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INTRODUCTION



Russia in Africa: Who is courting whom?

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ABSTRACT

This is an introductory essay for the special issue of the *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 'Russia in Africa: Who is courting whom?'

KEYWORDS

Geopolitics; African politics; Russia; Africa; Russia-Africa

Three decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia is resurgent in Africa. On 23 and 24 October 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin co-chaired the first Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi, which fêted heads of state from 43 African countries and showcased Moscow's great power ambitions. Russia has signed military-technical agreements with over 20 African countries and has secured lucrative mining and nuclear energy contracts on the continent. Russian private military contractors (PMCs) have influenced the outcomes of civil wars in Libya and the Central African Republic (CAR), and Russia exports more arms to Africa than the United States, France and China combined. These indicators of Russia's expanding influence in Africa are compelling, but a closer examination reveals a murkier picture. Despite Putin's lofty trade targets, Russia's trade with Africa stands at just \$20 billion, which is lower than that of India or Turkey. The involvement of the Wagner Group PMC in alleged war crimes in Libya and CAR, Russia's support for authoritarian regimes in Africa, and Moscow's failed COVID-19 vaccine distribution campaign have eroded Russia's soft power. Limited cooperation between Russia and China in Africa, combined with growing pressure from the US and Europe, could further expose the shaky foundations of Moscow's influence on the continent. What is clear is that renewed attention by Russia to Africa presents both risks and opportunities for the continent. The question arises: Who is courting whom?

The Ukraine War has underscored both the resilience and limitations of Russian influence in Africa. On the surface, many African countries have engaged with Russia in a business-as-usual fashion and have either refrained from condemning Russian aggression or from expressing explicit solidarity with Ukraine. Nevertheless, over half of all African states sided with the West in condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine in UN General Assembly votes in March and October 2022.

Russia views Africa as an increasingly important vector of its post-Western foreign policy and has therefore continued military interventions in Libya, Mali and CAR, while seeking to sanctions-proof its defence and energy sector deals on the continent. The continued drawdown of France's security presence in West Africa, the inconsistent

engagement of the US on the continent and pockets of discontent with China's development model create vacuums that Russia readily wishes to exploit. On the flipside, Russia's major breakthroughs on the continent will likely be confined to fragile states, such as Mali, or autocracies, such as Cameroon, as major regional powers are reluctant to convert rhetorical cooperation into multidimensional partnerships. Despite the enthusiastic pro-Russian sentiments of many African netizens, Russia's soft power has been damaged by credible allegations of war crimes and cultural genocide in Ukraine.¹ The case for Russia being an anti-colonial power is weakened by its naked pursuit of territorial expansion in Ukraine, while the Russian military's striking weakness causes African countries to ponder whether security engagement is worth the risk of secondary sanctions. Heading into the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit in St Petersburg (unless the proposed date and venue change, again), Russia looks more like a 'virtual great power' than a genuine challenger to European, American and Chinese influence.

As suspicions arise that Russia's growing assertiveness in Africa is a driver of instability and that its approach to governance encourages pernicious practices, such as kleptocracy and autocracy promotion, the dearth of scholarship on Moscow's post-1991 activities in Africa is striking. An overreliance on anecdotal media reports and country-specific think tank analyses has fuelled misleading extrapolations and erroneous assumptions about the foundations and durability of Russian influence in Africa. One particularly problematic assumption is that Russia's resurgence in Africa is a relatively recent phenomenon, which took hold at the tail end of Putin's second term from 2004 to 2008 and accelerated after Russia-West relations soured over the 2014 Ukraine crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea. This contention neglects Russian domestic politics, which featured heated debates during the 1990s between pro-Western figures, such as former Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, and advocates of multipolarity, such as former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov. If Russia's capabilities were truncated with the collapse of the Berlin Wall, its intentions to return as a great power in Africa did not completely evaporate. Russia's main tactics to expand its influence, such as debt forgiveness, arms contracts to fragile states and resistance to US unilateralism, come from its transition-era playbook and are not simply throwbacks to its Soviet-era superpower status. These continuities and forces that have shaped them are largely ignored in Western accounts and deserve granular attention.

Despite the remarkably understated consistency of Russia's approach to Africa over the past quarter-century, Moscow's policy towards the continent is also dynamic. Russia's historically grounded use of energy and health diplomacy, as well as military-technical assistance and training, have been incrementally reformatted for a multipolar order. Russia has used social media, state media and 'political technologists' to create distorted narratives of Russian largesse and to erode public support for Western involvement in Africa. Russia's use of PMCs has allowed it to export its signature 'Syrian model' of counterinsurgency to Africa and provided Moscow with opportunities to re-assert its role as a great power in the Mediterranean Sea, Red Sea and Indian Ocean, and the littoral states bordering them. At times, image triumphs over reality, as Russian narratives are more appealing than its actions, but it is clear that Moscow's approach to Africa is customised and is not a mere extrapolation from Putin's global approach to foreign policy. While the antiquated nature of Russian battlefield tactics in Ukraine and the inefficacy of Russian hybrid war dominate the headlines, Russia's approach to power projection in Africa is characterised

by versatility, speed and modernity. This intriguing contradiction, which mirrors Moscow's successful outreaches elsewhere in the Middle East and the Global South more broadly, is a striking paradox. The scholarship deficit on Russia-Africa relations has also misleadingly framed Moscow as (1) a purely transactional actor, even though the non-material drivers of its partnerships are the most durable sources of its influence, or (2) as the product of Putin's personal vision, which neglects the complex web of officials, businessmen, ideologues and state-owned companies that drive Russian policy. Moreover, the limited amplification of African voices causes sub-Saharan Africa to be viewed as a passive pawn of Russian power projection and neglects the perspectives of African civil society and the historical legacies that drive elites to court the Kremlin. Africa's agency is thus discounted and diminished.

This special issue's far-reaching coverage of Russia-Africa relations, which includes academic research from leading Russian, African and international scholars, takes a major step towards compensating for this dearth of scholarship. It addresses the dimensions of Russian power projection in Africa, highlights continuities and new frontiers of Russian influence and provides a roadmap towards understanding how Russia is perceived in Africa. The issue's balance between continent-wide studies and more narrowly focused regional and country-specific analysis counters the prevailing artificial homogenisation of Russian policy in Africa that undermines many extant accounts. Taking a continent-wide perspective, Allard Duursma and Niklas Masuhr's article provides a much-needed long-term perspective for Russian influence in Africa, which detaches it from the great power competition-centric frameworks that predominate in Western discourse. It highlights non-material factors, such as narratives about anti-colonialism and normative bonds, and describes how those sources of solidarity are transmitted by Russian elites to their African counterparts through patronage networks. By framing Russia as an opportunistic power, Duursma and Masuhr astutely highlight the uncharacteristic flexibility of Russian policy towards Africa. This is perhaps best epitomised by the activities of oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin and his Wagner Group PMC, Chechnya's strongman Ramzan Kadyrov's Islamic community outreaches, Russia's manipulation of big tech companies and Russia's disinformation appeals to aspiring authoritarians in the region.

Leonid Issaev, Alisa Shishkina and Iakov Liokumovich, in their examination of Russian military diplomacy, provide a valuable analysis of how Moscow's new tactics for power projection are perceived in Africa. Their article illustrates how Russia's military successes in Syria shape positive perceptions of Moscow as a counter-insurgency actor in West Africa and places this within the broader post-Cold War context of a multipolar geopolitical order in Africa. Russia's counter programming, shifting the emphasis from human rights and democratisation to stability and sovereignty, appeals greatly to African elites and provides Moscow with a smooth path to engagement with regional institutions and informal security blocs, such as the Sahel's G5. While the image of cooperation with Russia is enticing, it is also based on illusions. Russia, it appears, is a neo-colonial power dressed in anti-colonial clothes. Ovigwe Eguegu's exploration of Russian private military diplomacy in Africa expounds further on this clash between illusions and reality in the counterinsurgency arena. Russia's no-strings attached approach to counterinsurgency is a source of appeal for fragile states, but the opacity of Russian PMC activity undermines the popular appeal of Moscow on the continent. Its

examination of the cases of Mali and CAR provides empirical depth that complements the broader-reaching analysis of African media in the article by Issaev, Shishkina and Lio-kumovich. Isaac Antwi-Boasiako's article examining Russian public diplomacy in Africa explores the targeted use of its historical ties, education and health aid programmes, and international broadcasting to enhance Moscow's 'soft power' on the continent. The author unpacks the Kremlin's exploitation of existing anti-Western narratives, and the weaknesses of its state-centric approach to public diplomacy in general.

The remaining articles in the special issue provide in-depth examinations of Russian policy towards specific African regions, which confirm and challenge continent-wide trends. Bhaso Ndzendze and Manyana Zimkhita's examination of Russian arms sales to states in Southern Africa further broadens the discussion of Russia's security policy in Africa. As the counterinsurgency articles in this special issue highlight the correlation between authoritarianism and Russia's appeal as a partner, Ndednze and Zimkhita assess whether this trend extends to arms sales. Russia's arms contracts with Africa depart from the ideological nature of Soviet-era transactions and extend to democracies and hybrid regimes, as well as anti-Western countries. In Southern Africa, a pattern of 'differentiated courtship' emerges clearly. By bridging Southern and Eastern Africa, Dzvinika Kachur highlights the diverse array of tactics that Russia utilises to expand its presence in Africa. These tactics include debt-for-development, nuclear energy, military and paramilitary cooperation, disinformation campaigns and election interference and sponsorship of political parties. It builds on the theme of patronage that is discussed in Duursma and Masuhr's article, as well as the predatory nature of Russian private business elites, which is discussed at length in preceding articles on counterinsurgency. The sources of co-dependency between political elites and autocrats also erode transparency, an observation which builds on Eguegu's examination of PMCs.

The remaining articles provide in-depth analysis of Russia's power projection in the Horn of Africa. Jithin Matthew and John Moolakkattu provide an account of Russia's influence in the Horn of Africa, which has been especially neglected by scholarship since the collapse of the Marxist-Leninist Derg regime in Ethiopia in 1987. It highlights the versatility of Russia's tactics for influence projection in the Horn, which span from participating in anti-piracy missions to vaccine diplomacy. It also provides an empirical case for the pitfalls of Russia's post-Communist era re-engagement with Africa and illustrates how constraints, such as the role of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, limit Russia's influence. Francesco Generoso provides a further in-depth examination of Russia's influence in the region, focussing on the goal of a naval port along the Red Sea and providing theoretical grounding for analysis of Russian influence on the continent. Through the use of a defensive realist prism, Generoso explores the nexus between great power status projection and Russia's internal security preservation and examines the historical and contemporary drivers for Russia's pursuit of influence in the Horn of Africa, in particular.

The war in Ukraine has elevated the level of scrutiny of Russia's actions both in Europe and elsewhere in the world, including in Africa. Moscow is wooing African elites to serve its interests; African states are trying to play off Moscow, Washington, Brussels and Beijing for maximum advantage. This special issue illustrates the complexity and nuances of the multiple relationships African countries have with Russia. It warns against over-generalising the unique features of bilateral ties. The second Russia-Africa Summit – if it indeed

goes ahead in 2023 – will provide an ideal opportunity to reflect on progress since the inaugural event in 2019, and separate bluster from the facts on the ground. The editors hope that this special issue on ‘Russia in Africa: Who is courting whom?’ will help inform and deepen conversations on Africa-Russia relations.

Note

1. See, for example, <https://war.ukraine.ua/russia-war-crimes/>.

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