



*The heads of delegations attending the Russia-Africa Summit pose for photographs. October 24, 2019; Sochi, Russia (Source: en.kremlin.ru)*

## Moscow's Limited Prospects in Sub-Saharan Africa

By Emmanuel Dreyfus

On October 23-24 in Sochi, a resort city on the Russian Riviera, Vladimir Putin hosted over 50 African leaders for the first Russia-African summit. The meeting demonstrated Moscow's ambitions toward the African continent. In the past few years, these ambitions have manifested themselves in the growing bilateral trade turnover, an increase of Russian arms sales, and an expansion of the Russian political-military presence throughout the continent. These trends have sparked concerns of a so-called new Russian strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa. The recent developments related to Moscow's "security" footprint in some Sub-Saharan countries should not be ignored; but nor should they

be over-exaggerated. Rather than a comprehensive strategy, Moscow's current activism in Africa, and more particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, is best understood as opportunistic moves that are unlikely to yield significant results.

### The Soviet Roots of Russian-Africa Relations

The Soviet Union devoted little attention to the African continent until after WWII. After that, Moscow's approach became more consistent. During the late 1940s and the 1950s, Moscow provided important



*Soviet military instructors with Namibian guerrillas during the South African Border War, late 1970s. (Photo courtesy of [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Africa%E2%80%93Soviet\\_Union\\_relations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Africa%E2%80%93Soviet_Union_relations))*

political support to various decolonization movements across Asia and Africa. Rather than being driven by Marxist ideology, this support was mostly grounded in the simple objective that the Soviet Union then shared with the United States: the dismantling of the French and British empires. Beginning in the 1960s, when most of African countries gained their independence, Moscow saw Africa as a promising arena for competition with the West. It developed relations with more than 40 African countries, providing technical assistance in different areas. In 1960, it established the People's Friendship University in Moscow, with the goal of bringing students from the "Third World" to educate them in Soviet Union. Several African countries, such as Ethiopia, Angola and Mozambique, provided the stage for armed proxy conflicts during the Cold War. Despite its efforts and investments, the Soviet Union never managed to build long-lasting alliances with African regimes. By the end of the 1980s, it projected only limited influence across the continent.

## Ranking Sub-Saharan Africa among Russia's Strategic Priorities

Russia's national security priorities start with geography. The primary focus of its foreign policy is maintaining its status as the lead nation within the former Soviet space—what it calls its "near abroad." It relies on a large set of comparative advantages inherited from a common Soviet past. Its second priority is projecting to the fullest extent possible its importance as a global leader.

In the Middle East, bold military and diplomatic steps since its intervention in Syria in 2015 drive Russia's growing influence. At the strategic level, Russian policy in the Middle East is partly based on the intention to contest and offset long-standing Western influence. From a security standpoint, curbing the threat posed by fighters from Russia and former Soviet countries on the ground in Syria and Iraq, as well as concerns over the Assad regime falling to a "Western-supported civil war" were among the reason behind its intervention in Syria.

Sub-Saharan Africa, as a region, lacks a strong connection to Moscow's global strategy, and does not represent a direct security threat. Russia is aware that it is lagging far behind both traditional (Europe and the US) and relatively new (China) actors, and that it doesn't have there the leverage it enjoys elsewhere to remedy this situation. Moreover, the different armed conflicts that plague the African continent do not represent particular security threats to Russia: Africa is not a hotbed for radicalized fighters from Russia and the former Soviet Union, as Iraq and Syria have been for the past ten years. More generally, Sub-Saharan Africa has never been a significant region in Russian strategic culture. The latter tends to focus on Russia's bordering areas, such as the Middle East, Asia and the "West," e.g. Europe and by extension the US.

A review of the various official documents enshrining Russia's main foreign policy and defense objectives confirms Africa's minor strategic importance to Moscow's eyes. Over the past decades, three successive Concepts of Foreign Policy (2008, 2013 and 2016) have been released, and the key paragraph devoted to the African continent has been left unchanged since 2008.<sup>1</sup> It remains the last regional foreign priority objective out of the 50 mentioned in the three successive versions of the document. A look at the consecutive versions of Military Doctrines (1993, 2002, 2010 and 2014) confirms this limited interest.<sup>2</sup> In all these documents defining the regional priorities of Russian defense policy, there is not a single mention of Africa. Among the different official documents defining Russia's strategic goals and policy, the National Security Strategy, crafted by the Russian National Security Council, is the only one to indicate a rising interest in the development of relationships with Africa.<sup>3</sup>

The priority devoted to African relations by the Russian Foreign Ministry apparatus confirms their secondary importance. Contrary to other world regions, there is no Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs responsible for Africa. The African continent was, in fact, added in 2014 to the portfolio of Leonid Bogdanov, who already supervised Middle East relations and the Islamic Cooperation Organization.<sup>4</sup>

### **The current dynamic is mostly driven by economic considerations**

Often described as a new trend, Moscow's interest toward Africa dates back to the late 2000's and coincides with the development of a foreign policy presenting Russia as an alternative to the West. This policy is realized through the promotion of regional organizations or other groups, like the BRICS, meant to counterbalance Western influence as well as the resumption of ties with former client states, mostly in the Middle East and in Africa.

Over the past decade, Russia has experienced a surge in previously insignificant bilateral economic relations with African nations. According to the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEU), trade turnover between the EEU and Africa has seen an eightfold increase over the past 8 years, up to almost \$22 billion in 2018. Three key elements explain this dynamic. First, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, bilateral trade slumped: the ongoing trend is partly a simple catch-up effect. Second, the participation of Russian companies and investors in mining projects in Africa has risen recently. In the area of nuclear energy, in 2016, Egypt signed a contract with Rosatom to build the first Russian atomic plant build on the African continent. Third, the current dynamic in Russian-African trade



relations is bolstered by the decline of economic relations between Russia and the West following the introduction of sanctions and counter-sanctions after 2014.

Russian interest in the African continent is likely to continue for economic and political reasons.<sup>5</sup> However, labeling these trends as a major Russian shift to Africa is exaggerated and premature. Russia is a long way from emerging as an important economic player in Africa. First, in terms of economic influence, Russia lags far behind better established foreign powers, such as the EU, the US or China. Russian bilateral trade turnover with Africa (\$17 billion in 2017) represents 6 percent of EU's trade turnover (\$275 billion) with Africa and 8.5 percent of Chinese trade turnover with Africa (\$200 billion). Second, economic relations are limited to a small handful of countries: more than 80 percent of the trade turnover between Russia and Africa takes place between Russia and 5 African countries: Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Nigeria.<sup>6</sup> Four of these countries are located in North Africa, which the Russian diplomatic apparatus traditionally groups with the wider Middle East region.

### Looking for Local Opportunities

Since the early 2000s, exporting 'security' has been a core dimension of Russia's foreign policy. A long-standing tradition of defense cooperation dating back to the Soviet era exists between Russia and Africa. In 2011, Russia accounted for about 11 percent of total arms export to the African continent. Currently, it is Africa's arms main supplier and accounts for 30 percent its arms imports.<sup>7</sup> Rosoboronexport – the Russian arms export authority – labelled 2019 the "Year of Africa". It is worth mentioning that, in a similar manner as the

trade turnover, Russian arms exports are mostly to North Africa, particularly Algeria and Egypt, which together account for about 90 percent of the Russian arms exports to Africa. Yet, over the past few years, Moscow has concluded new arms deals with several sub-Saharan countries, such as Burkina Faso, Angola, Mali, Sudan, and Nigeria.<sup>8</sup>

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In 2008, Russia launched a comprehensive reform of its defense sector which has become an inspiring model for a certain number of countries, and is now expanding the scope of its defense cooperation, for instance by providing military training. Such training can be carried out by units which formally belong to the Russian armed forces (for instance in October 2016, units from special operation forces were sent in Egypt to provide their Egyptian counterparts with counterterrorism training) or by private contractors.<sup>9</sup>

The rise in defense cooperation between Russia and various African countries has sparked concerns over Russia's regional strategy toward the African continent. However, as noted earlier, Sub-Saharan Africa occupies a minor position in the Russian strategic calculus. On that note, it is important to distinguish Russian policy toward North African countries (part of a wider Russian policy in the Middle East) from Russia's current activism toward

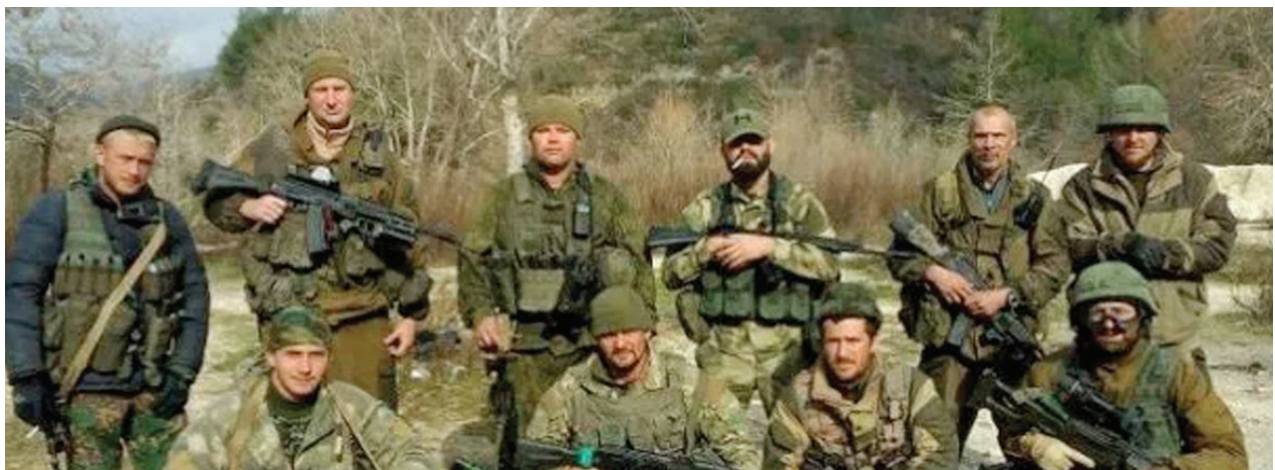
Sub-Saharan countries, which is better understood as a set of opportunistic moves. Misperceptions of Moscow's strategy in Africa have been fueled by the alleged implication of the so-called Wagner group in different African countries.

## Concerns over Russia's Wagner Group

Russia's Wagner Group is frequently mislabeled in the West as a Private Military Company. On the one hand Russia has experienced, for the past two decades, the development of conventional private military/security companies. These companies provide services that are similar to those offered by their Western equivalents such as military training, protective security, demining, and counter-piracy. They do not provide mercenary services, which are illegal in Russia.

In addition to these legal entities, non-state structures involved in fighting operations emerged in the wake of Moscow's intervention in Ukraine and in Syria. To date, the Wagner Group is the most

famous. Controlled by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian tycoon close to Vladimir Putin, Wagner came to public attention after its members took part in military operations in Syria. In some circumstances, for instance during the two Palmyra offensives (march 2016 and March 2017), Wagner fighters provided direct military support to regular Russian armed forces. In others, for instance during the February 2018 battle of Kasham, they were used as auxiliary soldiers to the Syrian forces.<sup>10</sup> In the first case, using Wagner was dictated by the need expressed by the Russian military command to achieve operational goals. In the second, the engagement of Wagner fighters was mainly motivated by Prigozhin's personal economic interests. Unlike regular Russian PMCs, Wagner has no legal existence. While Russian standard PMCs, as any commercial entities, are merely driven by business-oriented strategies, the rationale behind Wagner is slightly different. In addition to growing Prigozhin's personal wealth, it can be used as a force multiplier for military operations without direct participation of the Russian armed forces, when their deployment is not possible, not desirable,



*Wagner: A closer look at Russian private security and military enterprise (photo courtesy of: [www.offiziere.ch/?p=34979](http://www.offiziere.ch/?p=34979))*

or both. To that extent, Wagner merges aspects of a conventional PMC with a long-standing, idiosyncratic Russian tradition of using non-state actors to achieve military goals.<sup>11</sup> It is important to bear in mind that, while Wagner was deployed in Syria as a force multiplier, it is mostly used in Sub-Saharan Africa to implement some aspects of the bilateral defense cooperation and to safeguard Russian economic assets.

### Defense cooperation between Russia and African countries

Since 2015, Russia has signed 20 or so bilateral defense agreements with various countries in the region. According to available documents, Russia and African countries seek, notably, to develop their cooperation in the fields of counter-terrorism and counter-piracy. Moscow has been developing its counter-terrorism cooperation with many countries since the two Chechnya wars, and went further after the beginning of its intervention in Syria. Regarding counter-piracy activities, the Russian navy maintains a regular presence in the Gulf of Aden since 2008 and Russian PMCs have been providing counter-piracy services since 2012-2013. Again, while the conclusion of defense agreements between Russia and Sub-Saharan countries is a relatively new trend, neither the content, nor the potential reach of these agreements are particularly cutting-edge.

Military training is an important dimension of these agreements. So far, bilateral cooperation on military training, recently inked with several African countries such as Botswana, Burundi, Chad, Gambia, Niger, has yielded its most significant results with the Central African Republic. This takes place in a wider context of a significant

rapprochement between the two countries, which started late 2017 and led to the conclusion of a defense agreement between them.<sup>12</sup> Since 2018, more than 3000 servicemen of the CAR armed forces have been trained by about 170 civilian instructors<sup>13</sup> deployed from Russia and possibly hired by Prigozhin.<sup>14</sup> Relying on private instructors to provide military training is not peculiar to Russia and happens with many countries. A technical explanation would suggest that it's easier, cheaper and safer to send civilian instructors rather than regular servicemen in a remote country where Moscow has no particular footprint. Other analysts propose a bureaucratic approach, suggesting that Prigozhin's expanded presence in Africa is the result of an elite dispute that ended in his favor.<sup>15</sup> The same interpretation can apply to Sudan, where Russian instructors have been training Sudanese forces following Omar Al-Bashir's visit to Moscow late 2017.

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Defense cooperation is the backbone of Russia's current actions in Sub-Saharan Africa. Locally, some Russian businessmen have benefited from this increased defense cooperation: in return for implementing certain parts of it, they have been granted with economic rewards, such as mining concessions. This nexus of military cooperation, economic investments and political influence,

has given rise to serious concerns. In the CAR particularly, but also in other Sub-Saharan countries, several disinformation campaigns targeting the image, activities, and interests of key players such as France and the US have been repeatedly organized by people belonging, or close, to this nexus. By having developed a limited but multi-faceted presence in Sub-Saharan Africa, Moscow now has the potential to push forward its interests locally, even though it does not intend to become a strategic actor in the region.

### Russia's Actions in Africa: Structural Weaknesses and Setbacks

A deeper look at the bilateral trade turnover between Russia and countries portrayed as being central elements in a so-called Russian pivot to Africa provides cogent evidences of Russia's little economic significance in Sub-Saharan Africa. In 2018, bilateral trade turnover between CAR and Russia was \$0.933 million, which is 0.2 percent of CAR's total trade turnover and \$ 510 million with Sudan, which is 5 percent of Sudan's total trade turnover.<sup>16</sup> While deals worth \$12 billion were signed on the sidelines of Sochi summit, their actual implementation remains to be seen. Future trends will indicate if the Sochi summit provided the necessary long-lasting impetus to Russia-Africa relations, or whether it, as many other high-level summits organized by Russia (BRICS, Eurasian Economic Union) was mostly an exercise of good will.

Undoubtedly, Russia is beefing up its political-military influence in the region. But it is starting from a very low base, and neither the conclusion of basic defense agreements with a certain number of countries, nor the presence of at least a few hundred Russian contractors, compared to the

7000 French personnel and the 6000 US personnel, are going to affect the current strategic landscape in Sub-Saharan Africa. There are no serious discussions about creating Russian military bases in Africa, simply because Moscow sees neither strategic, nor operational incentives for such a move.

Another question is related to the concrete results of these actions. While Russia managed to gain some local successes, it has also suffered significant backlashes. Moscow's traditional personalized approach on diplomacy has recently proven detrimental in different situations. Less than two years after Moscow had started to strengthen its ties with Khartoum by developing strong relationship with Sudanese leader Omar El Beshir, the latter was ousted and Russia lost almost overnight its most important asset in the country. Moscow bet on the wrong horse not only in Sudan, but also in South Africa, where Jacob Zuma, who played a personal role in the rapprochement with Russia, left power in February 2018 amid corruption scandals. Furthermore, it seems that Russian overtures to Africa has so far been not converted into a significant political support from African states at the international level. An in-depth analysis of how African countries vote on UN resolutions that directly affect Russia's interests doesn't reveal any particular trend.<sup>17</sup> For instance, on the vote about the status of displaced persons and refugees from Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia), about human rights in Crimea or related to the complete and unconditional withdrawal of foreign military forces from the territory of the Republic of Moldova, most of sub-Saharan countries simply do not take part to the vote or abstain, as did the majority of the countries represented at the UN.

## Conclusion

Africa ranks at the bottom of Russia's strategic priorities. Current discussions on Russia's so-called "return" to Africa are misleading, since they imply that Moscow was once a prominent player in Africa. Because of the absence of territorial continuity, Africa has never represented any particular strategic significance to Moscow. It is a minor economic partner of Russia and, in spite of the current enthusiasm, this paradigm is unlikely to experience dramatic changes in the near future. The very reason

why Russia has lost some of its influence in its post-Soviet backyard to other actors, primarily to the EU in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus and to China in Central Asia, lies in its lack of economic attractiveness. Russia's opportunistic efforts to build political and economic influence in Africa through security agreements are unlikely to prove sustainable given how low a foreign priority Russia ascribes to the continent, particularly outside of Northern Africa.

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The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the author.



## Endnotes

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