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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Economic Sanctions; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Science and Technology; Corruption ; Resource Security; Africa; Sudan; Iran; Russia; United States

RUSSIA INCREASES ITS AFRICAN FOOTPRINT

Based on recent satellite imagery, Moscow appears to be expanding a key military base in Mali. The imagery, captured by the Maxar satellite, reveals "new buildings, roads, and excavations" at a site formerly used for logistics and training by the notorious Russian paramilitary group Wagner. The expansion is part of an ongoing commitment by Moscow to maintaining its presence in West Africa – a commitment that has also seen the launch of a new military force, dubbed the "African Legion," comprised of former Wagner mercenaries. The latter step is an attempted rebrand of Wagner in the wake of the abortive coup and subsequent untimely demise of its founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin. Wagner has been involved in numerous countries on the continent, including Libya, where it stands accused of violating a United Nations embargo and funding the militant faction of rebel warlord Khalifa Haftar. (*Military Africa*, March 4, 2024)

THE U.S. SANCTIONS ZIMBABWE... AGAIN

The United States has imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe's president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, and other senior national leaders over corruption and human rights abuses. The sanctions are designed to target the assets of the named officials, and prohibit their travel. According to the White House, Zimbabwe continues "gross abuses of political, economic, and human rights," with the regime in Harare refusing to lift restrictions on political activity, prevent the transfer of public resources to leadership for personal gain, and cease its support for criminal networks. Secretary of State Blinken stated that Zimbabweans are "living in fear" over the constant abuse and unlawful killings. (*BBC News*, March 4, 2024)

[EDITORS' NOTE: The new punitive measures should by now be familiar to Zimbabwean leaders. The country saw heavy U.S. sanctions in the early 2000s as a result of allegations from Washington that the government at the time was undermining democracy.]

A NEW AFRICAN "GREAT GAME"

The ongoing strategic competition between the U.S. and China in Africa is now focused on a key dimension: strategic minerals. Africa's mineral market is critical to advanced U.S. defense systems and clean technologies, such as the F-35 fighter jet, electric vehicles, and wind turbines, making the disposition of the continent's resources a vital geopolitical issue. America's challenge stems not only from the fact that Beijing dominates the global refining and processing of such materials, but also that the PRC has invested in multiple infrastructure projects across the continent, furthering its partnerships in the region and doing so in ways that impact American competitiveness and even its security.

In an attempt to diminish China's influence over the critical mineral supply chain, Washington is now seeking to invest hundreds of millions of dollars to resurrect the Lobito Corridor, a "1200-mile-long railway that would transport critical minerals from the [DRC] and Zimbabwe to the Angolan coast." Some experts, however, have expressed concern over whether the U.S. will in fact fulfill its pledge to revitalize the regional rail line. In this regard, hopes have been bolstered by the recent introduction in Congress of the *Critical Minerals Security Act*, which calls for the United States to become less reliant on China for these critical resources. (*Foreign Policy*, February 28, 2024)

IRAN'S SUDAN PLAY GOES SIDEWAYS

The Islamic Republic recently pressed Sudan to let it erect a permanent naval base on its Red Sea coast, but was turned down by Khartoum. Tehran tried offering the country's ruling Transitional Sovereignty Council a helicopter-carrying warship in exchange, but was declined over fears that the move might further alienate the U.S. and Israel. Had the deal been successful, Iran would have gained the ability to "monitor maritime traffic to and from the Suez Canal and Israel," according to a senior Sudanese intelligence official. Tehran has previously provided the Sudanese military with explosive drones to assist in Khartoum's ongoing civil conflict.

The Iranian overture is understandable. Under the previous leadership of Omar al-Bashir, Sudan previously maintained close ties with Iran and its ally Hamas. However, following a 2019 coup, new leadership sought to normalize relations with the U.S. and Israel in order to end Western sanctions, going so far as to sign a (so far largely dormant) normalization deal with Israel in 2020. Tehran appears to be hoping for a return to more friendly policies in Khartoum. (*Wall Street Journal*, March 3, 2024)