

Russia Is Still Progressing in Africa. What's the Limit?

By Mathieu Droin and Tina Dolbaia

Introduction

Recent events such as the **armed rebellion** led by the Wagner Group's chief Yevgeny Prigozhin against Russia's military leadership and Moscow's **withdrawal** from the Black Sea grain deal triggered speculations over a potential inflection point in Russia's growing footprint in Africa. Yet other signs, such as Prigozhin **shaking hands** with officials from the Central African Republic (CAR) in Saint Petersburg while the 2023 Russia-Africa summit was unfolding, or Russian flags being flown during the Niger **coup** this July, suggest that Russia's influence in Africa is here to stay. In fact, the Kremlin's playbook on the continent will most likely be recalibrated rather than overturned.

The current volatile situation calls for a coolheaded look at the fundamentals of Russia's existing footprint and its forays across the continent to better assess how they might evolve and how to address them. Russia's breakthroughs in Africa are owed in part to a rekindling of Soviet-era relations. Yet the Kremlin's remarkable advances on the continent throughout the last decade also result from twin contemporary efforts: adept diplomatic reengagement with key regional players and opportunistic predation in areas where Western powers are either absent or in trouble.

While the U.S.-led effort to form a global coalition aimed at isolating Russia internationally has indeed strengthened the transatlantic alliance, it has not yet fully convinced the rest of the world, including countries on the African continent, to break ties with Moscow. In fact, many across Africa **regard** the war in Ukraine as primarily a Western problem and are preoccupied with protecting their own national interests. Even with the war and sanctions straining Russia's economy and defense sector, the Kremlin retains sufficient ties with the continent to challenge Western narratives.

This paper examines Russia's creeping influence over Africa, assessing Moscow's historic legacy as well as the current diplomatic, economic, and military-security links that contribute to the region's continued willingness to engage with Russia. In doing so, particular attention is paid to the Russian

private military company (PMC) Wagner Group, which has been playing an important role in forging ties between the Kremlin and different African nations, despite the uncertainty following Prigozhin's rebellion in June 2023. It then offers analysis and recommendations to Western policymakers, outlining new approaches the transatlantic community should adopt to counter a rising Russia in Africa.

The Kremlin's Playbook in Africa: From Diplomatic to Military Footprint

It is commonly **argued** that the hesitancy of many African states to openly condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine is rooted in the deep Soviet-era ties Moscow forged with the continent, which continue to generate a lot of sympathy and respect toward Russia.

Starting from the mid-1950s, as Africa turned into another important **Cold War battleground**, the Soviet Union **became actively involved in** reshaping the continent's political and security landscape by granting generous economic and security assistance programs to many different local Marxist, anti-colonial, or anti-U.S. groups. By **supporting** independence movements during a period of colonial conflict and aiding governments that faced internal or external confrontation, the Soviet Union **managed to penetrate** all the major countries across Africa, including but not limited to Algeria, Angola, Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, and Mozambique. The Kremlin supplied those states with weapons and equipment, provided military training and advisers, and developed relations between the Soviet and various African intelligence communities, ultimately **creating** "a long-term legacy of Soviet hardware and operational culture throughout Africa."



Leonid Brezhnev, general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, meets with the new Egyptian president, Anwar al-Sadat, in Moscow, the latter seeking political support and military hardware from the Soviet Union for use in Egypt's imminent war with Israel, 1971.

Photo: Slava Katamidze Collection/Getty Images

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the newly established Russian Federation—finding itself in political and socioeconomic turmoil—was forced to disengage from the continent, which meant that its generous economic and military assistance programs came to an abrupt halt. For around two decades after the Soviet collapse, Russian activity in Africa was **marginal**.

RUSSIA'S DIPLOMATIC REENGAGEMENT WITH AFRICA

Moscow's first visible attempts to reengage with the continent started in the mid-2000s. In 2006, President Vladimir Putin **visited** the Republic of South Africa, followed by his successor Dmitry Medvedev's trips to Egypt, Angola, Nigeria, and Namibia in 2009. The Kremlin doubled down on its diplomatic efforts following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, when the first round of Western sanctions against Russia forced Moscow to actively seek new geopolitical partners and business opportunities. Since 2014, various high-ranking Russian state officials—including Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Security Council secretary Nikolai Patrushev, and Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov—have **frequented** different African states and signed multiple bilateral military, economic, and security cooperation agreements, as well as **written off** billions of dollars in African debts.

Russia's return to Africa has also coincided with (and has been encouraged by) the reduced U.S. engagement with the continent, including **the 2018 decision** under the Trump administration to scale back U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the region despite the growing terror threat in many African nations. Moscow was quick to fill that security void. In 2019, President Putin hosted the first-ever **Russia-Africa summit** at the Black Sea retreat of Sochi, aimed at reinforcing Russia's standing as a reliable strategic partner on the continent and **securing** military contract agreements with different nations, including the Nigerian government, which agreed to purchase Russian attack helicopters. In July 2023, despite the war, sanctions, and Western pressure, 17 heads of African states attended the



President Putin, African leaders, and heads of delegations pose for a group photo at the second Russia-Africa summit held in Saint Petersburg, Russia, on July 28, 2023.

Photo: Alexey Danichev/AFP via Getty Images

second Russia-Africa summit, **signing several agreements** with Russia on prevention of arms race in space, cooperation in informational security, and combating terrorism on the continent. Moscow also promised to write off additional debts.

These ongoing diplomatic efforts, encompassing high-level visits, debt relief, and strategic partnership agreements, have proved to be **particularly useful** at the United Nations. The Kremlin has been able to count on the backing of many African nations on key UN votes, including the 2014 General Assembly **resolution** condemning the Russian annexation of Crimea, the 2018 **resolution** urging Moscow to demilitarize the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, and the 2022 **resolution** decrying Russia's attempted annexation of four Ukrainian regions. In all three cases, a considerable number of African countries voted against the proposed resolutions, abstained, or did not show up for the vote, thus directly or indirectly contributing to the Kremlin's efforts at challenging the United States and its allies within international frameworks.

RUSSO-AFRICAN ECONOMIC AND TRADE RELATIONS

In addition to strengthening diplomatic ties with African states, the Kremlin has also expanded its economic footprint on the continent. For instance, trade revenue between Russia and African countries **almost doubled** from \$9.9 billion in 2013 to \$17.7 billion by 2021. **Grain exports** are of particular importance, as nearly 30 percent of Africa's grain supplies come from Russia. Moscow's leading trade partners in the region are countries in North Africa—particularly Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco—which together **account for** approximately 67 percent of Russia's total trade with the continent. Moscow mainly exports **wheat, coal, refined petroleum**, and **electronics** to these states, while importing fruits, sugar, and vegetables.

Russia's recent withdrawal from the **Black Sea grain deal**—which enabled Ukraine to safely export grain to different parts of the world, including Africa—may benefit Moscow's own grain exports by cutting Kyiv out of the global market and increasing the dependence of a number of African republics on Russian grain. Moscow has maintained that it will do **“all it can”** to shield Africa from the negative consequences of the halted grain deal, with President Putin **asserting** that “our country is capable of replacing Ukrainian grain on a commercial and a gratuitous basis.” During the 2023 Russia-Africa summit, Putin even **promised to start shipping free grain** in the next several months to six African nations significantly impacted by the cancellation of the grain deal: Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe, Mali, Somalia, Eritrea, and the CAR.

An important aspect of Russia's economic outreach to Africa is that it is dominated by Russian companies that are either partially or fully owned by the state, including **oil and gas giants** Rosneft, Tatneft, and Gazprom, which carry out major hydrocarbon projects in North Africa. **Rosatom**, Russia's nuclear power company, has also been actively engaged with different countries across the continent. For instance, in summer 2022, it **received permission** from an Egyptian regulator to start building Egypt's first nuclear power plant, based on the 2017 agreement signed between President Putin and President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. The plant is expected to become **fully operational** by 2030. Rosatom also **funds** different educational and cultural exchange opportunities in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields to support the Kremlin's soft power efforts in Africa. In addition to energy deals, Moscow has also boosted cooperation with different states rich in natural resources, primarily diamonds. For instance, Alrosa, Russia's top diamond mining company, has

expanded its operations in **Angola, Congo, and Zimbabwe**. Importantly, **according to** some African scholars, “Russia is highlighting collaboration over aid” when seeking lucrative business opportunities in Africa, thus stressing partnerships of equals, “and that message is tempting to some leaders who view the West’s outreach as patronizing.”

Still, despite Russia’s ongoing efforts to build stronger business and trade ties with the continent, the Kremlin’s economic engagements in Africa today are modest when compared to those of the Soviet Union, as well as those of the modern-day China, United States, and European Union. While trade revenue between Russia and African countries comprises around \$17.7 billion, Africa’s trade value with the European Union, China, and the United States currently **stands at** \$295 billion, \$254 billion, and \$65 billion, respectively. Russia also invests little in Africa, representing **less than 1 percent** of total foreign direct investment (FDI) going to the continent. Moscow’s main competitive advantage against the global powers seeking to expand their footprint on the continent is therefore its ability to render relatively cheap security and military services, including arms transfers, as well as anti-insurgency training and consultancy services.

RUSSO-AFRICAN DEFENSE AND SECURITY COOPERATION

While the Kremlin continues to be a small player in Africa when measured by its economic and trade relations, it retains strong defense and security ties with the continent, spanning arms sales, joint military training programs, and Russian PMC activities.

Russia is the **chief arms supplier** to Africa, accounting for 40 percent of African imports of major weapons systems between 2018 and 2022. This has been higher than the total arms imports from the United States (16 percent), China (9.8 percent), and France (7.6 percent) during those years. According to a **report** by the RAND Corporation, Russian weapons sales to Africa have increased from around \$500 million to over \$2 billion annually in recent years. The key importers of Russian weapons systems are the North African countries **Algeria and Egypt**, with 73 percent and 34 percent of their arms imports, respectively, coming from Russia. Both states **have purchased** billions of dollars’ worth of weapons and equipment from Moscow since 2013, including the Su-24, Su-30, and MiG-29 combat aircraft, as well as the S-300 missile systems, among others. Besides Algeria and Egypt, many other countries across the continent also receive Russian matériel, including but not limited to **Mali, Sudan, the CAR, and Angola**.

There are a number of **reasons** explaining the dependency of African countries on Russian-made weapons and equipment. Modern Russian arms are usually cheaper than their Western alternatives and compatible with Soviet-era stocks retained by many states on the continent. Additionally, unlike the United States and its allies, the Kremlin does not make its arms deliveries contingent upon adherence to democratic principles or the protection of basic human rights; it has sent armor, combat aircraft, and missile systems to different war-torn countries in Africa—including **Libya**, where it has supported eastern Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar’s fight against the UN-recognized Government of National Accord.

Besides arms transfers, Moscow has advanced military diplomacy in the region by engaging different African countries in Russian-led **military forums and exercises**, including the International Army Games, which since 2015 has been attended by around a dozen African states, such as Angola, Algeria, Congo, Mali, and Zimbabwe. The Kremlin has also organized the annual **naval** (“Friendship Bridge”) and

aerial (“Defenders of Friendship”) exercises between the Russian and Egyptian armies and **supported** UN peace operations in Congo, Western Sahara, Sudan, and South Sudan by providing a limited number of military observers. Yet, while the official Russian military presence might seem modest, it is usually supplemented by Russian PMC activities, which have been rather extensive on the continent.

While the exact numbers of Russian private military companies or operations in Africa are difficult to estimate, available reporting shows that there have been at least **seven Russian PMCs** that have carried out at a minimum **34 operations** in 16 African countries since 2005. PMCs became **particularly active** in the mid-2010s following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its intervention in the Syrian war in 2015, both of which enabled Russia to **advertise and offer** its PMC services—from providing private security and military training to conducting combat operations—to different governments and separatist groups across Africa. According to **RAND**, Russian PMCs have a substantial presence in the CAR, Sudan, and South Sudan. They are also found in a number of other African states, including Congo, Gabon, Libya, Mali, and Madagascar. What makes the proliferation of Russian PMCs in Africa particularly noteworthy is that, in virtually all cases, they have strong ties with the Kremlin. As Major Thomas D. Arnold of the U.S. Army **argues**, “Russia effectively trades PMSC [private military and security company] services for access and economic concessions in resource-endowed fragile states.”

The most prominent among the Russian PMCs operating in Africa is the Wagner Group, owned by Prigozhin, an infamous Russian businessman dubbed “**Putin’s Chef**” whose notoriety increased immensely following his June 2023 short-lived **armed mutiny** against the Russian government, and particularly the Russian Ministry of Defense (MOD). However, prior to the June uprising, the Wagner chief was known as one of President Putin’s most loyal subordinates. For instance, in 2018, the United States **indicted** Prigozhin for financing a Russian troll factory that had spearheaded Moscow’s efforts to meddle in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections. As for having strong links to the Russian government, Wagner forces were allegedly **trained** along with the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation’s (GRU) special forces units. The PMC gained notoriety for its participation in the 2014 **Ukrainian** and 2015 **Syrian** conflicts. In Syria, due to Wagner’s assistance to the Assad regime, several **Prigozhin-owned or closely linked** companies struck exclusive **oil and gas deals** with the government, thus enabling the Kremlin to get its share of Syria’s energy revenues.

Wagner adopted and further developed a similar strategy in Africa, where it has advised **tottering leaders**, run pro-government and disinformation campaigns, conducted military training and anti-insurgency operations, and, in return, secured concessions in **extractive industries**, particularly gold, diamond, and uranium mining. For instance, in CAR, at various times since 2018 up to **1,900 “Russian instructors”** (i.e., Wagner and its subsidiaries) have provided **escort protection** to the country’s senior officials, including President Touadéra, and **have assisted** the Russian MOD with arms deliveries and on-site military training. In return, the Kremlin has been able to explore “**the possibilities** of the mutually beneficial development of Central African natural resources,” with Prigozhin-linked companies spearheading **gold and diamond mining efforts** in the republic. In Sudan, Wagner has **provided** site security to Prigozhin-owned gold mining companies and has been actively involved in strengthening ties with General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), a **deputy head** of Sudan’s ruling council, to **establish its first naval base** in Port Sudan. Similarly, in Libya, the Kremlin reportedly sent **up to 1,200** Wagner contractors to aid General Khalifa Haftar, a de facto ruler of eastern Libya

in control of a significant share of the country's **oil reserves**, in exchange for securing economic concessions that included Russian oil giant Rosneft's **access** to the country's lucrative oil market.



Demonstrators hold banners and a Russian flag in the capital city of Bangui, CAR, in March 2023. Taking advantage of the security vacuum created by the departure of French troops from the country, Moscow first sent “military instructors” to CAR in 2018, followed by hundreds of Wagner troops in 2020 at the request of President Touadéra to help him fend off a dangerous rebellion.

Photo: Barbara Debout/AFP via Getty Images

Overall, Russia's military presence in Africa, focused on the strengthening of both official and unofficial channels of defense-security cooperation with different African states, has proved to be a cost-effective way for the Kremlin to gain considerable political and economic leverage on the continent that even the 2022 war in Ukraine has been unable to undermine.

Russia's Continued Progress in Africa, despite the War in Ukraine and Domestic Fissure

Despite Russia's **military shortcomings** in Ukraine—including incurring significant personnel and equipment losses, struggling to produce advanced weapons systems, and increasing reliance on Soviet-era defense equipment—there have not yet been any tangible signs of African countries actively seeking to replace Moscow as a chief arms supplier or military partner. In fact, throughout 2022, a number of countries on the continent initiated new or continued existing **military cooperation** agreements with the Kremlin. Cameroon, for instance, signed a new defense deal with the Russian MOD entailing joint military trainings, and Mali received military equipment from Moscow. In 2023, the Russia-Africa summit **participants agreed** to establish a new permanent Russo-African security mechanism, aimed at combating terrorism and extremism on the continent. However, some negative trends have also been observed. For example, Algeria and Egypt, which have long been **listed** among Russia's top five arms

purchasers globally, slowly started to lessen defense ties with the Kremlin in 2022. Yet, considering the large reliance of both countries on Russian-origin arms, they will most likely maintain defense cooperation with Moscow in the near term.

Similar to the Russian armed forces, Wagner has sustained significant losses in Ukraine. In May 2023, Prigozhin **openly accused** the Russian MOD for not supplying his PMC with enough ammunition during the fight for the city of Bakhmut in eastern Ukraine. A month later, this disagreement led to the Prigozhin-orchestrated “**march for justice**” against Moscow, which, even if brief, has given rise to a number of questions connected with the stability of the Putin regime, as well as the future of Wagner in Africa.



Wagner soldiers sit on the top of a tank in Rostov-on-Don, Russia, on June 24, 2023.

Photo: Roman Romokhov/AFP via Getty Images

Prior to the uprising, experts **believed** that, even if Wagner were to be sidelined in Ukraine, the PMC would not “fade into obscurity.” Instead, it would pivot back to Africa, where it still retained a comparative advantage against the backdrop of a new wave of insurgencies spanning the continent, resuming limited-scale “expeditionary operations and supplying muscle to fragile states in exchange for access to valuable resources.” Indeed, in March 2023, Wagner was already actively **recruiting** new contractors willing to serve terms ranging from 9 to 14 months in Africa.

It was also argued that, by putting a private army to work in the region, Prigozhin was able to at least partially fund Wagner’s war effort in Ukraine. This, in most cases, was achieved by expanding the PMC-linked mining operations across the continent. For instance, in exchange for supporting regime stability in CAR, Wagner **reportedly** gained some degree of control over the country’s international airport,

flying gold worth billions of U.S. dollars that it had been mining in CAR from the capital of Bangui straight to Moscow. According to some **estimates**, despite the allied sanctions imposed on Russia, Moscow's gold reserves reached an all-time high in the first quarter of 2023. Similar to in CAR, Wagner continued to **exploit** the existing power struggle in Sudan, allegedly assisting the country's General Hemedti through Wagner's Libyan partner General Haftar, and thus attempting to preserve Russia's ongoing gold mining operations in Sudan and advance the Kremlin's interests of building a naval base along the Red Sea in Port Sudan. Experts **believe** that, if Moscow is ultimately successful at gaining port access in Africa, it will be well positioned to "disrupt naval and maritime passage along the central and eastern Mediterranean, and establish coastal airfields that would make global transit of Russian aircraft—including anti-submarine aircraft—possible."

Following the June mutiny, the Kremlin is now **forced** to come up with a plan dealing with the reorganization of Wagner's ongoing operations in Africa as seamlessly as possible. As one of Prigozhin's people **stated** after the uprising, "entire sectors of Russian foreign policy are dependent on the assets of Wagner PMC abroad, and if they are removed, there will be a rapid compression of Russian influence, more in Africa, to a lesser extent in Syria." In fact, the CAR leadership **has already expressed** concerns regarding the Wagner chief's highly precarious position inside Russia and how this would impact the PMC's presence in the country; yet the leadership has also declared readiness to sign contracts with other Russian "instructors," should Moscow decide so.

Therefore, no matter how the war in Ukraine plays out or how the fate of Prigozhin is ultimately decided, the Kremlin will likely have strong incentives to maintain its use of PMCs—including a restructured Wagner Group or its subsidiaries—in Africa to ensure uninterrupted access to the continent's gold reserves, among other benefits, and to destabilize Western strategic partnerships with different African states. Importantly, as the invasion of Ukraine will inevitably produce more veterans seeking adequate remuneration amid Russia's wartime economy, it can be **expected** that Russian PMCs might expand the size and scale of their current operations in Africa.

What to Do Now? New Offer, New Tactics, and New Branding

Russia's forays in Africa present the West with serious strategic dilemmas, as letting Russia expand further affects the United States and allied interests, but attacking it head-on can backfire and end up fueling Moscow's narrative, something recently experienced by **France**.

On the one hand, the West cannot afford to stand idle and resort only to "strategic patience," as the stakes are too high considering that Africa is the continent with the youngest and fastest-growing population, with **daunting challenges** that have direct consequences for global security and stability. Russia is both uninterested and unable to foster sound and sustainable development in Africa, as it does not provide substantial aid nor capacity building beyond the military-security realm. Instead, its entrenchment can only compound the challenges that Africa faces and comes with major risks, especially for Europe.

On the other hand, it would be delusive to expect new grand strategies at times when the United States and Europe struggle to sustain their joint efforts in the two most pressing theaters of strategic competition: Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific. Traditional key Western stakeholders in Africa such as the **United States** and **France** have both recently heralded a "reframing" of their approaches, in which

the security component is relegated to the background, to the benefit of political, economic, and social engagements. This is a sound evolution—especially considering that ongoing Russian efforts in these arenas are rather limited—but it leaves free ground for Russian progress in the security realm.

The new rules of engagement for the West to confront Russia in Africa therefore stand somewhere between “strategic patience” and “grand strategy.” This section lays out recommendations for Western policymakers, stressing the importance of equal footing cooperation with African partners in order to offer attractive and efficient alternatives catered to the region’s security and prosperity aspirations.

OVERARCHING RECOMMENDATIONS

Devise a security cooperation package that will be principled but not transactional.

Russia’s current approach of providing security assistance through Wagner remains attractive to many African nations despite it being expensive in the longer term (local governments have to pay the PMC for its services in addition to accepting its multiyear commercial conditions, while also losing at least part of Western aid and risking sanctions). This is because the “regime survival package” offered by Russia in the region, which is beset by chronic instability and military coups, supersedes any other potential gains from traditional cooperation agreements advanced by Western partners, which are usually based on institutional capacity building instead of securing the authorities themselves.

In Mali, for instance, Wagner agreed to provide the Malian authorities with **helicopters** and ammunition that the French were always reluctant to consider due to rising levels of violence and continued insurgencies, **among other reasons**. This issue calls for a more horizontal and less vertical Western approach to cooperation that will remain principled, but not based on conditions. Western security assistance should thus ultimately serve political objectives that are consistent with the transatlantic community’s values and principles, but due diligence should be conducted upstream through arms control policies and downstream through accompaniment and monitoring—not during the negotiation phase or political engagement, so as to alleviate the sentiment that Western support is a politically motivated bargaining chip.

Redouble efforts in the energy domain.

Russia does not thrive in Africa only through Wagner and security assistance, even though its efforts in this regard are particularly extensive. Moscow also offers assistance in the energy domain, notably through a push for nuclear energy to meet the continent’s growing needs. While Western countries are late to engage in energy diplomacy in Africa, they should redouble their efforts, as this will be one of the key parameters of strategic competition on the continent. Engaging in energy diplomacy is also central to countering the widespread narrative that Western countries are only interested in plundering the continent’s resources for their own prosperity, without benefiting Africans.

Build strategic partnerships free from “neo-Cold War” perceptions.

In order to be recognized as a preferable alternative to Russia, the West should direct its efforts toward the key “swing states”: major regional players that maintain close ties with the Kremlin, such as Nigeria, South Africa, Ethiopia, and Egypt. Yet the Western reengagement should not resemble a neo-Cold War approach, forcing the countries to take sides through “carrots and sticks.” Instead, it should take the form of a strategic dialogue aimed at better understanding why these African states maintain ties

with Russia, in order to assess if the West can offer something more attractive. The West should also strengthen partnerships with other countries on the continent committed to building functioning institutions, robust militaries, and strong technological bases, including but not limited to Ghana, Tanzania, Kenya, and Botswana, especially when those countries are courted by Russia.

Actively prove Russian narratives wrong.

The West should continue exposing the failures of corrupt regimes, especially those that engage in mafia-type deals with the Russian government, as well as widespread **atrocities** and human rights abuses committed by Russia-linked groups—including Wagner paramilitaries—in Africa. But perhaps more importantly, the United States and the European Union should promote their own success stories in the region, while also reflecting on the legitimate concerns of many African nations. The West should also invest more in establishing or supporting reliable local pan-African media outlets promoting African voices and perspectives on key regional issues.

Engage with new partners that are more palatable to the African public.

Many African countries are enthusiastic about increased “South to South” cooperation and would welcome engagement with leaders from the Global South. However, these relations remain largely nascent at this stage, as the major nonaligned states such as Brazil or India are also figuring out how to best engage with Africa. In the longer term, increased “triangulation” between Africa, the Global South, and the West could prove mutually beneficial, with India and Brazil becoming the key partners in this effort as they are pro-democracy without appearing anti-Russian.

Preserve an ability to act against traditional and potential new threats.

Russia’s continued advances in Africa are also risk multipliers, with the most prominent one being rising levels of terrorism in the countries where **Russians**, including Wagner fighters, set foot. According to the 2022 **Global Terrorism Index**, 48 percent of all terrorism-related deaths worldwide occurred in sub-Saharan Africa, with three of the top ten countries—Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger—all having a Wagner presence. Increased levels of terrorism coupled with the ongoing Russian hybrid warfare efforts in the region—including information warfare and cyberattacks, **weaponization** of migration, and disruption of critical infrastructure—have the potential to further fuel instability and insecurity on the continent. Facing these threats implies that the West should retain certain capabilities in the region, including defensive equipment and airlift options, to protect both Western citizens and African partners in case of serious violent outbreaks, as well as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities to **disclose** intelligence on Wagner’s nefarious activities on the continent to partners in Africa and dissuade them from partnering with the PMC. Finally, the United States and its allies should also retain an ability to carry out defensive strikes against Wagner in the event of an assault, as happened in **Syria** in 2018.

COUNTRY-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The United States: Africa is too important to be let down.

Recently published **public documents**, as well as **statements** by U.S. government officials, show Washington’s eagerness to treat African countries as peer partners, which undoubtedly is a positive development. But to be effective, the United States should adopt a whole of Africa strategy rather than only a sub-Saharan strategy, especially when it comes to challenging Russian advances across the continent, given the interconnectedness between North Africa, the Sahel strip, and sub-Saharan Africa.

Europe: Get serious about “Europeanisation.”

France has been the main prey of Russia’s forays in Africa. Anti-French sentiment and the Russian disinformation apparatus have become so entrenched in certain parts of the continent that any French-led effort to turn the tide tends to result in adverse outcomes. France has therefore opted for a **transformation** of its relations with Africa, presented by President Macron on February 27, 2023, as an intention to build a “new, balanced, reciprocal, and responsible relationship” underpinned by the **expressed needs of African partners**. This entails a reduction of France’s military personnel across the continent, following the termination of the Barkhane counterterrorism operation in Sahel late last year, and **co-management** with African partners of French military bases on the continent (except for the one in Djibouti dedicated to the Indo-Pacific strategy). The expectation is that reducing the focus on security and defense will move the otherwise rich Franco-African cooperation into the limelight.

Most Europeans welcome the ongoing reorientations in France’s strategic thinking. Yet if Paris lowers its profile, this requires others to step up, both at the national and EU levels. Paris has pushed for years for Europeans to get more involved in Africa—for example through the **Takuba** task force in the Sahel, or more recently through the “Team Europe” coordinated initiative between member states and EU institutions resulting in trips to **Ethiopia, Niger, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo**. Despite genuine French efforts at coordination, the **view** in some European capitals has sometimes been that France looks after its own interests in Africa, and then seeks partners to share the burden. Right or wrong, this view could prove an obstacle for Paris. In the meantime, France’s unique know-how and assets, let alone francophone connections and the importance of the African **diaspora** in France—the largest in Europe—will remain indispensable. Paris should therefore be genuine in its effort to empower other Europeans to take on increased responsibilities.

At the national level, some European countries are expected to step up and seem to be willing to do so. This is the case for Germany, which has steadily increased its presence in the Sahel and recently completed its first-ever **Sahel strategy**. With a less visible colonial record on the continent, Germany could appear as a more acceptable partner than France in many places. Some perceived German weaknesses at the European level, such as its absence from the UN Security Council or its alleged leniency vis-à-vis Russia, could conversely prove to be assets for building confidence with Africans. But Germany will need to convince African states that it can be not only an assistance provider but also a partner for security cooperation.

Spain also nurtures ambitions to become a strategic partner to Africa. Madrid has repeatedly voiced its interests for increased collective engagement with the Global South—notably Latin America and Africa—through EU or NATO efforts, and it will continue advocating for this cause during its presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2023. In its recently released “**Africa strategy**,” Madrid pledges to send a warship to the Gulf of Guinea to fight piracy and increase security in the region.

Next, the United Kingdom, although not a member of the European Union, remains one of the most knowledgeable European players on Africa-related issues, as well as one of the most active and experienced actors confronting Russian threats worldwide. Despite a low interest for Africa in its **Integrated Review**, London heralds that it will keep prioritizing Europe’s “wider neighborhood.” Therefore, the country could become an important player in the region, should it have the political will to do so.

Finally, at the European level, the most recent **declaration** of the European Union-African Union summit held in February 2022 has committed to renewing and enhancing “cooperation for peace and security.” EU missions in Africa, which were generally assembled upon French request, have been collateral victims of Russia’s progress. The European Union seems aware of the need to change its approach and is experimenting with new forms of partnership—such as the one with **Niger**, in which the African country was given the **lead on operations**, with European supply of equipment through the **European Peace Facility** and **growing bilateral support** from several member states. Although the coup in Niger has put an end to this experiment in a very fragile state, this approach was certainly going in the right direction and could be replicated in other, more stable countries. In general, the European Peace Facility, as an instrument initially conceived of in Paris to support its own efforts in Africa (taking over the Africa Peace Facility) and later reoriented to support the Ukrainian Armed Forces, should be supported in a way to fund efforts in both theaters. The European Peace Facility has the potential to be a very competitive instrument, with due diligence carried out up front to ensure that arms are supplied into safe hands, for clear and shared objectives. Failing to do so could add to the **sentiment of double standards** and frustration in the relations between Africa and Europe. ■

Mathieu Droin is a visiting fellow with the Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. Tina Dolbaia is a research associate with the Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program at CSIS. All views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this paper should be understood to be solely those of the authors.



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