



RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE STRUGGLE IN AFRICA

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Introduction

Russia has a positive legacy in Africa dating back to the USSR. Russia developed very close relations with the continent during the USSR period. However, these relations lost momentum in the early periods of the Russian Federation, which replaced it after the dissolution of the USSR. However, there has been a change, particularly with the process that began in the 2010s. The tension of Russia's relations with the West causes Moscow to produce strategies focusing on Africa in its foreign policy. In this context, it can be seen that Russia and the West develop strategies to limit each other's global influence in the African continent.

Long before Russia invaded Ukraine, international opinion held that Moscow's influence in Africa was increasing. Russia uses two avenues notably in growing its influence on the continent. The first is through arms sales to African countries and the Russian mercenary company Wagner. The second is energy investments made by the Kremlin administration in African countries.

Although the USA and China come to the fore in influence competition in Africa, Russia is also trying to turn the global power balance in its favor through the policy it follows in Africa.

In addition, the fact that most nations in Africa did not join in sanctions against Russia in the Russia-Ukraine War and adopted

neutral policies might be viewed as a success of Moscow's policy towards the continent. Therefore, the causes of the current situation are worth examining. In this context, Russia's intricate relations and partnerships in the African continent are important.

1. What is Russia's strategy for gaining influence on the African continent?

1.1. Defense Cooperation and Arms Sales

As wars of global proxy escalate, so does competition over control of Africa's vast natural resources and strategic trade routes, which are likely to shape Africa's future geopolitical dynamics. To this end, Russia uses private military companies such as the "Wagner Group" as a tool to increase its influence in Africa.¹

The fact that most of the African countries have fragile state structures and unstable governments creates a free field of activity for the terrorist organizations in the continent. For this reason, some states in Africa have reached an agreement with mercenary groups in order to defend their territory against these terrorist organizations. In this context, it is seen that Russia's influence in Africa has increased in recent years thanks to the Wagner Group.

A special emphasis should be made for "defense cooperation" in Russia's relationship with African countries. At this point, one of the most striking aspects is the presence Russia has in the arms market of African countries. The report prepared by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), which monitored the arms trade in the world in 2022, shows that Moscow was the largest arms supplier of African countries between 2017-2021. While Russia's arms sales to Africa constituted 44% of major arms imports to the continent, Russia was followed by the United States of America (USA) with 17%, China with 10% and France with 6.1%.²

The most important fact that these data reveal is that Moscow dominates almost half of the arms market in Africa. Even when the ratios of the USA, China and France are added up, they cannot reach the ratio of Russia. In this context, it would not be wrong to say that Russia is on its way to "being unrivaled". In addition, the development of Russia's relations with the African countries through defense will facilitate the transformation of relations into a "strategic" nature in the future.

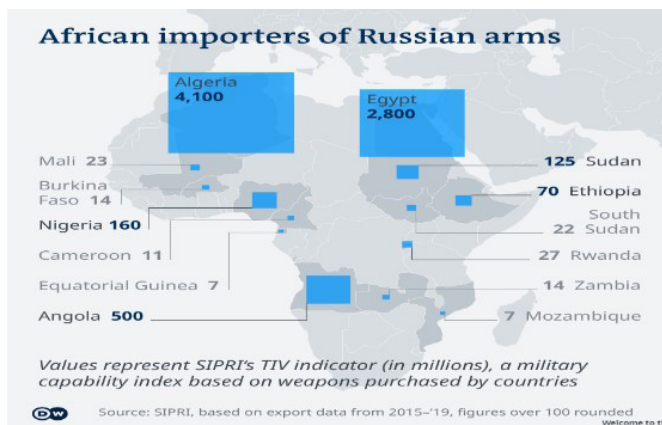
Russia's biggest arms buyers in Africa and the countries that have been doing so for the longest time include countries such as Algeria, Angola, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, Morocco and Uganda.³

¹ Vamo Soko-Bintu Zahara Sokor, "Russia and China Ambiguity Alliance in Africa", PRIOD BLogs, <https://blogs.prio.org/2022/09/russia-and-china-ambiguity-alliance-in-africa/>, [Date of Accession: 25.10.2022].

² "Russia is the Largest Supplier of Weapons to Africa - New Report", *The Independent*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/russia-is-largest-supplier-of-weapons-to-africa-new-report/>, [Date of Accession: 25.10.2022].

³ Moses B. Khanyile, "Sanctions Against Russia Will Affect Arms Sales to Africa: The Risks and Opportunities", *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/sanctions-against-russia-will-affect-arms-sales-to-africa-the-risks-and-opportunities-180038>, [Date of Accession: 25.10.2022].

Image 1: List of African Countries Importing Arms from Russia⁴



From the table above, it is understood that Russia's "most distinctive" factor in gaining influence on the African continent is the sale of weapons. The Moscow administration is pursuing a policy that seeks to connect countries in Africa to itself through "arms sales".

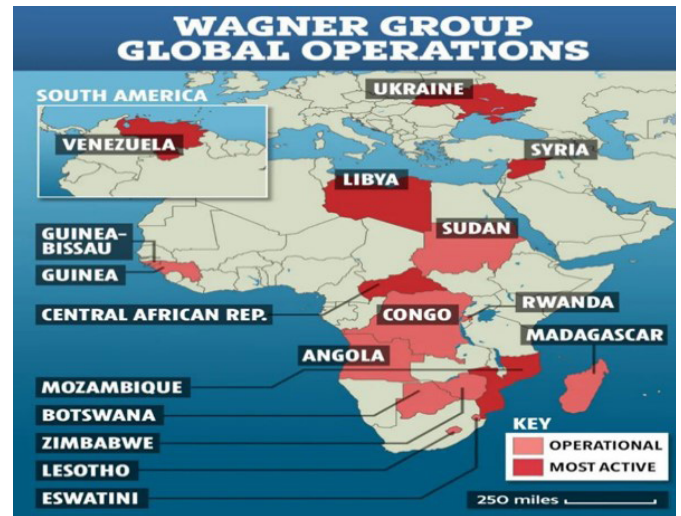
Image 2: Activities of the Russian Wagner Group in Africa⁵



⁴ "Lavrov Tours Africa Amid Diplomatic Isolation", *Deustch Welle*, <https://www.dw.com/en/sergey-lavrov-tours-africa-amid-diplomatic-isolation/a-60745880>, [Date of Accession: 26.10.2022].

⁵ "Russia's Wagner Group's Presence in Africa Goes Beyond Libya", *Daily Sabah*, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/africa/russias-wagner-groups-presence-in-africa-goes-beyond-libya>, [Date of Accession: 24.10.2022].

Image 3: Table Showing the Activities of the Wagner Group in the World on A Country Basis⁶



As can be seen from the two tables above, the Russian Wagner Group is focused on the African continent. Wagner is also known to operate in Ukraine, Syria and Venezuela. The fact that African countries have more unstable structures than on a global scale is a driving element that strengthens Russia's influence in the region.

1.2. Energy Investments

One of the policies Russia pursues to gain influence in Africa is "energy investments" on the continent. Russia, like China, does not stipulate the conditions offered by international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank regarding its investments in Africa.⁷ The fact that Russia does not impose on some dictatorship-ruled nations, particularly in Africa, on issues such

⁶ "War Crimes by Russians in Libya, Syria and the Central African Republic", *Il Corriere Nazionale*, <https://www.corrierenazionale.net/138480-2/>, [Date of Accession: 24.10.2022].

⁷ "How Russia is Growing Its Strategic Influence in Africa", *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/how-russia-is-growing-its-strategic-influence-in-africa-110930>, [Date of Accession: 25.10.2022].

as “human rights and not to interfere with the internal structure” is one of the major motivations driving these countries to cooperate with Moscow. In this context, while Russia invests in the continent, it does not care about criteria such as democracy like the USA or other international organizations. Russia intends to strengthen its influence by making agreements with superstructures, mostly found in African countries. Therefore, what matters for Russia is the summit rather than the base. In other words, Russia’s goal is not to win over African peoples, but to win over their elites.

Under Vladimir Putin, it is observed that Russia’s trade with the African continent has increased significantly. In this respect, it is noteworthy to mention that trade between Russia and Africa increased by 185% between 2005 and 2015. Russia’s economic focus in Africa is on the “energy sector”. Key Russian investments in Africa are in the fields of oil, natural gas and nuclear energy. Furthermore, the lack of electricity for 620 million Africans creates prospective markets for Russia’s nuclear energy industry. In this context, many Russian companies such as Gazprom, Lukoil Rostec and Rasotam operate in Africa.⁸ It can be said that Moscow uses nuclear technology both to make profit from African countries and to increase its political power on the continent.

In addition to all this, the strained relations with the West after Moscow’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014

and the fact that these relations came to the breaking point with the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 cause Russia to seek new markets. In this context, the fact that most countries in Africa have rich underground mines and are governed by unstable governments, whets Moscow’s appetite.

Moreover, the details of Russia’s agreements with African countries remain almost always confidential, making it difficult to assess the true value of those agreements or their contribution to African countries. It should be noted that Russia has natural resources agreements with about twenty African countries.⁹

Image 4: Table Showing Russia’s Energy Investments, Arms Deals and Other



Activities on the African Continent¹⁰

As can be seen from the relevant table, while Russia invests energy in Africa, it focuses more on strategic areas. Among these, activities to extract nuclear energy, mineral and underground wealth have a significant place. It should also be taken into account that energy agreements

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Russia’s Strategic Goals in Africa”, *Africa Center*, <https://africacenter.org/experts/joseph-siegle/russia-strategic-goals-africa/>, (Date of Accession: 25.10.2022).

¹⁰ “The Kremlin’s Inroads After The Africa Summit”, *Institute for the Study of War*, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/kremlins-inroads-after-africa-summit>, (Date of Accession: 22.10.2022).

are long-term agreements and include geopolitical preferences. Therefore, it is easier for Russia's relations with African countries in the context of energy to turn into a strategic partnership. Cooperation in the field of energy will also African countries to increase their purchases of weapons from Russia in the future. This situation also allows African countries to contract Russian private military companies like as Wagner. Russia's energy investments cause its relations with the countries on the continent to gain a multifaceted nature. Of course, one of the points to remember is that not every country in Africa has a strong bureaucracy and state structure, as in the case of Egypt. The fragile and unstable structure in Africa is the main element that accelerates Russia's increasing influence on the continent.

Nevertheless, it can be said that the first option is more effective if a comparison is made on whether "arms and defence agreements or energy investments are more effective" in increasing Russia's influence in Africa. So, Russia relies more on mercenaries and arms deals than on energy deals and investments to gain influence on the African continent.

1.3. Examples of Sudan and Mali

The examples of Sudan and Mali are important in terms of showing how Russia has gained influence in Africa. Russia is trying to gain access to a sea port in the Red Sea, especially through

the city of Port Sudan.¹¹ Russia reached an agreement to gain access to Port Sudan during the term of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir (1989-2019); however, the military government, which seized power after the coup in 2019, froze the agreement in April 2021 after intense pressure from the USA.

In addition to all this, the fact that another military coup took place in Sudan in October 2021 turned the process in favor of Russia. Following the aforementioned coup, the USA, the European Union (EU) and the World Bank decided to freeze financial aid to Sudan.¹² As a result of the West's isolation of Sudan following the coup, relations between Moscow and Khartoum re-accelerated. In this context, it is understood that the Kremlin aims to increase its influence in African geopolitics through "crises". In addition, Moscow significantly increased its influence in Sudan through the Wagner group both after the coup and with Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹³

From the map above, it can be understood more clearly why Russia is interested in the port in Port Sudan. The port is the gateway to Africa. It can also be said that Russia is trying to challenge the USA in the region by increasing its activity in the Red Sea.

Another African country that Russia has been trying to increase its influence on recently has been Mali. It can be said that Russia continued its relations

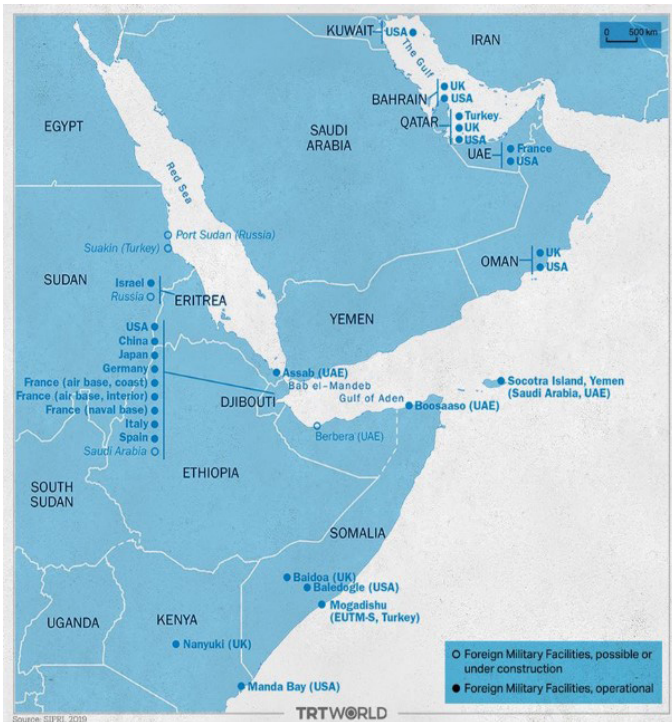
¹¹ Joseph Siegle, "The Future of Russia-Africa Relations", *Brookings Institution*, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2022/02/02/the-future-of-russia-africa-relations/>, (Date of Accession: 25.10.2022).

¹² Anton Mardasov, "Russia Eyes Port Sudan As Key Naval Hub", *Al Monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/08/russia-eyes-port-sudan-key-naval-hub#ixzz7ipoj6sLK>, (Date of Accession: 25.10.2022).

¹³ "Marc Espanol", "Russia, Wagner Group Expand Ties with Sudan", *Al Monitor*, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/russia-wagner-group-expand-ties-sudan>, (Date of Accession: 25.10.2022).

with Africa with a rapidly increasing momentum after the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. One of the most obvious examples of this is Mali. It is seen that Russia has filled the void France left as it withdrew from Mali. Moscow is increasing its influence in Mali through the Wagner group.¹⁴ Especially after the military coup in Mali in 2020, Bamako's relations with Paris have been strained. During this time, Mali began to collaborate with the Wagner group, which resulted in France's withdrawal from its former colony. Thus, Russia is feeding on "instabilities and crises" in Africa.

Image 5: Location of the Port in Port Sudan City¹⁵



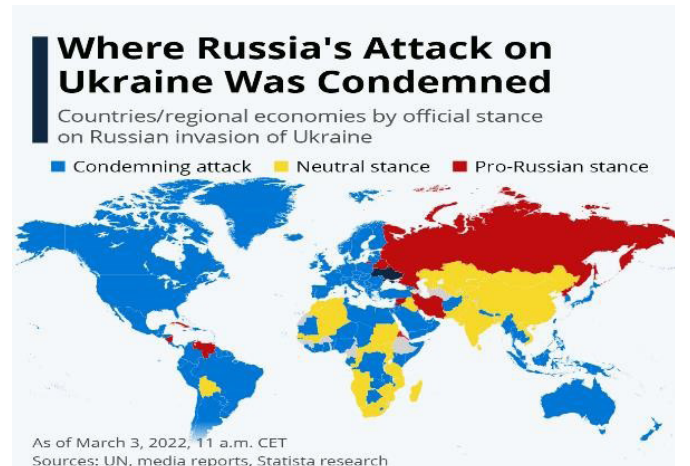
¹⁴ "As Europe Withdraws from Mali, Russia Gets the Upper Hand", *Atlantic Council*, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/as-europe-withdraws-from-mali-russia-gets-the-upper-hand/>, (Date of Accession: 25.10.2022).

¹⁵ "Why is Russia Establishing A Naval Base in Sudan?", *TRT World*, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/why-is-russia-establishing-a-naval-base-in-sudan-42205>, (Date of Accession: 26.10.2022).

2. The Impact of the War in Ukraine on Russia's Approach to African Countries

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is possible to argue that Moscow's foreign policy has a lot of rhetoric that emphasizes Africa and Moscow continues to pursue a policy of increasing its influence in these regions. However, the war was not universally condemned throughout Africa.

Image 6: States Condemning Russia's Attack at the UN in March 2022¹⁶



In particular, this table becomes even more meaningful with the Wagner tables mentioned in the previous section. This situation might be seen as the product of Russia's policy in Africa.

The reservations of many African countries to take sides in the war in Ukraine became even more apparent in April 2022 when the United Nations (UN) General Assembly voted to suspend Russia's membership in the Human Rights Council. Of the 54 African states,

¹⁶ "Where Russia's Attack on Ukraine Was Condemned", *Statista*, <https://www.statista.com/chart/26946/stance-on-ukraine-invasion/>, (Date of Accession: 25.10.2022).

only 10 voted in favour of the resolution, nine opposed it, and 35 abstained or did not participate in the vote.¹⁷

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited countries such as Egypt, the Republic of the Congo, Uganda and Ethiopia in July 2022. In a statement published in newspapers in the four countries he visited, Lavrov praised the African continent for “resisting attempts of the USA and their European satellites to impose a unipolar world order.”¹⁸

With this visit, Lavrov tried to show the world that Russia is not an isolated country. In this respect, Russia's foreign policy in Africa is important in preserving its arguments.

Therefore, the fact that Russia has increased its influence on the continent in recent years has been an important factor in most African countries' pursuit of a neutral policy in the Russia-Ukraine War. As previously emphasized, Moscow's expansion of its influence and investments in Africa with mercenary groups has a significant impact on African countries' attitudes.

It is also seen that the Kremlin has taken steps to create new crisis areas in Africa during its tense relations with the West. For example, the West is the number one target of the global food crisis that Russia is fuelling. It can be argued that one of Moscow's goals is to ensure inhabitants of poor nations in Asia and Africa, where food shipments cannot be made, to migrate to Europe.

On October 24, 2022, Oleg Ozerov, the Russian Ambassador and chairman of the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum, emphasized that they expected most African leaders to participate in the second Russia-Africa Summit to be held in July 2023, saying, “There are many serious political problems that need to be discussed and solved in order to arrange the architecture of a new multipolar world.”¹⁹ Ozerov's words are striking in that they show how Russia's approach to Africa was shaped along with the Ukrainian War. In this context, it is clear that Russia's policy towards Africa in the multipolar world discourse will be very important. In addition, with the summit, Russia is expected to speed its hunt for new markets, and hence may turn even more to Africa.

Conclusion

Russia has greatly extended its collaboration with African countries in recent years, contributing to the positive legacy of the USSR on the African continent. In this context, Russia is increasing its influence on the continent by using private military companies.

Russia's use of Wagner elements, in particular, to enhance its influence in Africa, is appealing to African countries, the majority of which are governed by dictatorships and military governments.

In other words, these countries do not deal directly with the state. So, there is no bureaucratic process.

¹⁷ “Lavrov Tours Africa Amid Diplomatic Isolation”, *Deustch Welle*, <https://www.dw.com/en/sergey-lavrov-tours-africa-amid-diplomatic-isolation/a-60745880>. [Date of Accession: 26.10.2022].

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ “Russia Expects Most African Heads of State to Attend Russia-Africa Summit”, *Tass*, <https://tass.com/politics/1526725>. [Date of Accession: 26.10.2022].

In the process that began with the Russia-Ukraine War, it can be claimed that with the emergence of new security paradigms, the USA may prefer to limit Russia's influence in Africa rather than China. Although China has an economic advantage over Russia in Africa, Moscow also has an advantage in arms sales and defense cooperation. In this context, it can be said that Washington's priority in Africa in the current conjuncture will be to prevent Moscow from increasing its influence.

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