Following the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow allowed its Cold War presence in Africa to atrophy. It closed nine embassies, three consulates, and a variety of trade missions and student exchange programs, even though it also helped a few large Russian firms (like the Alrosa diamond conglomerate in Angola) gain new contracts. Under President Vladimir Putin’s leadership in the 2000s, Russia began expressing more interest in Africa. However, its activities remain limited in comparison to the longstanding presence of the United States and European Union, the huge new commercial and financial inroads made by China, and the growing interests of India and other states like Brazil, Japan, and Turkey.

It is surprising, then, that over the past few years—starting with a search for new markets after the West’s Ukraine war sanctions of 2014 and accelerating more recently—Russia has come roaring back on the continent, even if in relative terms its presence still lags behind Europe and China. Moscow is engaged in an astonishing variety of well-publicized political, economic, and military pursuits, many of them centered in one way or another on Russian access to African minerals, oil and gas, and other raw materials. Those who benefit most are Putin’s close network cronies (many of whom sit atop Russia’s own state-controlled natural resource conglomerates) and the African leaders who serve as their local counterparts. Russia’s deals are opaque and often buttressed by

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© 2019 The Elliott School of International Affairs
The Washington Quarterly • 42:4 pp. 155–170
https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1693105
Moscow’s political and security support for individual autocrats, undercutting the possibility for democratic consolidation in states where government institutions are fragile or dysfunctional.

Washington sees this push as a strategic challenge. Former White House national security adviser John R. Bolton, announcing the new Africa policy of President Donald J. Trump in December 2018, grouped Russia and China as “great power competitors … rapidly expanding their financial and political influence … [and] deliberately and aggressively targeting their investments in the region to gain a competitive advantage over the United States.” He added that their “predatory practices … inhibit opportunities for US investment; interfere with US military operations; and pose a significant threat to US national security interests.” His remarks were echoed in February 2019 by Gen. Thomas D. Waldhauser, then-commander of US Africa Command (AFRICOM), who called Russia a “growing challenge” because of its arms sales and the actions of its semi-private security forces like the Wagner Group in the Central African Republic (CAR). Waldhauser said that Russia tries to “import harsh security practices, in a region already marred by threats to security, while systematically extracting minerals” and “potentially looks to export their security model regionally.” Waldhauser also highlighted the potential for Russia’s presence in Libya to disrupt US naval activities in the Mediterranean and for its activities across the continent to “threaten US freedom of maneuver in and around Africa.” His successor at AFRICOM, Gen. Stephen Townsend, similarly emphasized in April 2019 “Russia’s malign influence in Africa” and called Russian semi-private security forces the second biggest threat to US security interests in Africa after terrorism.

These concerns have been seconded by some think tank analysts. Nataliya Bugayova and Darina Regio of the Institute for the Study of War argue that Russian “investments in Africa are strategic … and will likely have important long-term consequences” for Russia’s expanded global influence. Paul Goble of the Jamestown Foundation fears that “Moscow may be able to force out Western and Chinese companies … and restore many of the political positions it enjoyed in Soviet times.” His colleague Stephen Blank adds that these activities have “strategic-political importance … allow[ing] Russia to gain a local foothold upon which it can then expand its influence in multiple directions.”

By far the most alarmist reports come from the Dossier Center, led by exiled Putin opponent and former Russian oil oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Anonymous documents purporting to reflect the mission statements of Putin ally Yevgeny Prigozhin, the notorious Wagner Group military contractor who
also directs the Internet Research Agency troll factory, are posted on the Center’s Proekt website (with additional, unposted material summarized by the Guardian). Prigozhin is under both sanctions and indictment in the United States, including for his role in interfering in the 2016 presidential campaign. According to these Dossier Center documents, Prigozhin intends to build Russian influence, undermine support for the United States and Europe (especially France) in 21 countries spanning the continent, and “revive ‘pan-African consciousness’” with a “loyal chain of representatives across African territory.” His plans are even said to include a bizarre effort to groom “agents of influence” inside the United States, creating “training camps” in Africa to prepare black US citizens who have been involved in “organized crime groups” or “radical activity” for “destabilization of the situation inside the U.S.” There is no credible evidence that Prigozhin’s purported plans are actually being implemented, but they were reported by NBC News in May 2019 and then rebroadcast in the Daily Beast, Vox, and the Guardian.

Why This Isn’t the Cold War in Africa Redux

It is important not to fall for Moscow’s own hype about the importance of its activities (including the first ever Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi in October 2019) and to remember that some key factors limit Russian influence in Africa. First, Russia is late to the game. The United States, the European Union, and China all have diverse, decades-long relationships nurtured across the continent, while Moscow is saddled with a burden of distrust after it left most of its old allies hanging in the early 1990s. Indeed, at least some of the places where Russia has been most active recently—including the Central African Republic, Libya, Sudan, and Zimbabwe—are themselves under UN and/or EU multilateral sanctions for war crimes and other bad behavior. Leaders in both Russia and these countries are likely pursuing these relationships because they have few alternatives as sanctioned states—not because Russia is making headway in some pitched international competition with the West.

Second, for all of Russia’s bluster, its economy is sagging. With low levels of innovation and growth, it faces the real possibility of a looming recession. Putin has succeeded in diversifying the Russian economy somewhat and in creating a cushion for market shocks. It still remains heavily dependent, though, on petroleum and other natural resource exports, leaving it vulnerable to any future global recession as well. Given Russia’s 1990s history of deserting African partners when economic crisis hits at home, rational state leaders in Africa should be hesitant to throw their lot in too heavily with Moscow right now.
Moscow was able to make headway in Africa during the Cold War at least in part because the Soviet planned-economy model offered an alternative to Western post-colonial capitalist competition, with a pathway out of poverty to quick industrialization through state intervention. It is unlikely today that many would see the Russian model as worthy of emulation, especially since leaders with an authoritarian bent can turn to the more successful Chinese model (and wealthier Chinese investors) instead. Some Russian analysts suggest that Russia is a more trustworthy alternative than China, given African fears about “a new era of Chinese economic colonialism” and a Russian history of giving debt relief to African countries rather than China’s debt traps. It remains to be seen, though, how many African states will buy into this claim, especially since inclusion in China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) promises increased access to global markets—whereas Russia’s presence in Africa has so far been geared toward Russian markets alone. The African countries most suspicious or unhappy about BRI right now (including Djibouti, Kenya, and Zambia) might in fact turn to the West over Russia if forced to choose an alternative to China, given their histories and relative (if imperfect) orientation toward democracy.

Indeed, French analyst Arnaud Kalika notes that Russia remains “an economic lightweight in Africa,” with trade levels lower than (in descending order) the EU, China, India, the United States, and Turkey. One Russian analyst suggests that, over the course of the next decade, Russia will gain on its economic competitors on the continent—but does not specify how this will occur. Another argues that Russia could increase technology and fertilizer exports to Africa, but bases the idea on Russian production capabilities and a general sense of African demand rather than complex market analysis.

And while Russia, in the period from 2013 to 2017, accounted for a plurality (39 percent) of global arms sales to Africa, one client—Algeria—accounted for 78 percent of that total, even as its weapons imports from Russia decreased over time. Because Russian military equipment is cheap and reliable, three-quarters of African countries use some form of it, even if their newest purchases are from elsewhere and not Russia. That does mean that Russian military technicians are still fulfilling maintenance contracts on the ground. But those contracts, many dating from Soviet times, would have been in place without any new push by Moscow and are not evidence of growing influence or competitiveness.

Third, while Bolton and many others have expressed concern that Russia can use its connections in Africa to sway votes against the United States and its allies
in the UN (as the Soviets did in Cold War times), African UN links are limited in the damage they can do to US security interests. For example, Moscow has tried to make deals with the A-3 group of African states that serve as rotating, non-permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC). But Russia and the United States both have a veto on the UNSC, and no African state does, so the A-3 vote there has little independent weight. In the words of UCLA Professor Barry O’Neill, who performed a sophisticated analysis of rotating powers and UNSC voting rules, “voting power considerations are probably negligible compared to such issues as prestige and access to information” for any rotating UNSC member.

Genuine African sway in the UN is limited to the General Assembly (GA). Resolutions there certainly have symbolic and public relations significance. They can be used both to embarrass Washington and its allies as well as to prevent universal condemnations of bad behavior either by Russia (for example, its annexation of Crimea) or by authoritarian states in Africa that the West would like to censure. They do not come with any enforcement mechanism, though, so the GA can neither stop the United States from doing what it wishes nor force it to do anything against its will. A recent analysis of China’s role in the UN suggests that Beijing is using leadership roles there to advertise the benefits of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and gain more support for its own actions—but even if Russia does something similar, this approach would not cause much real damage to US interests.

The fourth and perhaps most important limit of Russia’s influence in Africa is that Moscow is operating under an individualistic, patronage-based model of politics and business, where corrupt favors are exchanged under the table by particular bosses and kingpins on the basis of longstanding personal loyalties, but no lasting institutional relationships are built. Putin has used a similar model for both domestic and foreign policy for many years, sometimes undermining what would seem to be Russia’s rational state interests in order to serve the needs of his network friends. But this way of doing things is becoming increasingly outmoded in Africa. Although Moscow has been able to make headway in some of Africa’s remaining authoritarian states, especially with older leaders who were educated or trained in the Soviet Union, the continent as a whole is moving away from dictatorship. Democratic ideas have become entrenched across African populations, even if corruption and repression still hinder true liberal democratic institutionalization in many places. Popular protests have continued to threaten even some of the continent’s longest standing authoritarian regimes, for example in Algeria, Sudan, and Zimbabwe in 2019.

Putin, nonetheless, seems to have adopted a newer version of the personalistic elite network strategy pursued by France in the immediate post-colonial decades of
the 1960s through the 1980s, when economic and military assistance was offered in exchange for a special relationship between particular individuals. The French approach was often contemptuously referred to as “Françafrique,” implying that Paris bought friendship with leaders by keeping them in power in order to maintain French control over its former colonies. Unlike France in that earlier era, Russia is not reaching out merely to its historical allies. For example, Moscow had no military or other significant relationship with CAR before 2017, yet President Faustin-Archange Touadéra is now a major partner in Russian security and mining activities there that are led by Prigozhin.

The parallel instead is that Moscow is trying to maintain patronage relationships with particular leaders, trading its political and security support for local commercial opportunities that benefit Putin’s friends. For example, in 2018, Russia provided electoral campaign assistance to Zimbabwe’s new president (and former coup leader), Emmerson Mnangagwa, amid announcements of new bilateral joint ventures with Russia for both a platinum mine and the Alrosa diamond company. Alrosa’s CEO, Sergei S. Ivanov, is the son of Sergei B. Ivanov, Putin’s KGB training school classmate, former defense minister, and former chief of staff—and hence a close network associate of Putin. Nonetheless, it is China, not Russia, that is the largest international investor in Zimbabwe, leaving Moscow a bit player by comparison in this heavily sanctioned country. The patronage relationships may be bringing great benefits to a few of Putin’s friends without creating meaningful geopolitical influence.

Moscow (or its henchmen) may not always get much in return, either. In CAR, Prigozhin may actually not be making a profit, despite his control of diamond and gold mine contracts, given that those mines are probably artisanal operations spread out over large spaces with mining done by hand-held sieves. Prigozhin may instead be using his investments in the country primarily for money-laundering purposes, given the country’s limited customs and other law enforcement capabilities, although a poverty-stricken, landlocked state in the center of Africa may not be the most efficient place for Russians to launder money. Opportunities to do that abound in some East-Central European countries, in addition to more pleasant offshore venues.

In Madagascar in 2018, meanwhile, Prigozhin apparently worked with operatives to fund half a dozen or more presidential candidates, asking them eventually to pool their resources on behalf of winner Andry Rajoelina when it...
became clear that he was pulling into the lead. \(^{35}\) Yet, Russian money was probably just a drop in the country’s campaign buckets—especially given that in the prior, comparable 2013 presidential election (when no Russian involvement was alleged) the winner spent US$43 million, more per voter than spent by US President Donald Trump in 2016, in a spiraling race between candidates to attract the most votes in this impoverished country. \(^{36}\) Rajoelina, who previously served as prime minister for five years and came from a well-established local political network, probably did not need Russian money and would find little reason to be beholden to it. Around the time of the 2018 election, Prigozhin’s network did receive a contract for a new chromite mining joint venture in Madagascar, but the mine shut down almost immediately as workers launched a strike against Russian managers. \(^{37}\)

Russia’s personalistic strategy also risks backfiring. In Sudan, for example, Moscow had long been a strong supporter of dictator Omar al-Bashir, who was ousted in a protest-fueled coup in April 2019. Prigozhin repeatedly urged Bashir to crack down against protestors, \(^{38}\) and members of the Wagner Group apparently participated in the Sudanese military’s violent assaults on the opposition movement in 2018. \(^{39}\) As of late 2019, the military-dominated transitional government of Sudan seems to be upholding previously negotiated mining and other commercial relationships with Russia, and the Sudanese defense ministry agreed in May 2019 to maintain defense cooperation with its Russian counterpart. \(^{40}\) Yet, it was Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (and, to a lesser extent, the United States and the United Kingdom) that helped to negotiate the Sudanese transition in 2019—not Russia. \(^{41}\) The Transitional Military Council has pledged to work with a coalition of civil society and opposition groups over a 39-month period to institute democratic reforms. Whether or not the agreement holds (and many doubt that the Sudanese military will give up power), Moscow backed the wrong horse and is now a lower-influence player in relative terms. There was concern among Russian analysts in 2019 that something similar might happen amidst ongoing unrest in Algeria, Moscow’s most important arms client in Africa. \(^{42}\)

In democratic South Africa, where the governing African National Congress (ANC) party has longstanding ties to Moscow and the state now cooperates with Russia through the BRICS international economic association, local activists were able to unmask a corrupt nuclear power deal between Russia’s Rosatom and then-president Jacob Zuma. \(^{43}\) The publicity quashed the deal and contributed to political pressures that forced Zuma to resign under accusations of massive corruption. Future deals between the two countries will likely be closely scrutinized as a result, adding an extra burden to Russia’s activities there. Democracy may be under threat in Africa, just as it is elsewhere across the
globe, but in places like South Africa where democratic norms are stronger, Russia’s model is weak.

**What Bears Watching**

Despite these caveats, some of the concerns about Russian activities in Africa are valid. For example the semi-state Wagner Group militia, which was earlier active in eastern Ukraine and Syria, has become an ominous new player in Sudan, CAR, and Libya. The Wagner Group also appears to be present in Mozambique, where local reports indicate that up to seven Wagner personnel were killed (alongside a number of Mozambican army forces) in at least one and perhaps two separate combat ambushes by Islamist extremists in October 2019.

Wagner’s original commander, Dmitry Utkin, is a retired Russian military intelligence (GRU) officer, and the group trains across a rural highway from a GRU special operations training facility in Russia. Wagner remains technically illegal there, even though Putin mentioned its foreign activities approvingly in a public speech. Its ambiguous, semi-state status helps Putin maintain plausible deniability for actions the group takes that are almost certainly coordinated with the Kremlin. Yevgeny Prigozhin, who has funded the group for the past several years, began his adult life in a Soviet prison cell, convicted of organized crime activity. When he got out, he transformed himself into a successful restauranteur in Putin’s hometown of St. Petersburg, and after Putin moved to the Kremlin, Prigozhin eventually became Russia’s largest defense contractor. Prigozhin and the Wagner Group gained notoriety in Africa when three Russian combat journalists (employed by Khodorkovsky) were murdered under mysterious circumstances while attempting to film the group’s activities in CAR in July 2018. Wagner (or perhaps other Russian) military trainers were also accused of brutally torturing a CAR citizen, leading the UN (which is present in CAR through the MINUSCA—a French acronym for Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic—peacekeeping mission) to open an investigation.

While the United States does not have many direct interests in CAR, Russia may be experimenting with a model of intervention there that it could use elsewhere against US interests in Africa (or even in Syria, now that the United States has largely withdrawn). In CAR, Moscow is using financial and security
inducements to buy a tenuous peace between an individual leader in the capital and local warlords in the resource-rich periphery, serving as the sole linchpin for stability and undermining multilateral peace and democratization efforts. Somewhat oddly, given the multilateralism of most international efforts in CAR, Moscow has been couching its presence in CAR as a specific competitive geopolitical challenge to France.48 This tactic may imply that Prigozhin will attempt similar tricks in other former French colonies on the continent, especially given his interests in Madagascar.

The International Crisis Group (ICG) details the enormous range of Russia’s unilateral actions in CAR since 2018 including arms sales, military training, diamond and gold mining deals, providing personal security for President Touadéra and his retinue, and the posting of a Russian former military intelligence officer as Touadéra’s national security adviser.49 Touadéra is effectively surrounded by Russian security representatives 24 hours a day—a strong incentive for him not to stray far from Moscow’s wishes.

Two facts are most disturbing in CAR. First, Russian-trained security forces in CAR are not being integrated into the UN-backed EU training mission with its legal and human rights standards. A parallel, Russia-controlled national security structure is emerging that could be used to protect Russian interests while thwarting democratic oversight of CAR’s military. Second, while Russia did play a positive role in fast-tracking a peace accord in the war-torn country in February 2019, rebel militia leaders (some of whom control the mining areas where Prigozhin has contracts) are being integrated into CAR’s government and military institutions with inadequate vetting and oversight, according to the ICG.50 Since the state currently controls only 20 percent of the country’s territory, this hasty integration throws into doubt CAR’s ability to achieve real sovereignty. The people of CAR will suffer the most if Russia cannot be persuaded to play by well-established international peacekeeping norms, since they are the ones who will be dealing with illiberal security forces and a lack of accountability in their supposedly democratic new government. The test will come in December 2020, when CAR is scheduled to hold its next presidential election. It remains to be seen whether Russia will use influence operations and electoral meddling, as it has elsewhere in Africa, to try to cement Touadéra in the presidency.

In addition, it makes sense for Washington to keep close watch on any Russian military presence that is capable of monitoring or hindering the military or trade activity of Washington and its allies. As Waldhauser pointed out, for example, Russia has long been allied with Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar, whose forces have consolidated control along the country’s Mediterranean coastline in the east. Russia could, at some future point, build
a base in Libya and use it to try to control naval and air access to many of NATO's European members.

Russia has signed more than 20 military cooperation agreements with African states since 2015, any one of which could theoretically evolve into a permanent basing presence. Indeed, in September 2018, Moscow announced an agreement with Eritrea to build a naval logistics facility in Assab, just a few hundred miles from US AFRICOM’s naval hub in Djibouti. There is, however, no publicly available evidence that the Russian facility is actually under construction. Then there is Madagascar, which harbored a Soviet listening post in 1984 for eavesdropping on US ships and submarines in the Indian Ocean. Prigozhin may be using his presence in the country to try to get some similar arrangement today, although India beat Russia to the punch by publicly setting up such a post there in 2007.

Yet when examining Russian security actions in Africa analysts need to remember that African states have agency—and a choice. A military basing agreement signals a long-term commitment by the host state, and many African states have good reason not to throw their lot in with Western-sanctioned Russia and its stagnating economy when they have so many other options available—especially in the face of US pressure. For example, before the base contract in Eritrea, Moscow had tried to get a base in Djibouti itself—already crowded not just with the US base, but others leased by France, Italy, China, and Japan. Russia was prevented from adding a base there when the United States persuaded Djibouti to decline. Moscow has also been rebuffed (even before the 2019 popular uprising) in its desire to establish a military base in Algeria (it was rebuffed there in Soviet times, too), despite its longstanding arms sales relationship with the country. Russia may want to establish a permanent military presence in key locales throughout Africa, but that does not mean it will be able to do so.

Key Takeaways and Recommendations

It is very unlikely that Putin will be able to wage a winning a geostrategic competition against the United States in Africa. There are too many other well-established players there already, including (but far from limited to) the EU and China, with better long-term relationships in place than what Russia will be able to develop anytime soon. Indeed, it remains unclear whether China would be interested in any significant cooperation with Russia in Africa, despite the two countries’ shared membership in the BRICS economic organization. Beijing's investment capabilities are far superior to Russia’s. As China develops its own semi-state military companies to guard BRI facilities in Africa, Beijing might be
attracted by the Wagner Group model—but may instead wisely decide to avoid Wagner's missteps and notoriety when crafting its own African security system.

Russia’s model of personalistic exchange may attract some leaders with an authoritarian bent, but it can backfire given the instability such states currently face, as seen in Sudan. Furthermore, the corruption that this model entails will likely be challenged from within in states like South Africa where democratic consolidation is more entrenched. Putin’s approach to politics may be of declining utility on a continent where the population is increasingly attuned to democratic ideals.

Russia can certainly make trouble around the edges for the United States and its European allies if it establishes basing relationships in Africa—although at the moment, Moscow’s attempts do not seem to be making a great deal of headway, except perhaps in Eritrea (and even there it remains unclear exactly what will result from the deal). Russia’s use of semi-private security forces like the Wagner Group is already making trouble for UN and EU peacekeeping efforts in CAR, and it appears to have worsened the violent government crackdown against protestors in Sudan. One can imagine that Russian deployments elsewhere would have similarly negative effects on human rights and progress in governance. All of these actions are worth monitoring, but there is little evidence at this point that many additional African states are lining up to accept such a Russian presence.

Russia cannot really play a leadership role in Africa, especially given its relatively weak economic base. While its weapons may continue to be in demand, the arms sector alone gives Russia limited political influence. Therefore, the best strategy the United States can employ to counter Russia’s troubling security activities in Africa is to refuse to accept Moscow’s claims that a new scramble for Africa is taking place at all.

By engaging in multilateral institution-building on behalf of democratic reform and oversight, the United States and its partners can present a clear alternative to Russia’s archaic model of individual patronage. Russia cannot really play a leadership role in Africa.
Notes


17. Kalika.
18. Kulkova.
22. Stronski.
Kimberly Marten


29. Bruno Charbonneau, France and the New Imperialism: Security Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 55–56. The term “Françafrique” was reportedly coined by Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the first president of Ivory Coast.


33. Marten, “Russ-Afrique?”

34. Kalika.


