



Russia's African Inroads Bear Watching

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Since this Spring, global attention has focused overwhelmingly on Eastern Europe, and Russia's war of aggression against neighboring Ukraine. Both the United States and European capitals have been escalating their pressure on the Kremlin in a bid to get Russian President Vladimir Putin to blink. But for many of Washington's foreign partners, the crisis remains a distant one.

This is certainly true in Africa, as I learned on a recent research trip to the continent. Regional officials there are now preoccupied with the inevitable side effects of the Russia's new war, like looming food scarcity and cascading energy disruptions, that could destabilize their own vulnerable populations. Beyond that, however, they don't have much to say about Moscow's renewed aggression against its western neighbor.

That doesn't mean that Africans are not concerned about the Kremlin, however. To the contrary, multiple officials and experts I spoke with were quick to stress something often overlooked in the West: that Russia is now pursuing a concerted strategy to build influence on the continent.

Moscow, they say, is present in Africa in a much more serious and sustained fashion than is generally understood either in Europe or in the U.S. Recent years have seen it expand its presence throughout the continent through the establishment of new military basing arrangements, the deployment of irregular forces (most conspicuously those of the Wagner mercenary group) to regional conflicts in Mozambique, Mali, the Central African Republic (CAR) and Libya, and stepped-up arms sales to a number of the continent's regimes.

These maneuvers have been reported on sporadically in the Western press, and at least one Western government has acknowledged that Russian President Vladimir Putin seems to have made Africa "a top priority." However, the true scope of Russia's designs on – and entrenchment in – Africa still isn't properly appreciated by Western observers. African officials, by contrast, are convinced that Russia is pursuing a long term strategy that includes "trying to alter the way militaries work on the continent" and bringing more and more regional states into its own geopolitical orbit.

Take, for instance, Russia's growing links to Algeria. That country has increasingly found itself on the back foot over the past couple of years, as a result both of internal political dysfunction and positive international developments that have allowed its regional rival, Morocco, to decisively eclipse it on the world stage. This has propelled Algiers into a de facto strategic partnership with Moscow.

The two countries are now in talks over expanding trade and commercial contacts, and Algeria figured prominently at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum held last month in Russia's second city, with Russian officials touting ties between the two countries as an "effective strategic partnership." The growing coordination between Moscow and Algiers is also visible in the stepped-up military cooperation of recent months, with joint maneuvers in the region now planned for this coming Fall. Notably, these drills – though ostensibly intended as a common response to "illegal" groups – will be carried out close to Algeria's common border with Morocco, thereby sending an unmistakable message that Russian support is contributing to Algerian bellicosity.

More broadly, Russia's presence on the continent is intensifying the region's endemic conflicts. For instance, documented atrocities carried out by Russian-linked forces in the CAR, and the government's silence about the same, has stoked ethnic and sectarian tensions among local populations. And that is just the tip of the iceberg. "What Russia has been doing has been deploying mercenaries, disinformation, election interference, arms-for-resources deals, opaque contracts... aimed at capturing wider influence," Joseph Siegle of the U.S. military's Africa Center for Strategic Studies has explained.

Nor has the current war in Ukraine meaningfully altered this trajectory. The early stages of the conflict saw major missteps on the part of the Russian military, causing setbacks which led the Kremlin to seek reinforcements for its war effort from allies abroad. Moscow, however, was mostly rebuffed, forcing it to reposition its irregular troops (including those deployed in Africa) so they can contribute to the Ukraine fight.

But African officials and observers are convinced that such a shift is temporary. They fully expect Russian forces (including irregular ones) to return to Africa en masse in the future, as Moscow moves ahead with plans to expand its regional footprint.

All of which suggests that, for the Kremlin, the continent has emerged as a serious strategic priority – and a new battleground in its struggle for influence with the West.