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Research Report

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Briefing Paper, No. 15/2020

Provided in Cooperation with:

German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Bonn

Suggested Citation: Paczyńska, Agnieszka (2020) : Russia in Africa: Is great power competition returning to the continent?, Briefing Paper, No. 15/2020, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), Bonn,
<https://doi.org/10.23661/bp15.2020>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/242599>

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Russia in Africa: Is Great Power Competition Returning to the Continent?

Summary

Since 2014, Russian involvement in Africa has grown significantly. African leaders have been receptive to these overtures as a result of increasing concerns about growing Chinese dominance, retrenchment of the United States (US) and their interest in diversifying trading and security partners. Russia cultivates these relationships by relying on the legacy of the Soviet Union's support for anti-colonial and liberation movements, and focuses on strengthening diplomatic, military and economic collaborations. Our analysis shows that:

- Overall, Russia's strategy in Africa appears to involve a mix of arms sales, political support to authoritarian leaders and security collaborations – in exchange for mining rights, business opportunities and diplomatic support for Russia's foreign policy preferences. The offers of military assistance and political support, especially for authoritarian leaders, have opened doors to Russian firms and strengthened diplomatic relationships. The support of African allies has been especially important to Russia at the United Nations (UN), where African countries account for a quarter of all votes in the General Assembly.
- Russian trade and investment in Africa has grown significantly, particularly in north Africa. Yet, Russia remains a minor economic player on the continent in comparison to China, India or the US. Russia's support for smaller states, especially those that have been internationally shunned, gives Moscow significant influence in those countries.
- As of autumn 2019, Russia had concluded military cooperation agreements with 21 African countries and is negotiating the establishment of military bases in a number of states. It is also providing counter-terrorism training. Russia is currently the largest supplier of arms to the continent.
- Russia is increasing efforts to influence elections. Its strategy focuses on shoring up authoritarian strongmen in unstable yet resource-rich states thus bolstering these regimes' ability to persist. These priorities are in stark contrast to popular opinion on the continent, which favours democracy.
- Russia remains a relatively minor economic and political player on the continent, and European Union (EU) and US concerns that Russian expansion in Africa draws the continent into a broader geopolitical struggle between great powers are overstated.
- Germany and the EU should counter Russian assistance to authoritarian leaders by bolstering support for good governance and civil society strengthening initiatives.

Why is Russia expanding its footprint in Africa?

In the 2000s, a new “scramble for Africa” appeared to be unfolding. In addition to European powers, the US and increasingly China have been competing for influence on the continent. By 2014 Russia had also joined the fray. There is general agreement among scholars regarding what motivated the shift in Russian policy. Following its invasion of Crimea in 2014, Russia was thrown out of the Group of Eight (G8) and sanctions were imposed by the US, the EU and Canada, among others, increasing Moscow’s diplomatic isolation and putting a strain on its economy. Concurrently, Russia’s competition with China and India for access to markets and natural resources intensified. As it looked for new diplomatic allies, to expand its global economic footprint and to bolster its great power ambitions, Africa, which Russia had largely ignored following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, once again drew Moscow’s attention. At the same time, this entry was facilitated by US retrenchment from Africa under President Trump. African leaders for their part, concerned about China’s growing domination and keen to diversify trading and investment partners, have been receptive to Russian overtures and eager to enlist its support for the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063.

Russia relies on the legacy of Soviet policies, which viewed Africa as an important ideological battleground during the Cold War. At that time, Moscow supported anti-colonial independence and liberation movements, provided development assistance and promoted educational and cultural exchange programmes. It also established robust military and intelligence collaborations, providing weapons, training and advisors. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, most aid activities ceased, Russia’s interest in Africa waned and most of its attention focused on eastern Europe and central Asia. Since 2014, Russia has framed its expanding relationship with the continent in terms of supporting African states charting an independent path, free from constraints imposed by Western aid conditionalities. Like other emerging powers, Russia places primacy, at least rhetorically, on norms of state sovereignty and non-interference, drawing on common experiences of resisting imperial and colonial domination (Paczyńska, 2019), and presents democracy promotion by the US and Europeans as neo-colonialism. Consequently, Russian engagement has been particularly welcomed by authoritarian regimes and in contexts where democratic governance is fragile.

Russia has been increasing efforts to cultivate relationships on the continent, placing primary emphasis on military, political and economic cooperation. Russia has also been cultivating a new generation of African leaders to support its policy objectives. These efforts are closely interrelated and have proven to be useful at the UN, where African states account for almost a quarter of General Assembly votes. Thanks to its outreach, Russia has been able to count on African allies to support it on key votes and has relied on the three African states that rotate through the Security Council to back its positions. Russia views its growing engagement in Africa

through the lens of its global ambitions – a desire to be seen as a global rather than a regional power, promoting a vision of a multipolar world and undermining European and US influence (Stronski, 2019).

The first Russia–Africa Summit, held in Sochi in October 2019, was a reflection of the growing importance of this new relationship. The Summit was co-chaired by presidents Putin of Russia and Abdel al-Sisi of Egypt, and attended by 43 heads of state. It focused on strengthening political, commercial and security ties, with US\$ 12.5 billion of memoranda signed in natural resource exploitation, nuclear energy and military cooperation.

Political collaborations

Russia’s political engagements in Africa have expanded significantly. Raising particular concerns in both Europe and the US is evidence of growing Russian attempts to interfere in electoral contests on the continent. Recent investigative reports suggest that a Russian oligarch and close Putin ally, Yevgeny Prigozhin (who set up the Internet Research Agency, which engaged in information warfare during the 2016 US presidential elections) has extended his engagement to Africa. It appears that Prigozhin (who has been indicted by the US Special Counsel Robert Mueller) has been developing a strategy that mixes arms sales, electoral support and security cooperation in exchange for mining rights, business opportunities and diplomatic support at the UN. In other words, Russia’s political, economic and security collaborations in Africa are deeply intertwined.

It is not clear to what extent these initiatives have succeeded in influencing the outcomes of electoral contests; however, there is evidence that they have occurred in a number of countries, including Angola, the Central African Republic (CAR), Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Libya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Sudan and Zimbabwe. Moscow has sent regime-friendly observers to monitor elections in Zimbabwe and the DRC, where they provided positive assessments of electoral contests that were plagued by vote rigging and violence. In Guinea, Russia supported the president in changing the constitution to allow him additional terms in office.

Russian policies on the continent appear to favour political stability over democratic governance. Unlike Western actors, it does not, for instance, provide support to civil society organisations and other efforts to strengthen democratic practices. On the contrary, Russia’s strategy seems to focus on shoring up authoritarian strongmen in unstable yet natural resource-rich states. These strongmen are worried about possible “colour revolutions” and find it difficult to attract both development assistance and foreign direct investment from Western countries. Russia has been able to fill this void, by providing assistance, including military assistance, in exchange for Russian companies gaining access to natural resources and local markets. In 2019 for example, Russia provided diplomatic, financial and arms support to the Sudanese regime of Omar al-Bashir as it faced a growing

popular protest movement that eventually led to his expulsion by the military. As in the CAR, Russian security firms, including the Wagner Group, have been active there.

Economic engagement

Trade between Russia and Africa increased by 185 per cent between 2005 and 2015. Most of the trade is with north Africa and in particular Algeria, Egypt and Morocco. However, Russia remains a minor player in sub-Saharan Africa trade. Russia's commercial relations are driven by capital expenditures by state-owned firms, which provide credit and make investments primarily through mergers, acquisitions and joint ventures with African state-owned enterprises and other foreign companies with a presence on the continent.

The political support that Russia has offered to select African leaders, has translated into expanding Russian investments. Russia has made its most significant investments in north Africa, in particular Algeria, Egypt and Libya; in the Sahel, in Ethiopia, Somalia, Somaliland and Sudan; and in Angola, the CAR, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Most of these investments are in natural resources sectors, including oil, gas, minerals and metals. Moscow has also promoted nuclear power technology, although by 2019 only one nuclear plant in Egypt was under construction. A number of large Russian companies, such as Alrosa, Gazprom, Lukoil, Rostec and Rosatom, have a presence in Africa. Rosatom, the nuclear energy firm, also engages in soft power activities supporting scientific and engineering education programmes. Unlike Western firms, Russian companies are not encumbered by restrictions on engaging in corrupt practices, such as the US Foreign Corrupt Practices Act or the Council of Europe Criminal Law Convention on Corruption. This has facilitated Russia's forging of many commercial relationships with internationally sanctioned, authoritarian states, such as Sudan and Zimbabwe. However, in some cases, African civil society organisations have pushed back against their own corrupt governments, as happened in South Africa when the Zuma presidency collapsed in 2018 after he was implicated in a US\$ 76 billion deal with Rosatom.

Despite this expansion of economic relations, Russia remains a minor player when compared to China, India, Germany and the US. Given the small size and weakness of the Russian economy, it is unlikely this will fundamentally change in the near future. Likewise, Moscow's development aid, despite expanding in recent years, lags behind that of other major global donors. In 2016, Russian overall official development assistance reached US\$ 1 billion – a significant increase from US\$ 231 million in 2010; however, this still pales in comparison with China, the US, the EU or even Turkey.

Security collaborations

Russia has been generally supportive of UN peacekeeping missions. It trains peacekeepers in Russia and in 2018 was the seventh largest financial contributor to the UN's peacekeeping operations after the US, China, Japan, Germany, France and the United Kingdom (UK). However,

Russia believes that peacekeeping operations should be done only with the consent of host states and have narrow mandates. Consequently, it has sought to curtail human rights promotion, gender empowerment and environmental protection in UN mission mandates, including in the DRC, South Sudan and Mali during negotiations over budget allocations.

Russia backs "African solutions for Africa problems" and supports the bolstering of AU peacekeeping capabilities, arguing that the AU should be primarily responsible for addressing conflicts on the continent, thus reinforcing the Russian position of respecting state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs.

Like the US, UK, Germany and China among others, Russia is increasingly concerned with growing Islamist insurgency and criminal networks in Africa. The Russian government argues that globalisation means that combating transnational issues – such as terrorism, drugs and arms trafficking, and humanitarian emergencies, all of which are politically, economically and socially destabilising – requires international collaboration. It thus welcomed the establishment of the Group of Five (G5) for the Sahel Joint Force in February 2014. Russia has also strengthened cooperation with law enforcement agencies that focus on counter-terrorism and fighting organised crime and signed a number of counter-terrorism agreements to provide training, advice and arms, with states where Boko Haram and Al-Shabab Islamist groups are active.

Table 1: Top four arms suppliers to Africa in 2017	
Country	Percentage of sales
Russia	37.6%
US	16.3%
France	14.6%
China	9.2%
Source: SIPRI (2017); all rights reserved, used with permission	

The confluence of Russian willingness to offer political and electoral support to authoritarian leaders, a reduced US military engagement and the growing presence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)-West Africa have also made the region's countries more receptive to Moscow's offers of security aid. Moscow has become especially involved in the CAR, where it has provided military training and supplied arms to the government, struggling to contain a civil war. In May 2018, the president of the CAR appointed a Russian, Valery Zakharov, as the country's National Security Advisor. In 2019, a bilateral agreement signed between the DRC and Russia facilitated the deputising of Russian military advisors into its armed forces.

As of Summer 2019, Russia has signed military cooperation agreements with 21 African states, including Angola, Chad, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, and there are ongoing negotiations about establishing Russian military bases in the CAR, Egypt, Eritrea, Madagascar, Mozambique

and Sudan. What has raised alarm both in the EU and the US is the expanding presence of Russian military groups, such as the Wagner Group and Patriot Group – secretive organisations created by the Russian military that allow the Kremlin to provide security and military training for allied regimes, while creating deniability of involvement for the Putin government. These firms not only support local militaries but are also protecting private investments where local security forces are unable to do so effectively. The United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) estimates that these military groups are now active in 15 countries on the continent.

Since 2010, Russia has also been the leading supplier of military technology to African states. In 2018, Russia was the largest supplier of arms to the continent, surpassing even the US, with most of the sales going to Algeria (58.64 per cent) and Egypt (25.96 per cent), followed by Uganda (5.17 per cent), Sudan (2.63 per cent) and Angola (2.11 per cent). Part of the appeal of Russian weapons is that their sales are not encumbered by conditionalities regarding adherence to human rights and democratic norms.

Conclusion

The implications of Russia's expanding presence for political and economic dynamics within African states are much debated. Some observers are worried about the impact of Russia's policies on stability, transparency and democracy in Africa, as well as the potential for intensifying great power competition. The US and EU have both expressed concerns about expanding Russian engagement in Africa. In particular, its growing military footprint and the support provided to authoritarian leaders have alarmed the EU and the US.

However, others argue that these concerns are overblown and Russian influence should be kept in perspective.

There is no doubt that Russia has supported authoritarian leaders, expanded arms sales and the activities of its paramilitary forces, and has been able to forge diplomatic alliances with African countries. These engagements reflect Russia's ambition to be seen as a global rather than a regional power.

However, it is also true that Russia is constrained by its limited military and economic resources. Thus, although Russia is playing a more important role in Africa, its investments on the continent are small compared to those in Asia, which remains much more strategically and economically important to Russia. In fact, the 2016 "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation", mentions Africa only in the final paragraph. Likewise, Russian assistance and investments in Africa pale in comparison to those of other global actors, including emerging powers like China and India. Russia has also lagged behind other donors in providing aid to battle the coronavirus pandemic.

That being said, Russian support to smaller African states and those that have been internationally shunned and sanctioned does translate into significant political influence in those contexts. However, its support for authoritarian regimes is in stark contrast to popular opinion on the continent, which favours democracy and thus may undermine Russia's long-term interests. This provides an opportunity for the EU to counteract Russian influence, by supporting good governance and civil society strengthening initiatives and pushing back on Russian disinformation campaigns through assistance to local news media.

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Published with financial support from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

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DOI: 10.23661/bp15.2020



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