

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT  
The Truth of the Matter  
**“Russia Into Africa”**

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SPEAKERS

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*Transcript by Rev.com*

Bob Schieffer: I'm Bob Schieffer.

Andrew Schwartz: And I'm Andrew Schwartz of the Center for Strategic and International Studies and this is The Truth of the Matter.

Bob Schieffer: This is a podcast where we break down the policy issues of the day. Since the politicians are having their say, we will excuse them with respect and bring in the experts, many of them from CSIS, people who have been working these issues for years.

Andrew Schwartz: No spin, no bombast, no finger pointing, just informed discussion.

Bob Schieffer: To get to the truth of the matter on the first ever Russia/Africa summit, we'll talk to Judd Devermont. He is the director of the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Prior to joining CSIS, he served as the national intelligence officer for Africa on the National Intelligence Council. Prior to that, he was the Central Intelligence Agency's senior political analyst on Sub-Saharan Africa.

Bob Schieffer: Mr. Devermont also served as the National Security Council Director for Somalia, Nigeria, the Sahel, and the African Union from 2011 to 2013.

Bob Schieffer: Judd Devermont, thank you so much for joining you. This is a very unusual event that's taking place, this Russia/Africa summit, and it's kind of going under the radar. But let me just start out by at describing it in a story that the Associated Press wrote.

Bob Schieffer: Russian President Putin is following China's lead and making a splashy bid for influence in Africa, hosting the continent's leadership in the first ever Russia/African summit. At last count, 43 of the continents, 54 heads of state are expected to attend. I'm going to start with a question we ask most often on this podcast. What is this all about? What is Putin's motive? Why did he decide to do this, and why should people in America care about it?

Judd Devermont: Yeah, thanks Bob. So this event, October 23rd to October 24th comes as you said, on the heels of both an event that the Chinese do every three years called the Forum for African-Chinese Cooperation, FOCAC. It comes on the heels of an event that Japan just did that I attended in Yokohama, and this is really about one thing. Russia wants to portray themselves as a global power. And to do that, they have to be active not just in Europe and not just meddling in our politics, but they have to be doing that in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Judd Devermont: And so what they're trying to convey with this event is Russia is a great power, Russia is back. There's a couple of other, I think secondary motives. First, this is an opportunity to take lots of pot shots at the United States. So they are saying we're going to provide security assistance to those countries where the US is drawing down or where the US has human rights concerns, and so we're not going to provide them assistance.

Judd Devermont: This is an opportunity for them to say, "We don't have strings attached." This is an opportunity for them to say, "Well, if the US puts sanctions on you, we'll still work with you." And so you can see there's a counter-narrative that Russia is trying to push with this event. And what the communique will ultimately say from this event is the African leaders and Russia agree in a multipolar world, in a fair world order, all of these messages that Russia is trying to portray, now they have, as you said, almost 50 African leaders who are going to sign the dotted line and say that they share that vision.

Bob Schieffer: Well, let me ask you this and I read some of the articles that you wrote about this. You warn US policymakers not to portray this as some sort of a great power standoff for Russia, China, and the United States, and you note that Russia is nowhere near the power that China is, nor is it near the status of the United States.

Bob Schieffer: So why should we be careful about that?

Judd Devermont: Well, first of all, I think that when we call Russia a great power in Sub-Saharan Africa, we are doing Putin's bidding. That's exactly what he wants. It's almost the conundrum of our podcast today, right? We need to talk about it to explain what's happening. At the same time, we don't want to give this much airtime to this event, but they're not a great power in Sub-Saharan Africa. They're a minnow, right? Compared to what the United States does, compared to what Europe does, compared to what China does.

Judd Devermont: Their investments are a lot smaller, their partnerships are a lot smaller and a lot more narrow in terms of scope, but Russia wants to be called a great power, and to be quite honest, Bob, we have been calling them a great power in Africa. That's central to the national security strategy document that came out of the NSC. It's part of the NDS, the National Defense Strategy. It's front and center in the John Bolton speech from December where he unveiled the African policy.

Judd Devermont: But to do that, I think one, it benefits Russia and two, we set ourselves up for a dynamic where every time we talk about Russia being important and African leaders cozying up to Russia triggers our assistance so we can compete, we create this really negative loop where an African leader says, "Well, if I need more assistance from the United States, I'm going to go see Russia and then the US will come in with assistance." So we got to get out of that whole game. We've got to call it theater and we got to focus on the real risks.

Andrew Schwartz: Does Russia even have the assistance to give them?

Judd Devermont: It's small, right? So in terms of trade, they're doing about \$3 to \$4 billion a year with Sub-Saharan Africa, and if you include the five North African countries, they get up to \$18 billion. But what they do, Andrew, is it's specialized-

Bob Schieffer: And that a big increase, is it not?

Judd Devermont: It's a huge increase.

Andrew Schwartz: It's like three times what they used to do, right?

Judd Devermont: It's three times. So, we've seen a dramatic increase and I can explain why we've seen that increase in a second but let me just get to your point that they offer specialized assistance. So they're really only in two sectors, energy and security. And so they're going to sign a big deal with Nigeria on security assistance. They're going to sign a deal with Cameroon. They're working on an energy deal with Rwanda.

Judd Devermont: And so these are kinds of things that the US is much more reticent to do, right? Because we have concerns about human rights, or we maybe think the energy approach that they have isn't the right one for these countries. But the reason why Russia is doubling, tripling its investment is because after the US and the international community put these sanctions on them with respect to Crimea, they need more markets for them to enter, and Africa tends to be a more permissive environment.

Judd Devermont: And so we saw a flood of ... or maybe it's a relative flood, right? It's still a trickle compared to the US or China, but we saw a number of Russian companies linked to the Kremlin come into Africa so they could find places where they could sell since they can't do it in places like Europe or the United States.

Andrew Schwartz: Judd, the United States remains incredibly popular on the African continent. We've invested so much money in the health and wellbeing and the infrastructure of Africa. Doesn't that hold up against Russia?

Judd Devermont: Yeah. I mean, the United States remains very popular in Sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, Pew has been doing these polls since President Trump came to office and Africa as a region, and in these polls it's just Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria. Still, they hold strong, almost better than any other region. In fact, Nigeria is the most supportive country of President Trump after the Philippines and Israel.

Judd Devermont: But I do think that Russia is appealing to different constituents. I mean, you can be popular publicly, but maybe not as popular with the leadership and I think that's where Russia is targeting, focusing on leaders.

Bob Schieffer: Let me ask you this, if you were to assess what the US policy is toward Africa right now, you've been there, you've been in the government, now you're not in the government, are we aware of this? Do we take this seriously? What is our stance toward Africa? Because as we've seen in the Middle East, the president seems determined to pull back as quickly and as far as he can at this point.

Judd Devermont: Yeah, so I'll spare you the spin and I won't talk about the pillars that are in all the documents. It really comes down to two things that they're focused on, great power competition, countering China and countering Russia, and trade investment. The democracy and government side, that's gone.

Andrew Schwartz: Not fighting terrorism.

Judd Devermont: Not fighting terrorism. They drew down 10% of their forces in West Africa, in the Sahel and in Lake Chad basin. I mean, that's not their focus. It's trade and investments. The only initiative they've come up with is called Prosper Africa, which is about doubling trade investment and then focusing on China.

Andrew Schwartz: What about fighting AIDS in South Africa where the AIDS epidemic, it's ground zero for the global AIDS epidemic?

Judd Devermont: So, the funding continues on those kind of programs, but if you look at all the documentation that the US Government that comes out of the White House, that's not there anymore.

Andrew Schwartz: It's not their focus.

Judd Devermont: It's not their focus. It continues and thanks to Congress, it continues. And thanks to the bureaucracy that continues to do the hard work, but it's not part of the rhetorical package in which they present what their focus is.

Bob Schieffer: Which sounds to me like there's not much of a focus.

Judd Devermont: Yeah, I-

Bob Schieffer: That's subjective to say that, but-

Judd Devermont: My very cynical view is it's let's do less with less.

Andrew Schwartz: What needs to happen in your view?

Judd Devermont: First we have to isolate, not elevate Russia. Let's not spend a lot of time talking about Russia and let's focus on the actual risks. And the first way we do that is engage with Africans because it's in our interest to do so, and because it could inoculate them from these opportunistic Russian plays. Two, we have to counter the propaganda. Russia is starting to invest in RT and Sputnik, they are starting to work on social media. How can we do more to elevate what they are doing?

Judd Devermont: And they were involved in a disinformation campaign in Sudan supporting the former President al-Bashir. They were involved in a very amateurish approach to manipulate the Madagascar election. So we have to sort of raise the volume on that, and we know the best practices from some of the work here that we've done at CSIS.

Judd Devermont: And then finally, we have to close this from being a permissive environment. So how do we use various US and UN sanctions to make sure that Russian PMCs can't get into this space?

Andrew Schwartz: And why should Americans be concerned that Russia is getting more and more involved in Africa? And maybe we're withdrawing, except in those areas that you-

Judd Devermont: Yeah. I think that Sub-Saharan Africa is really the future. It is the fastest growing part, it is the youngest part of the globe, the population is about 1.3 billion, it will double by 2050. So all the problems that we face globally are going to come through and be connected to Africa.

Judd Devermont: The African countries are the largest and most unified block in the UN. You want to get business done at the UN, you need African votes, which by the way, Putin's not unaware of. There's three members of the security council are always African. So there's a host of things that are on the positive side, right? What do we need to do to get our agenda through? And that's going to be part of the African story.

Judd Devermont: But then there's the challenges that comes from Africa. The security challenges, the Ebola outbreak, what happens on the continent doesn't stay on the continent, and I think it's taken us a long time to sort of treat Africa as part of an integrated part of the global community and not this sort of side business that those of us who care about Africa work on.

Bob Schieffer: What is the main thing the Russians sell or help the Africans? Is it arms?

Judd Devermont: Yeah, it's arms. So they're the largest exporter of arms to Sub-Saharan Africa. I believe it's about 39%. And then second to that is energy.

Bob Schieffer: And how many Russians are there in Africa?

Judd Devermont: Oh, that's a great question. I'm not sure I know the answer. They don't have embassies in as many countries as we do. Their business presence is fairly small. They haven't made any commitments here so far at the Sochi event that they were going to increase those numbers.

Andrew Schwartz: They don't have troops on the ground.

Judd Devermont: They have troops on the ground.

Andrew Schwartz: They do?

Judd Devermont: So they have two kinds of elements. So they have the private military contractors that are connected to the Kremlin, and there's about 400 of them in the Central African Republic. By the way, we let them in, we created a UN carve out so that they could come in and sell arms to the Central African

Republican Government. There was an embargo because of the instability there.

Judd Devermont: The Russians said, "Great, we'll sell them the arms, but you know what they really need? They really need some trainers, so we're going to send some trainers in," and all of a sudden 400 Russian officers, including the national security advisor for Central Africa Republic is now Russian.

Andrew Schwartz: Is Russia getting paid for this?

Judd Devermont: That's a great question. I'm not sure how much they're getting paid in terms of salary, but it just so happens that Central Africa Republic is a diamond producer, so they've been picking up a lot of diamond contracts.

Andrew Schwartz: I see.

Judd Devermont: And then on the regular side, they have just started to deploy troops to Mozambique, which has a growing insurgency in the North. They've admitted to sending equipment, air assets. They've denied the troops, but most on the ground observers have seen the Russian troops.

Bob Schieffer: So as we look across the continent, where are the danger points? Where are the places that we should really be keeping an eye on right now?

Judd Devermont: It's a simple math. Does a country have natural resources? Does a country have political or security strife? Does the country view that the US is not being responsive to its asks? That's where Russia goes. And so for example, one of the more interesting cases right now is in Guinea, the President of Guinea is going for an unconstitutional third term and we have been vocal here and there about it. The Russian ambassador said that the President of Guinea, Alpha Conde, is legendary and of course he should stay in power, and we're behind him 100%.

Judd Devermont: Well that Russian ambassador was reappointed as the head of the Russian Rusal aluminum company because Guinea has the largest world reserve of bauxite. So you can see how all of this connects.

Bob Schieffer: How did the Chinese take all this?

Judd Devermont: The Chinese have been fairly quiet about the Russian involvement in Africa. There has been, I know some testimonies on the Hill about Russian-Chinese cooperation being at a high point. With respect to Africa, I think it's still early days as they try to figure out how to think about the Russian ... encouraging the Russian sort of expansion. For right now, Russia and China are singing the same tune rhetorically about multipolarity, about don't interfere in domestic activities.

Judd Devermont: But ultimately, I do think they will rub up against each other. Obviously, they had quite a falling out back in the 70s, and I think that will happen again in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Bob Schieffer: And the Chinese in Africa right now are doing what they're doing everywhere else, right?

Judd Devermont: Yeah. Absolutely.

Bob Schieffer: Building roads and bridges.

Judd Devermont: Roads, bridges, but they're doing a tremendous amount on soft power. They set up Confucius Institutes all over Sub-Saharan Africa. China takes in more African students now than we do or the UK, only France bests China. And so there's the infrastructure play that China's doing, there's the military play, but there's also the people to people connection, which that's again, that's our strong suit, and that's one of the things that's really frustrating is that we're resting on our laurels here, and we should be doubling down on our values and our historical connection to the continent.

Andrew Schwartz: And we've pulled back over this administration, or even before?

Judd Devermont: Well, I think that the innovation has been pretty flat line for a long time. One of the initiatives that President Obama had was called the Young African Leaders where we would bring a thousand African, really inspiring African young people to the United States. In fact, we at CSIS hosted one of them this summer, but that went from a thousand students a year over a longer period of time to 700, so there's continuity there, but again, it's sort of part of that same story of just sort of decreasing the total numbers.

Bob Schieffer: Is there a connection or do you see a connection between what's happening in the Middle East right now this past week and what's going on in Africa? Will our drawback in Syria, will that have any impact in Africa? Or will they even know about it?

Judd Devermont: They're probably aware of it. I mean, I think that our adversaries are going to use that narrative the same way in the Middle East in Africa. I actually think what's happened in Africa, it previewed some of the things that we're seeing in the Middle East, right, in miniature, a few that the US was sort of slowly retreating and slowly walking away from the continent.

Andrew Schwartz: Tell us about that.

Judd Devermont: It sounds dramatic.

Andrew Schwartz: That's really interesting though. Tell us about that.

Judd Devermont: Every administration since the end of the Cold War has had this really broad view about how we engage in Sub-Saharan Africa, that it's in our interest for

prosperity and security in Africa, and to do that, we're going to promote democracy and governance, we're going to do development, we're going to do the security assistance and cooperation, and we're going to do the strengthening institutions.

Andrew Schwartz: Because it's in US interest to do so.

Judd Devermont: Because it's the US interest to do it, right? Prosperous African societies are opportunities for our business to invest, secure African societies are places that we don't need to send UN peacekeepers to, right? There's places that we don't have to expend blood and treasure.

Judd Devermont: When this administration came in, it's the first minimalist approach I have seen in Sub-Saharan Africa since the end of the Cold War. We're going to be really focused on just the geostrategic competition, we're just going to focus on trade investment, and this is the thing that is really disappointing. If we want to do those two things, the best tools that we have is democracy and governance and multilateralism, and we leave those on the table. If we invest in democratic institutions, if we invest in journalists, we can expose Russian and Chinese malfeasance. We can make sure that judiciaries arbitrate deals more fairly.

Judd Devermont: If we have multilateralism, we can get a coalition around some of these issues. We're doing this all on our own and we are, I think, falling short.

Bob Schieffer: Back to the beginning. So what we have here is a situation where people in Africa or leaders in Africa are going to take things away from what they have learned about the United States in Syria. So this whole Syria thing is much broader, if in no other way than just the impact on thinking of others.

Judd Devermont: Yeah. I don't want to put too fine a point on it. I think that in the list of things that an African leader is going to cite, Syria's probably low on that, but it's a bullet point to reinforce a broader narrative, right? When they need to marshal an argument, they will, I think get to Syria, but probably at the very end of the list. They're going to talk about things that are closer to home first.

Andrew Schwartz: Can you trust the United States?

Judd Devermont: Right. Can you trust the United States? Look what happened in Syria. But they're going to go through, I think, things that are more relevant in their space first. But I do think that it's part of this broader critique about the US that Africans, when advantageous, will draw on as well.

Andrew Schwartz: Nobody wants conditionality if you can do something, and someone's going to say, "Do whatever you want, we'll still support you."

Judd Devermont: Yeah.

Andrew Schwartz: And that's what Russia seems to be offering.

Judd Devermont: That's what Russia is doing. And so you ask what's in it for the Africans, and in the first instance, it's resources without strings. They're not going to be evaluating whether or not there's human rights abuses that comes from these security investments. They're not going to be asking, "Well, make sure that you do democratic reform, otherwise we're not going to partner with you this way." But what it also provides is leverage. More partners, more leverage.

Judd Devermont: And so Alpha Conde in Guinea can say, "Well, US, France, Europe, you don't support my third term? Russia does, so back off." And so that's one of the values here too, is it's a hedge for them.

Andrew Schwartz: How long would this take to clean up if we even started today? Let's say we just started today, and we were going to say, "Okay, well this conference with Russia is a wakeup call. This amount of investment that Russia has been putting into the continents, a wakeup call. Russia has been really getting into our turf." How long would it take to clean up the sense of African nations doing whatever they want without condition with Russia versus our support? How long would it take?

Judd Devermont: Well, first of all, I think we have to frame it differently and we need to focus on what is important to the US interest first and leave the Russia part outside of it. We definitely do not want to frame it as we're trying to counter Russia. So I think we first do that, and then I think it could take a period of years, but we can start to reduce the Russian footprint. But we're not going to get rid of Russia in Africa, and no African leader would support that. And Russia never left, but their footprint did shrink at the end of the Cold War.

Judd Devermont: Let me just give you like a vignette I think about one of the strategic flaws of what Russia does in Sub-Saharan Africa. All Russia knows how to do is to cozy up to incumbents. They are going to go all the way with the corruption, with the flattery to get the relationships they want with incumbents, including using sort of the nefarious tools like disinformation.

Judd Devermont: But Sub-Saharan Africa is a particularly volatile place right now for leaders. Since 2015, we have seen almost 30 leaders leave power, whether that was-

Andrew Schwartz: Wow.

Judd Devermont: ... just a handover, or that was they were defeated by incumbents. So it's a bad play to invest in incumbents right now, and what we do, and actually the Chinese are getting better at this, we have broad based relationships. So it doesn't matter who comes into power, our relationships are going to be enduring.

Judd Devermont: So in South Africa, the Russians had a really dirty nuclear deal with the former president, President Zuma. And the minute he was replaced by Cyril

Ramaphosa, that deal was frozen on ice. In Sudan, Russia was working on behalf of al-Bashir with all this disinformation and he's gone now. Now both the head of the Transitional Military Council of Sudan is in Russia, and so is Ramaphosa, and so my point is that that relationship is no longer as close, but it's not going to disappear, but I think we can do a good job putting some distance back in there.

Bob Schieffer: Judd Devermont, I want to thank you for helping us get to the truth of the matter on this emerging story about what's going on in Africa concerning the Russians. We'll be back again next week. I'm Bob Schieffer.

Andrew Schwartz: I'm Andrew Schwartz.

Andrew Schwartz: If you enjoyed this podcast, check out Into Africa, a CSIS podcast hosted by Judd Devermont, the guy we just interviewed. Judd and his guests discuss policy, politics, and the arts, and even sports across the African continent. You can hear it wherever you get your podcasts.