TRANSCRIPT
Press Briefing
“Previewing the Second Russia–Africa Summit”

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FEATURING
Mvemba Phezo Dizolele
Director and Senior Fellow, Africa Program, CSIS

Cameron Hudson
Senior Associate (Non-resident), Africa Program, CSIS

Maria Snegovaya
Senior Fellow, Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program, CSIS

Mathieu Droin
Visiting Fellow, Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program, CSIS

Catrina Doxsee
Associate Director and Associate Fellow, Transnational Threats Project, CSIS

MODERATED BY
Paige Montfort
Media Relations Manager, External Relations, CSIS

Transcript By
Superior Transcriptions LLC
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Paige Montfort: Thank you so much and hello, everyone. Good morning or good afternoon, actually, depending on where you’re dialing in from. My name is Paige Montfort, as our operator noted. I’m the media relations manager here at the Center for Strategic and International Studies – CSIS – in Washington, D.C. Thank you all for joining us today to preview the second Russia-Africa summit and the coinciding Russia-Africa Economic and Humanitarian Forum taking place next week in St. Petersburg.

I’m joined today by some really terrific colleagues from a few different programs across the center who are going to weigh in on key themes and context, and their expectations for these events. So I’m going to introduce them in the order in which they’ll be speaking, and then after they provide some opening remarks and analysis then we will open it up to your Q&A. So I will introduce our speakers now.

First, we will be hearing from our Africa Program director and senior fellow Mvemba Phezo Dizolele. Mvemba will be followed by our non-resident senior associate Cameron Hudson, who’s also working with our Africa Program. From there we’ll go over to the experts joining us from our Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program. So first we’ll hear from Maria Snegovaya, who’s a senior fellow for Russia and Eurasia. And then we’ll hear from Mathieu Droin, who is a visiting fellow with us here at CSIS. And finally, last but certainly not least, we’ll hear from Catrina Doxsee. She is associate director and associate fellow with our Transnational Threats Project.

So we have, you know, a lot of speakers to get through and a lot of expertise to share today. So I’ll turn it right over to Mvemba to get us started.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Thank you, Paige. Good morning, everyone, and thank you for joining us this morning.

I would like to discuss a couple – just the context. I think we know that – it’s been four years since the last Russia-Africa summit. This is happening within a specific context – post-pandemic. We’ve had a lot of challenges during the pandemic. One of the challenges, of course, was the issue of vaccines, how the great north kind of literally took all the vaccines away from the Africans and only at the last minute was about to share some. The Russians had used their version of the vaccine as a diplomatic tool. It didn’t go very far. But we know that set a certain trust deficit between Western countries and the rest of African countries. We all remember the debacle with AstraZeneca, and so on.

But it’s also happening within the context of the war in Ukraine. Since that time, Russia has been under tremendous pressure from the West, particularly with economic and financial sanctions. We also know that crisis in Ukraine has led to food insecurity in a lot of countries in Africa, partly
because of the governance problems that African countries face. Africa has a tremendous amount of arable land that they’ve not really put to good use. So the war in Ukraine really drove a lot of pressures in terms of shortage of food, hike in prices, and even lack of fertilizers.

As we go into the summit, I think we look at also what’s happening on the security space, which is the rise of the Wagner Group, their presence in about four countries in Africa. So CAR, Mali, Libya, Sudan, and they’re trying to make headways in other places on the continent. We’re also looking at this within the context of Africans, we remember the recent summit in Paris where Cyril Ramaphosa, the Kenyan president, and others it clear that Africa want to play a bigger role within the global stage.

So what do we expect from Russia? It’s hard to say what’s going to be exactly on the agenda and what they will offer. But I will suspect that with them pulling out of the grain deal just a couple days ago, they will probably try to reset some of that relationship. They know Africa still needs grains, African still needs wheat, African needs a lot of these foodstuff. So I expect that Russia will use this time to not only assert their role as an important player on the global stage, but also to come up with some largesse vis-à-vis Africans, to release a large amount of grain. Literally, to try to meet Africans halfway, to say, hey, we are not the bad guys they are trying to make us to be.

I also think that is the time where Russia will try to assert themselves as a reliable defense and security partner. We know Russia has a number – I think about 40 – defense and security partnership with about 40 countries. These are ongoing partnership, it’s not – it’s not new. A lot of these countries have had strong relationship with Russia dating from the independence days – or, independence years, if you will. During the fight for independence.

So we’ll see that Russia will continue to push for agriculture and food security type of arrangement, defense arrangement. They will continue to roll out their invitation for African students to come to Russia, go to school. They will also at this time, I think, with the debt issue, try to bring in their own influence in that space. So it’s a time for them to reassure the Africans that the world is still a multipolar space and they have a role to play in it.

I will stop there and I’ll turn the time back to Paige for Cameron to take over, and then we’ll take and do Q&A. Thank you.

Ms. Montfort: Great. Thank you, Mvemba.

Handing it over to you, Cameron.

Cameron Hudson: OK, great. Thanks, Paige. And good morning, afternoon, everybody.
So just to follow along from what Mvemba was saying, I think, you know, we have to – we can’t ignore that this meeting is taking place at a particularly charged, I think, geopolitical moment in the wider history of Africa-Russia relations. Since Russia invaded Ukraine, I think those global fault lines have deepened, and Africa has really emerged at the center of; at least in the last sort of six months or year, a great-power charm offensive, primarily from Russia and the United States, all seeking support for their approach to the war in Ukraine, but also the wider international order.

As the largest regional grouping at the U.N. General Assembly, and the region, frankly, most divided on condemning Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, Africa’s geostrategic stock is certainly on the rise. And the question for me is how will the Africans use their growing leverage in St. Petersburg next week.

Normally the continent’s development agenda would be the priority in its engagements at this sort of summit, of which there have been a proliferation in recent years. Just as an aside, in the last two years there has been a U.S.-Africa, a Japan-Africa, a China-Africa, an EU-Africa, France-Africa, U.K.-Africa, and Turkey-Africa summits.

So this summit comes in the context not just of U.S.-Russia competition in Africa but a much broader growing international interest on the continent. But the common elements of all of those summits was that they were all largely based on the continent’s development and investment prospects. And certainly the first 2019 Russia-Africa summit in Sochi was very much in that same vein.

But that’s no longer as straightforward or as prominent as I think it once was. Who Africans collaborate with and how they do so is becoming a growing concern for continental leaders and U.S. leaders in an international system which is just more in flux. Senegalese President Macky Sall recently said that African leaders would, quote, continue to use the Russia-Africa summit to see how we can move forward on the negotiations we tried to implement between Russia and Ukraine.

So this summit obviously comes a bit of a departure from just, I think, the trade and investment that we normally see. But it comes, as Mvemba said, in the backdrop of the Ukraine war, Russia stepping back from the Black Sea Grain Initiative, sensitive negotiations around President Putin’s possible travel to the South Africa-hosted BRICS summit, which we now know he will not attend in person, but also a substantially more assertive African diplomatic effort to seek a resolution to the Ukraine conflict, in which they believe they have few direct interests – we often hear on the continent this is a white man’s war that they want to be left out of – but where the consequences for that conflict are really huge for them. And Mvemba talked a lot about the grain initiative.
So for me, and in this context, I think there’s a number of things that I’ll be looking at as the summit plays out next week. First, will Africans do more to come to the summit with their own agenda, or will they allow the Russians to set the terms of the discussion? I guess that’s to say, is this a business-as-usual summit like we have seen in the past involving trade and investment deals that are widely customary and touted, or will we see efforts to address head on the geopolitical debates that are swirling in the background?

Secondly, I think the African head-of-state delegation that went to Russia recently and left with no firm commitments from Putin, even though they have asked for him to show signs that he was, quote, serious about pursuing a path towards peace, will those African leaders come back to Russia, will they come to St. Petersburg, with another peace proposal? And will that be different from the last one? Are they going to make another run at this? And if so, will they make the details of that deal public, which they didn’t do the last time they went to Russia, to put, you know, greater pressure on Putin to respond with specifics at this summit? So that’s another question.

Now that Russia has pulled out of the grain deal, as Mvemba said, will they pursue an alternative approach. One can imagine that countries like Mali or Central African Republic or the more than two dozen other African countries with bilateral security cooperation agreements could use that favored status to access negotiation – sorry, to negotiate direct access to grain purchases going outside the U.N. context.

And then, lastly, the U.S. is reportedly encouraging African heads of state who go to Russia to stop in Kyiv on their way either to or from St. Petersburg so that they can get a Ukrainian perspective on the war and Russia’s actions there and so I have a question as to whether or not they will take up U.S. efforts to seek out alternative viewpoints from the narrative that Russia is putting out there.

So those are the big questions I’ll be watching, and look forward to taking your questions. Thanks.

Ms. Montfort: Thank you so much, Cameron.

And I’ll hand it over now to Maria.

Maria Snegovaya: Good morning/good afternoon, everyone. Thank you very much, Paige.

So I certainly echo in my comments everything that has been said by previous commentators. I wanted to draw a little bit of attention at the domestic perspective how Russia, they see the importance of the summit.
So, most importantly, it’s been almost a year and a half since this war has been unraveling in which Russia has increasingly found itself isolated, at least from the so-called collective West. And it’s clear that the fight for the so-called Global South right now is on its way.

We have just seen the end of the summit between Europe and Latin America where, again, there were some conflicts associated to how to position various countries with regards to this war. And certainly I think that this forthcoming standard should also be primarily interpreted in that context as Russia’s effort to demonstrate to the international community that it is not, in fact, isolated – that it remains a very important international actor and that it competes directly with Western interests in – among those other countries in Africa.

So that’s certainly the first point that Putin is almost guaranteed to try to make. Of course, with that in mind it’s very important to keep following what sort of resolution or comments will come out of it regarding the war in Ukraine.

Second issue – and I’m sure there will be other speakers who will focus on it in more detail – is that the Wagner situation in light of this Prigozhin mutiny that was seen unraveling about a month ago right now remains in question. The Kremlin certainly is attempting in some ways to deal with the Wagner troops, not to distance them further from Russia’s army but rather to incorporate them. And with in mind, of course, the future of Wagner in Africa remains highly important and contested.

My understanding right now is that the effort will be to try and maybe break down Wagner and maybe make sure that its different elements are incorporated by different structures within Russia, the defense entities or Russia’s military structures. So from that perspective, probably we should expect some sort of discussion with regards to Wagner’s future.

Keep in mind also the fact that Prigozhin actually remains a highly problematic issue for the Kremlin. Just yesterday there was another video released in which they actually are saying that they’re waiting for the moment when they will be able to sort of prove themselves, to show themselves. So the story with Prigozhin is far from over, and from that perspective the Wagner future in Africa is very important.

There’s also an aspect of humanitarian elements. It’s been showcased through different media that there will be this attempted effort to demonstrate Russia’s more active engagement in Africa through cooperation in areas like education, culture, sports, empowerment for women and young people. So that certainly will be the key.
And of course, it’s also important to keep in mind that Russia’s role in Africa remains quite important particularly for nondemocratic regimes that rely on Russia to — Russia to provide not just humanitarian elements but quite typical, hardcore authoritarian elements by essentially outsourcing authoritarian toolkit, something that — where Wagner actually has been quite important in the past. And I would expect the discussions to include the issue of who is going to be in place of Wagner in that regard, so outsourcing of ways of control over corresponding societies, or maybe there will be still some elements of Wagner to continue in there. So this is when it comes to the political aspect.

But of course, there’s also an important economic aspect. We should certainly expect it to come up as well. Most importantly, Africa is one of the main regions that are strategically important for the Kremlin in compensating for losses incurred by the war and in particular the West-imposed sanctions and restrictions.

So with that in mind, of course, the discussion of deepening Russia’s economic relationship with African countries, particularly in light of these problematic situations with the grain deal — Russia just announced, as I’m sure you’ve heard, that it will not be participating in the grain deal going forward, but not a lot of people are, frankly, convinced that is indeed the case. And everybody is waiting for the African summit, actually, for some kind of confirmation or maybe perhaps there will be a way for Russia to actually continue cooperating in the grain deal. If anything, it shows that Russia wants to destabilize the world in order to achieve its goals in Ukraine. But it also wants to sustain certain relationships with African countries.

In the past, Moscow promised that it will establish individual relationship with African countries shall the grain deal collapse. So if the grain deal is not continued after all, we probably should see more of these sort of discussions. But that is not a given. The markets so far do not believe that Moscow is exiting the grain deal for good, so we might as well see some change of minds on Putin’s side.

But it goes beyond that. There’s also an issue of fertilizers, fuel exports, equally important for many African countries, all coming from Russia, Russia being one of the main exporters. And last but not the least, it’s already been announced that there will be separate presentation opportunities offered to African countries by heads of state and delegates by Russia’s state-controlled companies, like Rosatom, Russian Railways, VTB, et cetera, et cetera. So these intergovernmental and interagency agreements probably will follow as a result, again, as a way to showcase Russia’s deepening engagement with the continent.

And I’ll stop here. Thank you.
Ms. Montfort: Thank you so much, Maria.

And over to you, Mathieu.

Mathieu Droin: Yes. Thank you, Paige.

And good morning, good afternoon to everyone.

So obviously, as has been said by the previous speakers, there will be a lot of attention on the format, on the context, and we can count on the Russians to send strategic messages to brand the summit as a success. But beyond serving Russian narrative, one of the metrics to gauge the success of the summit that the Africans should take with them to Russia or that we experts or journalists should watch is to which extent these summits actually deliver some positive outcomes for Africa, and what do they actually bring to Africa? So I’d like to take a look back maybe at what Russia committed in Sochi in the previous summit and see how they performed in the past four years.

If we look, for instance, at the economic and financial commitments, one of the key commitments of the summit was for Russia and Africa to double their trade and bring it close to $40 billion, but what we see is that the trade has actually declined each year since then; it still stagnates around $19 billion, which is around 5 percent of the EU-Africa trade or 6 percent of the China-Africa trade, for instance. And it is also quite an imbalanced trade relationship since Russian exports to Africa are seven times the level of African exports to Russia, which is much less balanced than with peer competitors. And actually, more than 70 percent of this trade is dedicated to four countries only, which are Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, and South Africa. If you take the other metrics, which is the foreign direct investment, it is also stagnating at 1 percent of overall investment in the continent and is mainly dedicated to extractive industries. So that makes Russia nowhere near the top ten investors in Africa.

So I think this is something that is quite known for Africa watchers. And we can say that it’s the geopolitics that matter anyway. But I would argue that even in this field their record is quite questionable. If you look at the Sochi declaration, and I will quote here, which aimed at achieving peace based on the principle of respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, noninterference in internal affairs of state, reservation of national identity and civilizational identity – well, of course, everyone has Ukrainian in mind, and we know that it has been mentioned that this is a divisive topic across Africa.

But we could argue that Russia’s record in Africa is also questionable, if you look at how Russia supports the Rapid Support Forces in Sudan, for instance. There was also a commitment to fight terrorism, organized crime, drug
trafficking. And in this respect too, I mean, the methods that Wagner used in Africa, we’ve seen a dramatic increase in terrorism recently in the Sahel, which is, of course, not the only responsibly of Russia or Wagner, but it certainly didn’t stem the phenomenon. And Wagner really operates as an organized crime syndicate in the way that it takes payments in the form of timber, precious metals, gold, and diamonds. And if you look at United Nations figures, we see how Wagner troops are involved in major massacres, like the one that happened in Moura in March this year.

And maybe one last example to illustrate – to challenge Moscow’s interest – or, for African interest, is that in 23 years Vladimir Putin has not visited in any sub-Saharan Africa, except for South Africa. And he has visited only two African countries since 2012, and none since the Sochi summit. Which brings me to my last point and last question before transitioning to Catrina, who is more expert on this, is that actually the face of Russia progress since Sochi is not Russia as a state, but through Wagner. And the PMC has been used as an operator for Russia, but with a great level of autonomy.

And the problem is that now the security services that have been contracted with the frequent partners that were done through Wagner, not through – not through the Russian state. And in the most famous examples, like Central Africa or Mali, it’s actually Wagner that controls the business, the mines. So one of the key issue going forward will be how, of course, the cards are redistributed between Wagner and the Russian state. But the fact of the matter – as a matter of fact, it’s actually Wagner that operates as a state within the state in the African countries that it’s partnering with. And I will stop there. Thank you.

Ms. Montfort: Great. Thank you, Mathieu.

And, last but not least, we have Catrina Doxsee.

Catrina Doxsee: Thank you all for joining us. I’m going to zoom in particularly on this issue that my colleagues have touched on related to the Wagner Group and, more broadly, implications for Russia’s use of private military companies, or PMCs, in Africa and how that ties into the conversations that we can expect to be happening at the Russia-Africa summit.

So I’m going to go through three big areas of focus here. First, just a little bit of background on this growing use of PMCs and why it’s concerning for the United States. Second, what we’re thinking at this point on the future of the Wagner Group and the future of this PMC model in Africa. And then, third, how that feeds into our expectations for the summit next week.

So, first, as many of you will know, private military companies like the Wagner Group that are linked back to Russia have been increasingly used
since about 2017-2018 in Africa to provide various training and operational services, typically these paramilitary capabilities, in exchange for not only contract payments, but also the ability to spread Moscow’s geopolitical influence to expand Russian military and intelligence footprints, and to secure economic gains, particularly through access to natural resources. Those resources range from energy resources like oil and gas to minerals and gemstones, gold, timber, coffee, and so on.

These economic benefits have become increasingly important since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent sanctions that the West imposed against Russia because of the exploitation of these resources. And then particularly using smuggling networks to bring them to loosely regulated markets in places like the UAE and Turkey allows Russia to skirt some of those sanctions and to really soften the impact that the sanctions have, both on the Wagner network and on Moscow itself.

We’ve also – I mentioned we’ve seen an expansion in PMC presence. So since Wagner was formed in 2014, we’ve seen about a sevenfold global increase in the number of countries where Russian PMCs are operating. And for the U.S., this poses four big concerns. First is the displacement of U.S. and allied presence, influence. That’s thinking about diplomatic consequences, but also things like intelligence-collection capabilities, military presence and so on.

Second, this is enabling the spread of Russian military and intelligence capabilities and power projection. This is shown in things like Moscow’s efforts to use the Wagner Group to secure a naval base at Port Sudan, which would give them direct access into the Red Sea and increase power projection into the broader Indian subcontinent. These are direct military concerns for the United States and its allies.

Third, Wagner presence is creating destabilizing effects on local, national, and regional security in the places where it’s operating. This is a mix of destabilization directly from Wagner efforts, but also the ability for terrorist or insurgent groups to be able to flourish because they are not being adequately countered and controlled. This can be seen in places like Mali, where the security situation has deteriorated several times over since Wagner’s arrival in December of 2021.

And then, finally, fourth, we also see a growing frequency of U.S. military and intelligence personnel actually encountering the effects or potentially even operators linked to Russia in the field in these various places where they’re operating. This is potentially significant for the United States. We did have a direct firefight with Wagner troops back in Syria at Deir ez-Zor but otherwise haven’t had as many direct interactions. And there’s certainly a big question in terms of what U.S. policy will be in those interactions, but
also certainly concerns around signals-intelligence collection when we’re operating in similar areas and so forth.

And so we know from the past that Russia really accelerated its efforts to try to build more of these relationships with states in Africa, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where we see this exchange over natural resources during the first Russia-Africa summit back in 2019. And in the time leading up to that first summit and then the time since, we’ve seen that Wagner activities have been used both to help develop strong relationships for Russia so that it is able to secure new security cooperation agreements, but also Wagner has been used in order to fulfill the terms of security cooperation agreements, including some of those reached at Sochi. And so I would expect that we’ll continue to see this sort of chicken-and-egg model with Russian PMCs, whether Wagner or not, going forward out of this summit.

Moving into the second piece, this question of the future of Wagner itself, we know that certainly there’s a lot of ambiguity. There’s a lot of questions around how long the Wagner Group will exist in its current form with its current name. Certainly, a lot of questions about the future of its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin since the mutiny that he led in June. However, what we do know is that Wagner has gained a tremendous amount of experience and specialized knowledge. It’s built relationships and it’s become deeply entrenched with its wider network of shell companies and other commercial entities, who have not only these contracts to provide paramilitary services but also legal rights to control resource exploitation efforts, who have control of local media outfits, and so on, in Africa.

It’s unlikely that Russia would fully gut that infrastructure, simply because it would be very difficult to replace and replicate the success that Wagner had had in embedding itself in countries like the Central African Republic, in particular. And there really isn’t a rival or replacement to Wagner that is, at this point in time, ready to step in and fulfill that level of deep function in these states. And therefore, I’d say that while the future is certainly uncertain for the Wagner brand, for Prigozhin, I think that we’re less likely to see changes really in the implementation of this PMC model in Africa, and in some of that deeper infrastructure, and in the links of what’s currently Wagner.

We also have seen that continued developments with the Wagner Group point to their continued focus on Africa as their main area of operations. It was reported recently via a Telegram post linked to the Wagner network that their main base at Molkino, Russia will be closing as of the end of July. They gave a July 30th deadline for that closure to happen. So this is the main base of operations and training that they’ve had since about 2015 that is collocated with a base belonging to the 10th Special Mission Brigade of the GRU Spetsnaz, near Molkino, Russia. This has long been significant because of the
close relationship with the GRU. We see them sharing training facilities, as exhibited in satellite imagery. But they are alleging that they are closing that base.

This was also pointed to in the video released by Prigozhin yesterday, that my colleague mentioned, in which they really point to the end of operations at Molkino. Prigozhin is quoted as giving troops the expectation of a, quote/unquote, “new path in Africa,” and really this focus on the African continent, which is where we really see the bulk of his financial and business empire in the first place.

So then finally, expectations for this Russia-Africa summit. I think, first and foremost, even beyond the question of new opportunities, Putin will see this as an opportunity to provide reassurance for current African partners in the wake of the Wagner mutiny, and with all of these questions swirling about, about the future of Wagner, about Prigozhin, and about their agreements with African states. In the immediate aftermath of the mutiny, and even as it was ongoing, we heard a lot of questions, a lot of confusion from individuals in some of these regimes that have long been working with Wagner in countries like the Central African Republic, in Mali. This question of how long with Wagner continue working in my country? Who do I even talk to? Who is the point of contact for this going forward?

There was some swift reassurance given early in the following week. Lavrov did come out with a statement from the foreign ministry assuring that Russia would continue to operate in Africa with those relationships unchanged. But I expect that there will be a big piece of reassurance here. Not only Putin in general projecting strength after the weakness that was exhibited in June, but also specifically reassuring partners that depend on Wagner to provide their – not only their main source of security assistance, but for these regimes in particular that rely on Wagner to provide this coup-proofing function, to actually ensure the longevity of the regime’s control in the country.

In terms of new agreements, I think that, as I mentioned, we’ll certainly see the continuation of this model of PMCs providing services because Moscow has a lot to gain from the lack of accountability, the plausible deniability, and simply the cost and resource savings when they can use a private – ostensibly private contractor as a force multiplier to be able to spread their influence and achieve their goals abroad.

So whether this is under the Wagner brand or not I expect that we’ll see them continue to try to target countries that hit the profile of who they’ve worked with so far in Africa, so countries with ongoing security challenges, issues of weak governance, and with rich natural resources that can be exploited.
And, again, looking back to Sochi, this – we’ll likely see a mix of further agreements coming out that have been in part facilitated by Wagner presence so, certainly, assuring us of relationships between Russia and the countries where Wagner or other PMCs are already operating.

But we will also likely see in the coming months or year either Wagner or other PMC troops stepping in to help fulfill some of the terms of the security agreements that are reached during this summit.

Whether that’s larger-scale deployments or simply helping to facilitate arms transfers and equipment arrivals, I think that part of the impact for thinking about PMCs will be continuing to track those security cooperation agreements as they unfold in the coming months after the summit itself.

And I’ll turn back to Paige.

Ms. Montfort:  
Great. Thank you so much, Catrina, and also Mathieu, Maria, Cameron, and Mvemba for sharing your insights and analysis.

So now I’ll turn it back over to our AT&T operator briefly. He’s going to provide the queuing instructions in case anyone would like to ask a question.

Operator:  
(Gives queuing instructions.)

And we’ll go to the line of Gabriele Steinhauser with The Wall Street Journal. Please go ahead.

Q:  
Hi. Thank you so much for this briefing.

Given the very limited economic and investment ties with Russia what are African countries actually getting out of this relationship with Russia, which is, you know, for some of them causing them problems with Western countries on which they depend much more for trade and investment? And so what’s sort of – in your opinion sort of the main reason driving this continued close relationship and, you know, potential attendance by leaders of this summit which the U.S. is going to frown upon? And then at the same time, like, why is it so important for Putin to have these ties with African countries when in fact they aren’t so important for the Russian economy either? Thank you.

Ms. Montfort:  
Thank you. Maybe I’ll first see if Mvemba or Cameron wants to take the first part of your question and then, perhaps, Maria and Mathieu on the second part.
Mr. Dizolele: Yeah. Thank you, Paige, and thank you, Gabriele, for that. I’ll take the first half, just the first.

You know, African countries are really determined on asserting their prerogatives as sovereign nations. In other words, they want to choose who they want to collaborate with, notwithstanding pressures that they may get from the United States, because the United States and the West are often limited in the kind of help they give African countries – other partners like Russia and China and others fill that gap, right?

So let’s say in terms of defense and security the United States is limited by all kind of legislation. Let’s take Leahy vetting or arms sales. If you take the case of Nigeria that went for a long time trying to buy some Tucano airplanes – airplanes to fight the Boko Haram insurgency, there were so many hurdles that are totally legislative in the case of the United States that if you’re a Nigerian officer or if you are the minister or the president, you’re going, like, we want to do business with the United States, but the United States is not necessarily meeting us halfway, right? We understand the value demanding that human rights be respected and so on. But if you’re standing from the vantage point of a president, of a commander-in-chief or national security adviser, those limitations are not particularly the most helpful, right? So it provide(s) another avenue, another option for them.

That’s just one side that I would like to raise. Cameron or anybody else can chime in at this time.

Dr. Snegovaya: Yes, Maria here.

So about the importance for Russia, I actually hoped to clarify that in my presentation, but I’ll just repeat that Russia is increasingly internationally isolated at the moment. And therefore, showcasing their remaining ties with certain regions is of crucial importance to Putin just to demonstrate that, first of all, Russia is not isolated; it remains an important international player, a great power. But in addition, the conversation for the Global South seems to be on the rise right now, right? We know that. This is where there’s no – Putin has shaped opinion about this war, who’s at fault, and essentially how to understand this. And from this perspective, it’s highly important for Russia to essentially try and drag the African countries into its worldview, into its viewpoint.

So, as I said, there was another summit between Europe and Latin America that just ended. And in some ways, we certainly see conversations for the region that’s unraveling between Europe – well, the West more broadly – and Russia.
Last but not least, with fewer international links, economic links available with the West, Russia naturally rearranged itself to other countries, other destinations. And it’s not just Asia; Africa is also one such possible destination. I mentioned that if the grain deal was not to be sustained after all, Putin promised that he will continue individual economic relationships with African countries in order to sustain provision of grain, maybe fuel and fertilizers. So, I mean, honestly, it’s really one of the most important elements right now in Putin’s foreign policy, given the lack of any other relationships with other countries.

Ms. Montfort:  
Great. Thank you so much, Maria. And, Mathieu, did you want to join in?

Mr. Droin:  
Yes, maybe to complement. And there is perhaps there is one illustration of why Russia is interested. We can take the United Nations General Assembly resolution in October 2022 that decried the Russia referendum and the annexation of the four regions of Ukraine. At the time there were 45 states that either abstained or missed the vote, and that included 23 countries from Africa. So that, as Maria said, it really helps Russia to offset isolation on the international scene, and maybe one point where Russia and African interests meet.

If we take the examples of the countries where Wagner has established its feet on the continent, Central Africa or with Mali with the junta, these are easy wins for Russia in the sense that they are targeting embattled leaders for which regime survival is more important, actually, than the socioeconomic development of their countries. So by offering them services to be maintained in power, this is, of course, a win-win relation between the two countries since it also gives access for Russia to lucrative deal some extractive industries.

Thank you.

Ms. Montfort:  
Thank you so much, Mathieu. And we will go back to the queue. I don’t believe there’s anyone in the queue right now. But our AT&T operator will remind everyone how to queue. And then I have a question to read off from somebody whose line kept dropping out.

Operator:  
(Gives queueing instructions.)

Ms. Montfort:  
Great. Thank you. And in the meantime, as I mentioned – this is Paige, chiming in here with a question from Lynsey Chutel from The New York
Times. She didn’t have a great connection, so I’m going to read off a few questions for her.

So her first is: African leaders traveled to Kyiv and Moscow to speak with both President Zelensky and Putin as part of a peace mission. And African leaders are celebrating that they were able to speak to opposing sides. But was the mission a success or a PR exercise?

And then a second question: African countries, like South Africa, have reiterated what they call a nonaligned stance. But does this summit undermine that stance?

So those are two questions from Lynsey. If, you know, anyone – Mvemba, Cameron – would like to start out.

Mr. Hudson: I’m happy to take a lead on that question. I think it was neither a success nor a PR stunt, the trip to Europe by the African leaders. And I would just go back to sort of something that Mvemba said earlier, and something I said earlier, which is I think Africa’s growing geopolitical importance. There is – you know, the world is coming to Africa. The world is seeking out Africa’s opinion.

It’s been said already that African is the largest voting bloc at the U.N. And so if you’re the United States, or – and you want to demonstrate that you’re still the leader of the free world, then you need countries to line up behind you in condemning acts of aggression. And similarly, if you’re Russia and you want to show that the world is divided and not following the United States, then looking to the 54 countries of Africa is a great way to do that.

And so I think that given the importance – the increasing importance of African voices, I think it’s been interesting to watch Africa play a kind of nontraditional role. It’s not been common in recent years to see African leaders injecting themselves into global political debates. They are doing it with more frequency. They are doing it more loudly. They are doing it in a more coordinated fashion. And so I think this is the lesson that we, in the sort of Africa community, are drawing. Which is that Africa is both asking for a seat at the table, and also claiming its seat at the table.

Now, again, I don’t think that they were particularly successful in their gambit. You know, I feel like they got a kind of pat on the head from Vladimir Putin when they came. But again, given the comments that have been made by various African leaders in the lead-up to this summit – that they are, in fact, looking for some demonstratable sign that Putin is advancing, you know, a peace process, that he isn’t – that he isn’t just looking extend this conflict and therefore the pernicious effects of that conflict on Africa. But that he is, in fact, searching for peace.
I think if they come away from this not convinced that their calls have been heard, then I think you could see Africans beginning to vote with their – with their feet. So I think this is a decisive moment for both Africa and Putin in their relationship.

Ms. Montfort: Thank you. And we just have a few more minutes here, but did anyone else want to follow up after Cameron? All right. Great. Perfect. I’ll turn it over to our operator one more time, but after that we have no more questions in the queue and are getting close to 10:00 a.m. Eastern. So if there are no more questions, we will go ahead and wrap up the call there.

Thank you so much for joining us. And please feel free to reach out to me if you have any follow-up questions or are not able to ask your question today. I’m happy to put you in touch with one of these five experts on the call or other experts across the Center. And as a reminder, we will be sending a transcript out within just a few hours today. That’ll also be posted to CSIS.org. Have a great day ahead, everyone.

(END)