

# Russia's Footprint in Africa

Moscow's presence on the African continent increased in the years preceding its invasion of Ukraine. Now, this presence is intimately linked to the war and to the resultant political and economic struggle.

By Charlotte Hirsbrunner and  
Niklas Masuhr

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has created global shockwaves. Africa has been affected along a variety of axes, such as the elevated intensity of great-power competition, attempts to influence African public opinion, and trade shortfalls resulting from the war. Due to a wide range of pre-invasion ties with Russia and with the US and its allies and partners, as well as diverging national interests, African governments' reactions have not been uniform. Only a few have openly sided with Ukraine in condemning the Russian assault, but others have taken a more centrist position and abstained from UN General Assembly votes that condemned Russia in large numbers. The latter has caused some consternation in Western capitals and commentaries, prompting calls for African states to take a more principled stance in support of Kyiv. Through African prisms, however, policy choices are much less clear-cut, and the pressure to align with Ukrainian interests and – by extension – with those of the US and its allies, presents a problem.

In many ways, Africa has become another political arena in which the Russian invasion is negotiated through pressure to condemn Moscow and to join sanctions regimes. Africa serves as an indicator of how successful these efforts by the US and its allies are outside of their own constituencies. Looking at Africa is worthwhile also



The first plenary session of the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi, Russia, October 24, 2019.  
*Sergei Chirikov / Reuters*

insofar as Russia sought to increase its footprint in the preceding years, culminating in the first Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi in 2019. The planned follow-up summit in 2023 will thus indicate to what degree Russia has managed to present itself as an alternative to the US and Europe.

Hence, the future of Russia's presence remains open. It might contract in scope and influence because of sanctions and the pressures of the war, negatively affecting its reliability as an external partner to African

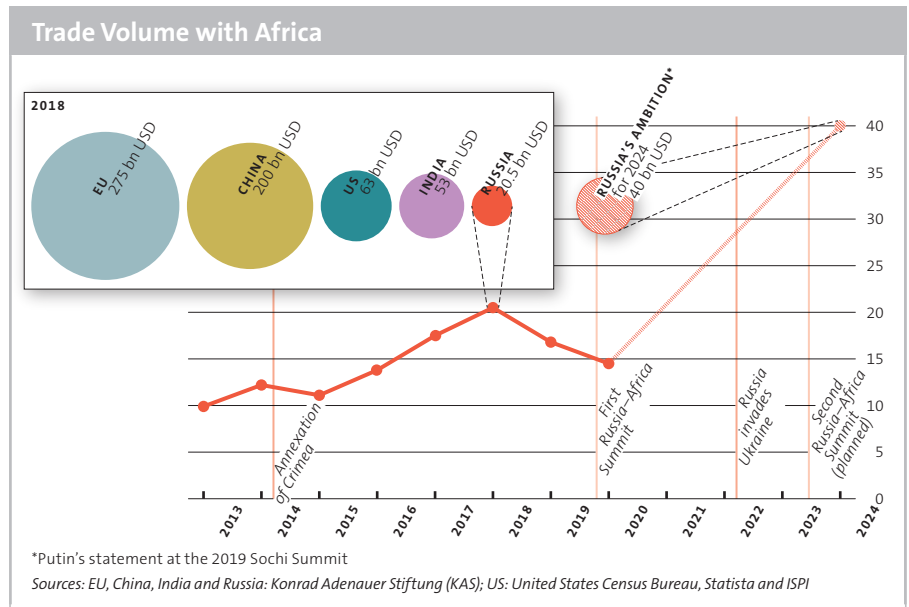
countries. However, it is also conceivable that Moscow will assume more direct control over paramilitary operations in Africa – previously, mercenaries of the so-called Wagner Group constituted the most prominent element of Russia's presence, in part by operating in its own self-interest. Hence, with Russia's confrontation with NATO escalating, the Kremlin might view Africa increasingly as a secondary theater of competition. Regardless of scope and scale, it is likely that Russia's footprint in Africa will remain highly heterogeneous

and lack uniformity. Russian agents probably will be able to play to their strengths opportunistically, such as by latching onto the Soviet Union’s anti-colonial credentials, while being constrained by having little to offer in the way of substantial economic prospects.

**Russia’s pre-2022 presence**

Russia’s invasion has upped the stakes in its rivalry with NATO and might increasingly extend the rivalry into Africa. Prior to February 2022, its growing presence in Africa was largely seen as a nuisance at best. Moscow’s footprint appeared highly opportunistic and minimal, limited to a handful of theaters. Its agents on the ground tended to be ostensibly private actors, drawn from Russia’s oligarchic “shadow state,” not the Russian government. At the center of these networks stands Yevgeniy Prigozhin, formerly the Russian military’s main catering contractor, who has fostered business and political ties to local African rulers and other partners. The Russian state has so far assumed a supporting role in these networking endeavors. Equally, the profit motive of the expeditionary oligarchs usually seemed to trump national interest. Russia’s presence was thus more of a patchwork of opportunistic, disparate interests, as opposed to following a Kremlin master plan (see [CSS Analysis No 274](#)). The most prominent element in Prigozhin’s network is the now-infamous “Wagner” mercenary outfit. Founded in 2014 during Russia’s initial incursions into Ukraine, the Wagner Group has become both a paramilitary element in Prigozhin’s network-building and a semi-deniable tool of Russian power projection – with the line between the two often being ambiguous at best.

While the Wagner Group has usually maintained a light footprint, Libya and the Central African Republic (CAR) are exceptions to this model in Africa. In the former, Wagner was deployed in force, supporting local Russian allies. The most prominent case of a Wagner deployment, however, have been efforts to entrench the government of Faustin-Archange Touadéra in CAR. These mercenaries are flanking the activities of “political technologists” – Russian terminology for, effectively, political consultants specialized in aiding autocrats – suppressing local resistance. While the paramilitary elements caught most of the media attention, Prigozhin’s CAR activities could be described more as an attempted semi-private comprehensive approach, aiming to combine military and non-military means. Pentagon press releas-



es tended to view CAR as a potential Russian bridgehead on the African continent. Civilian observers and analysts often poured water on this securitized interpretation, pointing out Russia’s presence may be visible, yet flimsy by any meaningful quantitative indicator.

However, France’s 2022 decision to withdraw its forces from Mali after a military coup government invited Russian paramilitaries might signal a shift into a phase that is more akin to Cold War-era patterns. Since its rivalry with the West seems to be viewed as a matter of survival for the Putin regime, Moscow may assume more direct control over Russian assets in Africa to harm US and NATO interests. Mercenary profit motive might consequently at least be complemented or even eventually supplanted by strategic control and a clearer alignment with Russia’s national interests. With cadres of experienced mercenary fighters already having been deployed to Ukraine to underpin the military’s shaky performance – and to bolster Prigozhin’s standing as a domestic power center – it is an open question how such a Russian ‘low footprint high impact’ posture in Africa might look.

**Intensified Rivalry**

Despite Russian hopes of a quick and clean regime change operation, its war against Ukraine has intensified its competition with NATO across the whole spectrum and elevated the stakes involved. Washington and its partners have sought to expand

the sanctions regime and isolate Russia diplomatically and economically. In line with these efforts, Western allies have undertaken great efforts to paint Russian aggression as universally condemned globally. These efforts have had mixed success regarding African countries. For one, many African governments have pre-established links with Russia. While Moscow’s trade volume with Africa may be dwarfed by that of China, the EU, and the United States, Russia is the preeminent exporter of military goods and has strengthened its security partnerships across the continent. Thus, for many African countries and – perhaps equally important – regimes, Russian arms and replacement parts are of vital concern.

But bilateral Russo-African governmental and trade relations do not fully explain the widespread reticence of many African governments to pick sides. Many of them do not want to be dragged back into the days of the Cold War, in which they were forced to choose discrete and opposed camps. Calls by Western powers, often couched in normative terms, to side with Ukraine as the obvious defender, thus elide the fact that African governments are following national interests that may or may not be aligned with these calls. In particular, the shadow of China’s growing footprint on the continent makes openly siding with a US and NATO-supported actor an unpalatable option. While China’s response to the invasion has been cautious to ambiguous, it has not chosen to break ranks with Russia. Beijing fears a weakening of its neighbor and

partner, which in turn ties up US strategic assets and attention (see *CSS Analysis No. 303, CSS Policy Perspective Vol. 10/13*). As a result, China has an interest in counteracting the notion that Russia was isolated globally, with African ambivalence being important evidence to the contrary.

### Information Dimension

In many cases, for African governments, siding with NATO explicitly equates to siding with their former colonial overlords. Russian information operations have deliberately targeted this historic linkage and simultaneously latched onto the Soviet Union's anti-colonial credentials. During the Cold War, Moscow was able to position itself as a global champion of anti-colonialism, which in the African context equated to an anti-Western position. Moscow can thus claim to have been on the right side of history, as far as Africa is concerned. The most prominent liberation movement-turned government in this regard is perhaps South Africa's African National Congress (ANC). In the contemporary environment, this means that Russian actors can have a certain public relations bonus relative to their US and European rivals. For example, in Mali, Wagner was at least partially successful in presenting itself as a viable alternative to the putschist government and segments of the local population. This bonus was not necessarily based in Wagner paramilitary counter-terrorism credentials, but more so seemingly by simply being opposed to former colonizer France.

This perception of Russia, however, is not a given but rather the result (at least partially) of a wide-ranging Russian information campaign. Russian actors have used both traditional and online-based media to present Russia as the rightful heir to the Soviet Union and its pro-African efforts. For example, Russia has managed to monopolize the position of heir to the Soviets – a position that Ukraine does not seem to hold among African publics, despite having been a major element of the USSR. Russia is framing its invasion as a defensive war against the very powers that previously colonized Africa and/or supposedly seek to keep up African dependence on the West.

The example of Mali bears out how successful Russia's information campaigns can be both at the level of regimes and amongst the population. After the French withdrawal was announced, the leaders of Mali's military government repeatedly explicitly thanked Putin for Russia's respect of

the country's sovereignty (in contrast to France and the West). Similarly, once Russian assets were deployed, there were public demonstrations in support of the new security providers that were deemed authentic by observers. This contrasts with credible reports of war crimes committed by Wagner mercenaries in CAR. Already in 2021, rapporteurs with the UN Human Rights Council pointed to systemic violations by "Russian instructors" embedded with CAR forces. In addition, since the displacement of France in Mali, the security situation in the country's north has deteriorated, not improved. Wagner's manufactured reputation as a competent counter-terrorism force thus appears to be unwarranted. That being said, in January 2023 France withdrew troops from Burkina Faso, again at the request of a military junta – with Russian political and informational support potentially to be followed by mercenaries.

### Trade and Economic Cooperation

At least since the first Russia-Africa Summit in 2019, Moscow has visibly tried to increase economic and diplomatic links with African governments at the highest political level. Similar to political ties, trade relations between Russia and African countries do not present a neat, uniform picture.

Since the early 2010s, the trade volume between Russia and the African continent has been steadily growing. This development can be interpreted as a consequence of sanctions that were imposed on Russia after its annexation of Crimea in 2014, which caused Russia to look for alternative economic partners. The Russo-African trade volume reached a previous peak of 20.5 billion USD in 2018. In an indication of Russian priorities, President Putin officially called for trade to be doubled by 2025, aiming to reach 40 billion USD. Due to the ongoing war in Ukraine and its consequences, this plan, which may have been overly ambitious at the outset, now seems to be relegated to wishful thinking.

The Russian economic engagement with the African continent is most pronounced in three sectors: weapons exports, mining activities, and energy exploration. However, beyond these, Russia remains an economic lightweight compared to other trade partners of Africa. In comparison with the trade volume of others, such as the EU (275 billion USD), China (200 billion USD), the US (62 billion USD) or India (54 billion USD), Russia's 20.5 billion USD trade volume in 2018 seems to be

### Further Reading

Ben Chandler, "Russia-Ukraine Crisis: Impact on Africa", *Mo Ibrahim Foundation*, April 2022.

Allard Duursma / Niklas Masuhr, "Russia's Return to Africa in a Historical and Global Context: Anti-Imperialism, Patronage, and Opportunism", *South African Journal of International Affairs* 49:4, 2022.

Kimberly Marten, "Russia's Back in Africa: Is the Cold War Returning?", *The Washington Quarterly* 42:4, 2019.

Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti, "Russia's Soft-Power Sources in Africa", *SIIA Policy Insights* 126, March 2022.

rather limited (see graphic on p. 2). These statistics are also skewed geographically, since the majority (74 per cent) of Russian trade relations with Africa are concentrated in Northern African countries.

As Russia accounts for just 2-3 per cent of Africa's international goods trade, the impact of the sanctions on Africa's external trade prospects are minor. Nevertheless, the war and the resulting sanctions that were imposed on Russia continue to have serious effects on several areas of Russia's engagement in Africa. In the first instance, the dominant arms sector has been affected by Russia's invasion – not only because of sanctions, but also due to Russian battlefield needs. These disruptions could conceivably translate into long-term implications impinging upon its role as a reliable weapons exporter to Africa. Indeed, in August 2022, the head of the Russian state arms export agency confirmed this – at the very least temporary – trend by stating that "the revenues from Russian arms exports in 2022 will be down 26 per cent from last year."

Beyond arms, Russian companies run multiple projects in African countries in the fields of mining (diamonds, aluminum, bauxite, gold, platinum etc.) and are involved in hydrocarbon and nuclear energy infrastructure projects. These projects, however, might be likewise complicated by pressure on Russia via sanctions and increased needs of its own industries. One such example is the El Dabaa nuclear power plant that was signed to be built and financed by the Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation *Rosatom* in Egypt. Several project partners, such as globally valued South Korean partners, have already

expressed concerns about their partnership and the sanctions imposed on Russia.

The war has caused concern in Africa along a separate track, namely imports of food-stuffs. Russia and Ukraine are significant exporters of food commodities and fertilizers. Taken together, roughly 30 per cent of globally traded wheat is exported by either country, as well as 20 per cent of corn, and 70 per cent of sunflower seeds. The invasion forces have cut a swathe of destruction through Eastern and Southern Ukraine, specifically the regions in which the majority of the country's agricultural sector is based. Beyond short-term disrupt-

## The 2023 Russia-Africa Summit will in many ways be indicative of where Moscow stands on the continent.

tions, some agricultural areas may only slowly recover from the devastation of the war and its longer-term effects, such as unexploded ordnance – both factors exacerbated by the artillery-heavy nature of fighting preferred by Russia.

As a result, the war has cut a supply gap into the global food market, with many low-income countries being especially affected by a decline in physical exports and, indirectly, by increased prices. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN therefore expects global food prices to rise by 8-22 per cent in 2023. This leaves many low-income countries with either higher bills to pay or less food to eat.

In July 2022, Russia and Ukraine, together with the UN and Turkey, signed the *Black Sea Grain Initiative* that aimed to allow resumption of exports from Ukraine. Nevertheless, the insecurity of African countries regarding the provision of food commodities and fertilizers remains. Russian information operations have seized upon food insecurity, blaming the “NATO proxy”

Ukraine for threatening Russia and endangering African lives in the process. Similarly, Ukrainian unwillingness to compromise on territorial integrity and political sovereignty are being framed as intransigence and Western interference risking African lives.

### Bottom Line

It is too soon to tell how the invasion of Ukraine will affect Russia's previously growing African footprint. In general, observers and analysts point to two archetypical scenarios: withdrawal or increased strategic control by the Kremlin. Reports of Russian paramilitary cadres being redeployed to the Ukrainian battlefield might indicate the former. This line of argument revolves around Russia's lack of experienced manpower and the need to marshal resources from further afield, in order to sustain its war effort. The counterargument, however, points out that Russia's presence in Africa is very much built and maintained on the cheap; specifically its use of mercenaries and the selective nature of engagement. Furthermore, the increased competition with the West would indicate Moscow might increasingly ‘conscript’ (or ‘nationalize’) non-state and semi-state assets for strategic effects. This, however, may be more easily planned for than operationalized: The invasion of Ukraine has very much shown that simply being in possession of strategic levers across a broad front, such as information outlets, deniable paramilitary forces, and political allies do not in themselves create strategic utility. Specifically, it can be argued that at some point Wagner's shine as the alternative to Western security assistance might wear off. It is questionable how long effective Russian information operations can offset ineffective or even counterproductive operations.

A similar delta might develop between Russia's popular reputation as it burnishes its anti-colonial credentials across the spectrum of new and old media versus loss of

reliability as a trade partner and arms supplier. The 2023 Russia-Africa Summit will in many ways be indicative of where Moscow stands on the continent, both in relation to the global perception of its war against Ukraine and in terms of its viability as a perceived alternative power center. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov's warm reception in South Africa in January 2023, to be followed by joint military exercises, shows how successful Russian diplomacy can be.

Regardless how these political narratives play out in Africa, at present Russia possesses a range of advantages over the West and even China, despite its comparatively miniscule war chest. Moscow is able to follow narrowly defined goals, largely disregarding systemic questions and second-order effects. In Africa, Russian actors are solely oriented towards regimes and power networks, without much concern for their legitimacy or human rights record. Wagner's deployment to Mali in many ways seems to have been the best-case scenario as far as these strengths are concerned: quick, opportunistic decision-making, a fertile ground for anti-colonial narratives, and a security vacuum that needed to be filled. Events in Burkina Faso might indicate that aligning with military coup governments harnessing anti-Western resentment might prove a useful general vector for Russian actors. To what extent these interventions become a template for future activity or even constitute the high-water mark of Russia's resurgent African activities remains to be seen.

For more on perspectives on Euro-Atlantic Security, see [CSS core theme page](#).

**Charlotte Hirsbrunner** is a former intern of the Global Security Team at the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich.

**Niklas Masuhr** is a Senior Researcher in the Global Security Team at the CSS.