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[The End of Arms Control?](#)

An Old Friend Is Back

Russian Military Cooperation in Africa

Benno Mühler

Russia's military cooperation in Africa has hit the headlines over recent months. Since 2009, the former Soviet power has shown renewed interest in Africa and has begun to restore its old ties on the continent. Moscow's aim is to gain access to Africa's energy and raw material markets in exchange for arms. A glance at its engagement on the continent quickly reveals that Russia is now a force to be reckoned with in the global competition for influence in Africa.

Murder in Africa. Three journalists are killed. On a remote road, they are stopped by strangers and riddled with bullets. Only the driver survives – a suspected accomplice.

It would be easy to think that this is a scene from a crime movie. In reality, this, or something very similar, took place last year outside the city of Sibut in the Central African Republic (CAR). The world sat up and took notice. The journalists were Russian nationals. They were working for a Russian investigative media outlet, which confirmed that they were in the CAR investigating *Wagner*, a private security firm with ties to the Kremlin. The outlet is run by Kremlin critic Michael Khodorkovsky.¹ A few months earlier, Moscow had announced that it had 175 military advisers residing in the CAR.²

News of the killing was met with disbelief. Not so much because of the “movie-style” murder – after all, these kinds of operations have become all too familiar after the assassination of Alexander Litvinenko in London and the attack on Sergei Skripal in Salisbury – but rather because of Russia's presence in Africa. After annexing Crimea and intervening in Syria, was Moscow now trying to gain a foothold on African soil and expand its global influence? The answer was clear: Of course! But people had only just realised this.

Russia Returns to Africa

Few parts of the world have gained as much strategic importance over recent years as Africa.

Russia, too, is striving to exert an influence on the continent. While the West focuses on development aid and China builds roads, railways, and IT infrastructure, Russia is providing one thing above all: Arms. Russia is reported to have signed 19 military agreements with African nations since 2015.³ The advantage that Russia has over its competitors is that it sets no ethical or moral conditions. Its aim is to gain access to Africa's raw materials in order to build on its position as the world's leading energy exporter. To that end, it hopes to make Europe dependent on its exports and establish political alliances so that it can influence decisions at the United Nations. Russia has no problem finding buyers among the autocrats and dictators who continue to rule the majority of the 54 countries on the African continent. Russia's strategic involvement in Africa already began in 2009, after relations with its former socialist sister countries had almost completely ground to a halt under Boris Yeltsin. Although Russia's influence in Africa is still fairly limited, it has grown to a point where it can no longer be ignored. Once again, Russia is challenging the West – perhaps with less aggression, but still in an ideological way.

And They Danced a Rumba...

It doesn't take much digging to find the first traces of Russian influence in Africa, which began during the Cold War. In the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, a large bust of Karl Marx stands proudly at the entrance to the university. Russian ships can still be seen rusting away in

Berbera, a major port city in Somaliland. Many older, well-educated African elites recount stories about studying in Russia. They also came to Germany – people from Angola and elsewhere were a regular sight on the streets of the GDR. Karamba Diaby, an SPD member of the *Bundestag*, originally hails from Senegal and studied in Halle in the 1980s.

The Afro-Soviet relationship is symbolised by one man above all: Patrice Lumumba, the flamboyant first prime minister of the newly independent Democratic Republic of the Congo. In today's Germany, his name is often associated with a drink (hot chocolate with a dash of rum), and some of the older generation even recall how the lyrics of a carnival song were rewritten: "And they danced a rumba, Kasavubu, and Lumumba."⁴ Yet for Moscow, Lumumba, a young freedom fighter who was assassinated with Belgian involvement in 1961, acted as a beacon against the West. Shortly afterwards, a university opened in Moscow bearing Lumumba's name. For years to come, it served to educate the elites of third world countries. By the end of 1991, around 50,000 Africans are estimated to have studied in the Soviet Union, and another 200,000 to have received training.⁵

Politically, Moscow intervened directly in countries such as Ethiopia, where it supported the country's communist military dictatorship *Derg*, supplied arms, and trained agents in Russia. It was also involved in Angola, where the MPLA party (*Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*) established a one-party state. Agostinho Neto, Angola's first president after gaining independence from Portugal, died in a Moscow hospital in 1979.

Revival of Russian Economic Initiatives in 2009

Russia's relations with Africa largely came to a halt with the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. The country had enough to worry about at home. It was Vladimir Putin who finally took the initiative and revived relations with Africa, restoring old ties and creating new ones. His systematic

approach began to emerge in 2009 with the creation of Afrocom, the Coordinating Committee for Economic Cooperation with Sub-Saharan Africa. Russia's government-owned development bank *Vneshekonombank* has a stake in this state-run institution which is intended to promote investment by Russian companies in Africa.⁶ At the same time, new life was breathed into the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute for African Studies, which was originally founded in 1959. It now provides expert advice about countries and markets on the African continent.

Russia's renewed interest in Africa in 2009 came at a time when the continent was finally generating positive news after years of press reports dominated by war and disaster. While in 2000, "The Economist" caused a stir when it published a controversial issue entitled "The hopeless continent", by December 2011 the headline had changed to "Africa rising". After years of war and famine, numerous African countries seemed to be gaining greater political stability. As wars and coups diminished, parliaments were elected and stayed in power. Countries such as Ghana, Rwanda, and Ethiopia recorded double-digit growth, fuelling hope that the "lion economies" of a continent that had largely been written off, could achieve a similar breakthrough to that of Asia's tiger economies a few years earlier. Hence, Putin believed that presence in Africa was essential for Russian business, and its abundance of natural resources was simply too good to resist.

Interest in Africa's Raw Materials

Russia's economy is mainly driven by the energy and natural resource sectors. The most important Russian companies actively engaged in Africa include *Rosatom*, *Gazprom*, *Alrosa*, and *Renova*.⁷ According to the African Development Bank, Russian investment was in the region of 20 billion US dollars in 2013.⁸ It is split on the one hand between tapping key metals and precious stones, and importing and exporting sources of energy such as gas and uranium on the other.





Europe challenged by Russia: The Russian strategy aims to open up energy markets abroad in order to make its main customer Europe even more dependent. Source: © Benoit Tessier, Reuters.

Metal and precious stones such as gold, diamonds, manganese, chromium, titanium, mercury, copper, nickel, and aluminium are all of interest to Russia. Either Russia does not possess these resources, they have already been depleted, or are so difficult to mine in the Urals and Siberia that it is more profitable to import them from Africa. The Russian company *Alrosa* mines diamonds in Angola, Botswana, and Zimbabwe.

As a leading energy exporter, however, Russia is not dependent on imports of gas and oil. Instead, its strategy is to use Russia's current strength to develop other foreign energy markets in order to remain the sector's global leader and ensure that its main customer – Europe – remains reliant on its supply. Algeria is a key country for Russia in this regard. In 2009, Russia entered into a strategic partnership with *Sonatrach*, Algeria's state-owned oil and gas company to open an oil and



Influence through weapons and training: Russia has strategically expanded its military cooperation with Africa.
Source: © Goran Tomašević, Reuters.

gas field in eastern Algeria. It also expressed an interest in future partnerships with the Algerian gas exporter which is strategically important for Europe.⁹

Russian Supremacy as an Energy Exporter

The second strategic energy source for Russia is uranium. To date, South Africa is the only African country with a nuclear power plant. However, since 2016 Russia's *Rosatom* has signed contracts with seven African countries including Ethiopia, Zambia, and Kenya, all of which need electricity for their economic growth, in order to

build nuclear power plants.¹⁰ Russia is in a position to supply both the technical know-how and the fuel for the plants. Together with its former federated states, including Kazakhstan, Russia is the world's largest producer of uranium alongside Australia. Russia is also keen to invest in Africa to further strengthen its supremacy in the global uranium market. South Africa, Namibia, and Niger alone account for some 17 per cent of global uranium production.¹¹ Russia's engagement in the CAR should be understood in the same way. Even though the former French colony only has a fraction of Kazakhstan's uranium deposits, its resources are by no means

negligible. France's nuclear power group, *Areva*, has been active in the CAR for many years and must be feeling challenged by Russia's growing influence.

Russia Uses Arms Exports to Gain Access to Africa's Raw Materials

When it comes to trading competition on the African market, Russia is unable to compete with the high standards of German engineering, American software and hardware, and the low prices offered by China. Nevertheless, Russia's niche lies in arms production and military intelligence – largely because it does not attach any moral conditions, so they are more accessible for African dictators who are looking to consolidate their power in the face of rebel groups and civil opposition.

The link between military cooperation and access to Africa's markets is illustrated by the example of Algeria. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Algeria accounted for precisely 14 per cent of all Russian arms exports between 2014 and 2018.¹² Another important country is Egypt. According to SIPRI, Russia tops the list of arms exporters to Africa at 35 per cent. It supplies submarines, tanks, and helicopters to Algeria and combat aircraft and missile defence systems to Egypt. According to reports, this year it will deliver six SU-30 fighter jets to Angola.¹³

Russia not only supplies Africa with arms, but also with military expertise in the form of Russian advisers, some in high-ranking positions.

Russia has been strategically expanding its military cooperation with Africa since 2015. It has signed agreements with 19 African countries. Photos of Vladimir Putin with his African

counterparts in the Kremlin or in Africa have now become a familiar sight. Angola's new president, João Lourenço, visited Moscow in 2018 and Russia recently signed a deal with the Republic of the Congo and President Sassou Nguesso. What is more, it is thought to have signed a cooperation agreement with the Republic of the Congo's huge, resource-rich neighbour, DR Congo.¹⁴ The Kremlin has confirmed that it sent military advisers to Sudan, and there are said to be approximately 200 Russian advisers now deployed in the CAR. The top security adviser to Faustin-Archange Touadéra, President of the CAR, is a Russian, Valery Zakharov. A key role is also played by Mikhail Bogdanov, Vladimir Putin's personal Africa representative, who establishes contacts for the Kremlin on the continent.¹⁵

Building an Alliance: the Russia-Africa Economic Summit in Sochi

The first Russia-Africa economic summit is expected to take place in October this year in Sochi, Russia.¹⁶ In addition to its economic interests, it is clear that Russia's engagement in Africa is also politically motivated. With 54 countries, Africa is the most important bloc in the United Nations. Russia is hoping to gain its backing in the event of dissent with the other four permanent members of the UN Security Council: The West on one side and China on the other. Russia could come into conflict with China if the Kremlin expands its involvement in Africa.

J. Peter Pham is a former Africa expert at the American think tank, Atlantic Council, and was recently appointed US Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region of Africa by President Donald Trump. He agrees with the majority of Russian analysts that Russia's engagement in Africa is currently minor when compared to that of the West and China. However, its growth can no longer be ignored by the other powers.¹⁷

The Trump administration's new Africa Strategy, as outlined by former US Security Advisor John Bolton in a speech in December 2018, focuses

on American security, promoting US investment and the effective use of its development aid funds. It clearly views both China and Russia as a threat: “In short, the predatory practices pursued by China and Russia stunt economic growth in Africa; threaten the financial independence of African nations; inhibit opportunities for US investment; interfere with US military operations; and pose a significant threat to US national security interests.”¹⁸

A Clear Strategy

In the global contest for influence in Africa, Russia has a clear strategy, as do China, the US, and other actors such as Turkey. This is not yet the case for Germany and the EU. With its Marshall Plan, the German government is moving away from the traditional development aid approach, as is also the case with the EU’s new Africa-Europe Alliance.¹⁹ This is the right move, and it is long overdue. However, the European approach continues to be dominated by development aid and the promotion of democracy. This approach is particularly vulnerable at a time when Europe’s democracies themselves are not in the best of shape – a fact that has not gone unnoticed in African capitals. Nowadays, in conversations with African elites about the advance of China on the continent, a knowing smile tends to cross their lips when the discussion turns to the current weakness of Europe.

However, in the global contest between powers, the German government and the EU could happily further promote their economic interests and adjust their development aid accordingly. The economic strength and quality of life of Europe’s democracies are far more attractive than any programme for promoting democracy, so good relations with Europe will always be in the interest of African countries.

The advance of Russia has accelerated the race in Africa still further. The German government does not have to play a role here. Because just as increased economic engagement in Africa would bring opportunities, it also poses the question: What would happen if Germany

clashed with other major powers in the economic competition on African soil? What would Berlin do then?

–translated from German–

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