of the effort to reshape the Wagner Group into the new Africa Corps.²²

Morality: Traditional Values and the Russian Orthodox Church

The Kremlin has been vocal about its anticolonial, anti-Western values for decades. And it has done so as part of a larger, multi-legged design. In his 2024 presidential address, Putin proclaimed that "Russia has been and remains a stronghold of the traditional values on which human civilization stands."²³ Russia is creating what the Russian ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Antonov, has described as "the new world order," which Moscow claims is currently dominated by the United States and dangerous, decadent Western values. The Russian Orthodox Church was formally incorporated into the Kremlin's Africa designs in late 2021

following a schism with Ukrainian and Greek Orthodox patriarchs over Russia's violation of Ukrainian sovereignty.²⁴ In line with the Kremlin's emphasis on traditional morality, and in addition to security, economic, and diplomatic services, Russia suggests to African leaders and peoples that, unlike the West, it shares traditional values. These values stem from Russia's militant religious conservatism and are being used as a form of soft power.

In December 2021, the Russian Orthodox Church, a stalwart in Putin's promotion of traditional values at home, established two dioceses in Africa, which it divided into north and south: one diocese was established in Cairo, Egypt, and one in Johannesburg, South Africa.²⁵ In 2022, the effort was extended to Ethiopia and Djibouti, with representatives of the church explaining that the "states of East Africa are among the key countries for organizing systemic work in the African continent."²⁶ To underscore the church's position on its presence, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Africa, Metropolitan Leonid Gorbachev, explained in a 2021 radio interview, "Of course, we will not turn back, we will not turn back from anywhere. . . . There will be no turning back from the direction of Africa, we will only strengthen and expand."²⁷ Some analysts might describe these ambitions as "neocolonial" despite assertions that Moscow interacts with "traditional societies" around the world, including those in Africa, "without imposing alien values and influences."²⁸

The Russian Orthodox Church is currently present in 25 African countries and intends to increase its visibility.²⁹ There is a good-size Orthodox population in Africa—though there will be some contestation between Russian Orthodox priests now on one side and Ukrainian and Greek Orthodox priests on the other—and there are small but notable Russian diasporas in South Africa, Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco. But the Russian diaspora is not the church's target audience—Africans are. Russia is using these African countries and their leaders to enhance its image on the world stage. At a time when other powers are retreating from association with Russia, the Kremlin has found fertile ground for its cynical use of religion and adherence to traditional values by deploying the Russian Orthodox Church as a cultural, missionary force.

At the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, told those present, "We are united by adherence to traditional values, [a] conservative view of human nature, rejection of the ideology of permissiveness and overconsumption." Putin echoed this sentiment.³⁰ The inclusion of the head of the church at this significant foreign policy meeting underscores that Moscow expects soft power and culture to enhance its position on the African continent.³¹

Conclusion

Twenty-five years ago, Russia had practically no assets and no standing in Africa in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Today, despite having an economy and a military that is much smaller than those of China, the European Union, or the United States, Russia is an important player on the continent. At the same time, Africa has played a key part in helping Putin achieve his dream of reviving Russia's *derzhavost*. These are impressive diplomatic achievements.

By serving as a major arms supplier, Russia generates crucial foreign exchange revenues and political dependencies that it can

call on as needed. Unscrupulous agents such as Wagner/Africa Corps offer support to corrupt leaders who become candidates for elite cooption and even state capture. These efforts are reinforced by increasingly effective disinformation capabilities through social media, radio, and television. Stronger political ties to African elites provide better access to a broad array of mineral wealth, from gold and diamonds to oil, uranium, aluminum, lithium, and cobalt. And enlisting the Russian Orthodox Church as a soft power instrument underscores the anti-West message.

The larger reward for Russia is that these ties with many African nations have become a vital asset in its battle with the West. Diplomatic isolation is much more difficult if Russia has friends in the UN General Assembly or Security Council. Economic sanctions are less likely to be effective. Moreover, Russia can claim to be more than merely a regional power when it operates effectively beyond its “near abroad.” In short, by following the guidelines of the Primakov Doctrine, Russia has come a long way in a short time despite its modest capabilities. China, Europe, and the United States would be wise not to underestimate Russia’s influence in Africa.

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