

RUSSIA'S AFRICAN POLICY

Increasingly affected by the sanctions imposed by Western countries, Russia has intensified its efforts in Africa to project itself as a geopolitically active great power.

Russia hopes to achieve rapid diplomatic and economic success with the cheapest possible means; however, in reality, it lacks the capacity to fully implement its plans in Africa.

Russia sees itself as having the greatest potential as a provider of security services in Africa and focuses on politically unstable countries that provide Russia with opportunities to profit from local natural resources.

RUSSIA'S AFRICAN EFFORTS

Increasingly affected by the sanctions imposed by Western countries in response to starting full-scale hostilities in Ukraine, Russia has intensified its efforts in Africa to project itself as a geopolitically active great power. While Russia's actions aim to sustain that image, its increased efforts in Africa are also due to the matter of fact need to avoid essentially being alone in United Nations votes on matters concerning Russia's aggression against Ukraine. In this latter goal, Russia has not succeeded. Nevertheless, Russia continues to try to reduce Western influence and redefine the balance of power in Africa. Russia is looking to Africa for a success story, for allies and for support for its anti-Western activities and narratives. It hopes to achieve quick diplomatic success in African countries with the cheapest possible means by providing security services to them to gain control over them and make them dependent on Russia to profit from the rising opportunities down the line.

Russia is looking to Africa for a success story, for allies and for support for its anti-Western activities and narratives.

Russia's interest in Africa increased several years before the full-scale military attack on Ukraine. The first Russia-Africa summit in Sochi in 2019 falls into this context. The event received extensive media coverage as Russia promised to double its trade with African countries in five years. However, since then, the volume of Russian trade with African countries has decreased from 20 billion US dollars in 2018 to 17.6 billion dollars in 2021. Russia overestimates its role and influence and lacks the capacity to implement its plans in Africa fully. Although Russia's endeavours were probably somewhat hampered by the coronavirus pandemic that started at the end of 2019, they are mainly set back due to intense competition. China meanwhile managed to increase trade with African countries by 35 per cent, to a record 254 billion dollars in 2021.

Despite the setbacks, the Russian leadership sees the situation in Africa as favourable for Russia and tries to expand its foreign policy levers by developing cooperation with African countries in multilateral and bilateral formats. Russian representatives in Africa are looking for opportunities to gain popularity by presenting themselves as a helpful and reliable partner with friendly rhetoric. According to the information available to us, Russia plans to expand its network of diplomatic missions in Africa, increase its diplomatic staff, simplify currency transactions with African countries and diversify payment methods. To implement these plans more efficiently, Russia plans to expand its membership in organisations. For example, it has expressed interest in obtaining observer status in the African Parliamentary Union.

IN ANTICIPATION OF THE NEXT RUSSIA-AFRICA SUMMIT

The next summit between Russia and Africa is planned to occur in Saint Petersburg in the summer of 2023. Organising the summit has not been without problems, and the event has been postponed several times. Originally scheduled to take place in 2022 in Addis Ababa, then in Sochi, and even as a video conference, the summit will finally take place in Russia, as sanctions make it difficult for the Russian delegation to travel to Africa. Coordinated by the Russian foreign ministry, the preparations for the summit were not particularly productive. The organising committee has been working under the direct authority of President Vladimir Putin to avoid further setbacks, led by his adviser Yuri Ushakov, since July 2022.

Since the beginning of the full-scale attack on Ukraine, Russia, which intends to treat food security as a priority topic at the summit, has systematically spread and exploited false claims about the critical situation of world food security and Western sanctions' negative impact on it. With the help of this narrative, Russia amplifies the international community's fears and props up its proposals for at least a partial lifting of the sanctions. Accusing the West of damaging Africa with sanctions, the Russian leadership, including President Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, call on African countries to put more pressure on Western countries to ease sanctions that inhibit trade (e.g., fertilisers) and push them to spread rhetoric that suits Russian interests.

Shipments of fertiliser and grain are promised in return and, if necessary, credit to pay for these. However, according to information available to us, the communication between Russian representatives, who present themselves as a helpful partner, gives a more vivid picture of their real attitude towards the representatives of African countries. If negotiations do not proceed quickly enough, Russian representatives humiliate their supposed partners, use racist language and complain that “your hair will turn grey or you might die before you beat a contract out of them”.

RUSSIAN SECURITY COOPERATION FOCUSES ON THE SAHEL, ESPECIALLY MALI

Competing with Western countries, Russia sees Africa's greatest potential in the security sector. Russia focuses on politically unstable countries that need help to guarantee their security and simultaneously provide Russia with opportunities to profit from local natural resources. The Sahel is one such region where the security situation is complicated and military coups have taken place in several countries (Guinea, Burkina Faso). Mali has asked Russia for help to step up the fight against terrorism. Due to political instability and

a difficult security situation in Mali, Russia has managed to intensify cooperation with the country. Mali is offered security expertise with the support of private contractors, thus enhancing Russia's image as a crisis solver and gathering support for anti-Western activities and narratives.

Russia's focus is on politically unstable countries that need help to guarantee their security and, at the same time, provide Russia with opportunities to profit from local natural resources.

Mali and other countries in the Sahel region can expect little real benefit from security cooperation with Russia. So far, the security situation in Mali has worsened significantly during its intensified cooperation with Russia. Being engaged in Ukraine, Russia lacks the capacity to increase its financial, military and political contribution to Africa and sustainably conduct counter-terrorism operations in Mali or elsewhere in the Sahel. To improve the security situation and sustain the fight against terrorism, Russia should support the Malian army with large forces at a wider regional level, also bringing in civilian staff. Despite its limited capability, Russia will likely continue to take advantage of

opportunities opening up in Mali and elsewhere in Africa to discredit the activities of Western countries on the continent. By amplifying the anti-Western narrative, Russia further tenses up the situation, both in specific African countries and on the continent as a whole, without offering real solutions or helping to improve the security situation.

WAGNER: AN INSTRUMENT OF RUSSIAN STATE POWER IN AFRICA

Russian private military companies are an increasingly important tool for Russia in pursuing its geopolitical goals. Among them, Wagner has received the most public attention. Associated with Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner has been active in many different parts of the world, from Venezuela to Ukraine, where the group is currently actively involved in military operations. Wagner has focused on Africa since 2015. Its presence has been observed in Libya, Madagascar, Mozambique, the Central African Republic, Sudan and, since 2021, Mali – a country to whose security Estonia has also directly contributed.

Wagner is a useful geopolitical tool for Russia in two ways. On the one hand, using private military companies allows the Kremlin to pursue its policies without demonstrating too much official involvement. On the other hand, Wagner's operations bring economic opportunities for companies connected to various Russian oligarchs.



According to our information, the equipment delivered from Russia to Mali broke down within a year; only one out of eight attack helicopters (Mi-35M, Mi-171) was operational at the end of 2022. According to the Russian representatives, the equipment broke down due to the incompetence of Malian personnel.

Source: French Armed Forces via AP



Despite the seemingly warm relations between the foreign ministers, cooperation with Russia and Wagner has not brought Mali the expected results.

Source: Russian Foreign Ministry via Reuters

Wagner generally uses the same modus operandi. As the first step, diplomatic and military cooperation is strengthened between Russia and the target country. This is followed by agreements on the export of military equipment and, finally, the hiring of Wagner. Mercenaries often arrive in the country under the guise of military advisers or instructors. At the same time, a suitable environment is prepared through information operations discrediting previous security partners and glorifying Russia's ability to ensure stability in the country; potential funding sources are mapped, such as mineral deposits.

Wagner mercenaries arrived in Mali at the end of 2021. Wagner's activities in Mali have not improved the security situation in the country. On the contrary, terrorist attacks and violence against civilians have increased, especially in central Mali, where Wagner and the Malian armed forces have mainly conducted their operations. Wagner's mercenaries have been repeatedly accused of human rights violations and crimes against humanity. In addition, Wagner members have tried to falsify evidence to suggest that French troops have committed mass murder in Mali. French and other Western troops have left Mali. This has left a security vacuum, which Wagner has not been able to fill and almost certainly will fail to fill in the future. The fate of Mali is likely to be the same as the other African countries where Wagner has arrived to ensure security: the promised stability will not be achieved, and the situation will only worsen.

Kremlin will very likely want to continue using private military companies to pursue its geopolitical ambitions in Africa.

Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine has also left its mark on Wagner's activities. The war has not gone in the direction the Kremlin wanted. This has led to a situation where Wagner's former veil of secrecy has fallen. Fighters are recruited publicly through advertisements, and Prigozhin, who personally visits Russian detention facilities to recruit personnel, has finally confirmed his links to Wagner. Kremlin will very likely want to continue using private military companies to pursue its geopolitical ambitions in Africa. Russia's lack of military personnel in Ukraine has led Wagner to withdraw its fighters from Libya, the Central African Republic and even Syria. As the situation worsens, Wagner may also leave Mali. In this way, Russia leaves others to resolve the problems and further deepens instability in the entire region.