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Russia in Africa

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Russian diplomacy in quest of the African market

Recent publications¹ indicate that Russia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are seeking to revive a never-implemented 1999 military and technical cooperation agreement, which should include the delivery of weapons, materiel, and Russian experts to establish joint military training programs. . To this end, on June 13 2018 the Congolese Senate ratified² the agreement. In parallel, Russia is expanding its military cooperation with the Central African Republic (CAR). The UN Security Council authorized Moscow on December 2017. While the program was ostensibly time-limited,³ as of this writing Russian instructors are still based in Bangui. On April 2018, Russia and Guinea Bissau signed the first inter-governmental agreement on military cooperation between the two countries since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

¹ "La Russie entame une coopération militaire avec la RDC", *RFI (Radio France Internationale)*, May 27 2018, Accessed:16/6/2018. <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20180527-russie-rdc-defense-cooperation-militaire-rdc>

² "RD Congo-Russie: Le Sénat vote la loi de ratification de la convention de coopération militaire et technique", *Democratic republic of Congo homepage of the Senate*, June 13 2018, Accessed:16/6/2018. <http://www.senat.cd/index.php/10-session-ordinaire/seance-pleniere/248-rd-congo-russie-le-senat-vote-la-loi-de-ratification-de-la-convention-de-cooperation-militaire-et-technique>

³ Le Monde reports that a ceremony marking the end of the training course took place on March 31, 2018. Remy Ourdan, "Soldats, mercenaires et conseillers russes se multiplient dans la capitale centrafricaine", *Le Monde*, 23 April 2018, Accessed :16/6/2018. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/04/23/la-russie-installe-peu-a-peu-sa-presence-dans-la-capitale-centrafricaine_5289462_3212.html

Over the past five years, Russia has multiplied its efforts to reinforce military and economic ties with the African continent. And while Africa does not yet represent a priority for Moscow, the surge in activity indicates a change of approach. This is evident also in the scope of mutual official visits. Guinean President Alpha Conde visited Moscow in 2017, as did Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir. Visiting Ruanda's capital Kigali on June 3, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov discussed the possible supply of Russian air defense systems with his Rwandan counterpart, Louise Mushikiwabo. Earlier in the year, Lavrov visited six other African countries (Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Namibia and Zimbabwe) in a bid to rekindle the Soviet Union's past alliances with the continent.

Cold War played out in Africa

To a certain extent, current African-Russian ties feed on the relations between the Soviet Union and its African allies during the Cold War period and the concomitant legacy of Soviet-US competition for influence in the Third World. The nature of Russian involvement in Africa always pretended to differ from that of the US and other Western countries, in the sense that the Soviet Union established no colonies in Africa. Absent Russian colonies on the continent, emerging African nations in the 1960s and 1970s benefited from the support of the Soviet Union, mostly on an ideological basis. Tanzania, Algeria, Guinea, Somalia, Mozambique and some other African states adopted anti-capitalist postures whose traces can still be detected in the contemporary political discourse of those countries.

Soviet ties with Angola can be considered to have been a showcase for Russian political-military involvement in Africa during the 1960s and 1970s. In the wake of dwindling Portuguese influence and during the civil war ahead of independence, Moscow backed the Marxist-Leninist Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), against other national movements supported by the US, China or South Africa (FNLA and UNITA). It was Cuban military involvement, combined with Soviet military support (weapons, training, military advisers and a few dozen of Soviet officers), that eventually enabled the MPLA to take control of the country. Relations between Moscow and Luanda strained in the 1980s, as Angola sought to upgrade diplomatic ties with the US, against the backdrop of the American "linkage policy" (linking Namibian independence to the withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola). According to some

estimates, in the early 1980s the USSR offered the MPLA some \$2 billion in aid and military support⁴.

Russian involvement in Africa sharply decreased following the political, financial, and ideological collapse of the Soviet Union. Several African countries, who had once enjoyed Soviet patronage, now sought support and investments from Western powers. African states were no longer a priority for Moscow; the Russian military presence in Africa became almost nonexistent and several Russian diplomatic missions were closed.

Putin reinventing Russia-Africa ties

President Vladimir Putin has never concealed his aspirations to revive Russia as a superpower. This has been true since his first term of office in 2000 and includes Russian ambitions on the African continent. With this, the changing world-wide geopolitical reality, in Africa and elsewhere, has confronted Russian diplomacy with new challenges. Several new players were added to the equation during Russia's two-decade 'absence' from Africa. Chief among them is China, whose spectacular growing presence in Africa has clearly demonstrated that other countries besides former colonial powers or the United States could exert dominance over parts of the African economy. Facing such competition, Russia's contemporary Africa policy has adopted new tactics. To this end, we can detect two new guidelines that define Russia's emerging policy in Africa: identifying African markets where Russia would enjoy an advantage vis-à-vis economic powers like US, France, Britain and China, and identifying zones of strategic interest (including the control of certain resources).

During the Soviet era, military cooperation was perceived as a goal in and of itself; such cooperation aided in combatting colonialist regimes and in expanding the sphere of Soviet ideological influence. But the contemporary Russian approach views military cooperation as only one tool amongst others designed to open up African markets. The Russian military presence in the Central African Republic precisely demonstrates this point. According to a Europe 1 report, some Russian instructors (a combination of Russian officers and ostensibly 'private' security contractors) who arrived following the UNSC authorization are deployed in the

⁴ Seth Singleton, "The Future of Soviet Influence in Africa", *Harvard university: national council for soviet and east European research*, Octobre 27 1987, Accessed:16/6/2018, <https://www.ucis.pitt.edu/nceeer/1987-628-6-Singleton.pdf>

capital Bangui, while others are deployed in areas close to valuable mineral deposits, such as gold, diamonds and uranium.⁵

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov's March 2018 visit to Zimbabwe, also reflects this strategy of combining military cooperation with economic interests. During his visit, Lavrov noted that his country was pursuing military cooperation with Zimbabwe and that Russia was also looking at opportunities in the diamond sector as well as fully implementing a \$3 billion joint platinum project near Harare⁶. While China started building a military presence on Africa (establishing a military base in Djibouti for instance) only years after it established an economic presence in the continent and a physical presence in the form of expatriate Chinese communities, Russia uses its military presence as a precursor to economic ventures.

A security-policy vacuum?

Contrary to Europe and the US, Moscow can be considered as a late arrival on the African market; its Soviet-era ties were mostly ideologically and militarily driven, and less economically based (though Africa did constitute a market for the Soviet weapons industry). Russia is also considered a latecomer compared to China and its massive investments in infrastructure projects across the African continent. Faced with this economic reality, Moscow has identified two principal fields of intervention which will provide them with added value: military cooperation and the management of natural resources.

Russia realizes that Western countries are reluctant to engage militarily in conflict zones in the absence of international approval. French interventions in Mali and in the Central African Republic were carried out only after the UN Security Council mandated Paris to do so, with the agreement and invitation of the countries in question. Once the military mission was accomplished, France gradually withdrew its forces in favor of the local army (Mali) or other UN peacekeeping forces (in CAR, for example). Indeed, the deployment of military instructors in the African Central Republic followed the relaxation of the UN Security Council's arms embargo that had been imposed on that country, but the number of Russian instructors and the longevity

⁵ "Les Russes envoient des forces spéciales en RCA", *Europe 1*, March 12 2018, Accessed :16/6/2018.

<http://www.europe1.fr/emissions/l-edito-international/les-russes-envoient-des-forces-speciales-en-rca-3571763>

⁶ MacDonald Dzirutwe, "Russia seeks military cooperation, diamond, platinum projects in Zimbabwe", *Reuters*, March 8 2018, Accessed:16/6/2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-zimbabwe-russia/russia-seeks-military-cooperation-diamond-platinum-projects-in-zimbabwe-idUSKCN1GK2JK>

of their presence are indicators of Moscow's 'flexible interpretation' of that authorization. The relative inefficiency of the UN peacekeeping forces in CAR also played into Russian hands, identifying the inherited weaknesses. Moreover, there are fundamental differences between the Africa policy of Western countries, which takes into account public opinion and issues such as human rights, and the Russian policy, which is devoid of compunctions, moral or otherwise, over the sale of weapons in conflict zones.

It also seems that Russia seeks to utilize the process of military cooperation in order to strengthen its own weapons industry. According to a 2017 research study by British think tank Chatham House, three percent of Russian global weapons exports are to sub-Saharan Africa (between the years 2010 and 2015).⁷ While this number may seem small, Russia is the main supplier of several countries, and as the African market rapidly grows Moscow is dedicating increasing effort to develop and enlarge its share. According to defense publication Strategic Culture, Africa as a whole (including North African countries such as Egypt and Algeria) accounted for 11% of Russian arms exports in 2011–2015. It is the leading exporter of armored vehicles and the second leading exporter of helicopters to the continent.⁸ The publication also explains that many African countries prefer to purchase inexpensive, less sophisticated equipment, and for this reason prefer Russian systems to Western ones. This is especially true because such systems or their predecessors have been previously used by African armies and thus they do not require significant re-training.⁹

Searching for new markets in Africa

The management-of-natural-resources choice can be explained by the fact that Russia actually competes with several African countries in the energy and mineral extraction markets. In this sense, the Russian economy resembles that of countries such as Nigeria or the DRC, which are dependent on the export of natural resources. The major share of Russian exports is composed of oil, natural gas and rare metals. Similarity (though on a different scale), Nigeria's economic

⁷ Richard Connolly and Cecilie Sendstad, "Russia's Role as an Arms Exporter The Strategic and Economic Importance of Arms Exports for Russia", *Russia and Eurasia Programme*, March 2017, Accessed:16/6/2018. <http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-03-20-russia-arms-exporter-connolly-sendstad.pdf>

⁸ Alex Gorka, "Russia Makes Big Strides to Expand Arms Sales in Africa", *Strategic Culture Foundation*, May 15 2015, Accessed:16/6/2018. <https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2017/05/18/russia-makes-big-strides-expand-arms-sales-africa.html>

⁹ Ibid.

growth depends on the export of petrol, while the economies of several other African countries depend on the export of diamonds and other precious stones and metal. Russia has been a long-time rival of South Africa's De Beers diamond company.¹⁰ But this global rivalry could also be seen as an advantage. While relations between the West and Africa have focused ever since colonialization on Africa's abundance in resources, Russia's self-reliance on minerals means that its economic relationship with Africa is fundamentally different.

Alongside competition with Africa, Moscow has also opted for a joint development strategy, offering its know-how and technologies in the extraction of the natural resources, as well as in the management of mines and of petrol platforms. For instance, Russian gold producer Nordgold has expanded its activities in recent years towards West Africa, most specifically in Burkina Faso. The Russian state-owned industrial consortium Rostec was selected in 2015 to negotiate a principal agreement for the construction of a crude oil refinery in Uganda (though the consortium later pulled out of the project). At the time, Rostec indicated that it considered the Uganda project together with the platinum project in Zimbabwe as door-openers in Africa, particularly to its fast-growing arms market¹¹. Also, following meetings of President Putin with South African President Jacob Zuma in 2013 and 2014, and the signing of a nuclear energy agreement between the two countries, Russia's Rosatom submitted a bid in 2017 (since blocked in court) for the construction of eight new nuclear reactors.¹²

Conclusion

When President Putin first took power, he established a rational influence strategy, by stages, which operated in concentric circles. First, he labored to reestablish Russian influence in the former Soviet bloc. He then moved to the Middle East, and is now expanding the reach of Russian influence in Africa. Here, too, Russia operates in circles (starting with old alliances

¹⁰ "The cartel isn't for ever", *The Economist printed edition*, July 15 2004, Accessed:16/6/2018.

<https://www.economist.com/special-report/2004/07/15/the-cartel-isnt-for-ever>

Andrew E. Kramer, "Alrosa, a Russian Rival to De Beers, Enters Public Trading", *The New York Times*, October 30 2013, Accessed:16/6/2018. <https://dealbook.nytimes.com/2013/10/30/alrosa-a-russian-rival-to-de-beers-enters-public-trading/>

¹¹ Frederic Muisisi, "Russian firm pulls out of Uganda's \$4 billion oil refinery", *Daily Nation*, July 1 2016, Accessed:16/6/2018. <https://www.nation.co.ke/business/Russian-firm-pulls-out-of-Uganda-s--4-billion-oil-refinery/996-3275446-3sqn8c/index.html>

¹² "Russia's Rosatom still keen to build South Africa's nuclear plants", *Reuters*, May 3 2017, Accessed:16/6/2018. <https://af.reuters.com/article/africaTech/idAFKBN17Z1BD-OZABS>

towards new goals). As demonstrated by Lavrov's recent tour in Africa, the Russian return to Africa is characterized by the pursuit of new opportunities in addition to Soviet-era partnerships with countries like Ethiopia, Angola or Namibia, and by extending efforts beyond East Africa to the west and center of the continent. Russian economic cooperation projects, such as the March 2018 "roadmap" signed between Russia and Sudan to build civil nuclear power stations, point in the same direction of a new Russian-influence expansion policy,¹³ though the extent of these projects is still much smaller than the Chinese, American or European economic presence in the continent.

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¹³ Omar Fahmy, "Sudan, Russia to sign accord to develop nuclear power: SUNA agency", *Reuters*, March 13 2018, Accessed:16/6/2018. <https://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFKCN1GPOME-OZATP>