



Moscow's African Footprint In Flux

August 29, 2023 **Matt Cesare** *AFPC Insights*

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Last month, with considerable fanfare, the Kremlin convened the second installment of the Russia-Africa Economic and Humanitarian Forum. The event, held in Saint Petersburg, was supposed to serve as a showcase of Moscow's long reach and extensive influence on the African continent. What it highlighted instead, however, were the limits of the Kremlin's influence – and the importance that Russia's increasingly isolated government attaches to its foreign policy footprint there.

From the start, the July gathering was intended to be a grand affair. Building off the first iteration of the event, which took place in Sochi in 2019, its goal was for African leaders to come together with their counterparts in Moscow and “promote efforts to strengthen comprehensive and equal cooperation between Russia and African nations across all areas of society.”

Things didn't quite turn out that way, however. Only 17 African heads of state made an appearance in Saint Petersburg – representing less than 1/3 of nations on the continent, and far fewer than the 43 who showed up to the 2019 summit. The attendance was dampened, and the mood soured, by the Russian government's decision, days earlier, to pull out of the Black Sea Grain Initiative – a move that will disproportionately impact developing regions of the world like Africa. Lingering uncertainty over the status of the Wagner paramilitary group in the wake of the group's abortive mutiny against the Kremlin back in June, doubtless played a role as well.

AFRICA MATTERS

Russia's interest in Africa has deep roots. In recent years, even as it has pursued an increasingly adversarial policy toward Europe and the United States, Moscow has made serious efforts to extend its strategic influence on the continent. It has done so asymmetrically. While China has wooed African nations with loans and infrastructure projects as part of its Belt & Road Initiative, Russia has preferred to build influence quietly, using proxy forces and quiet strategic arrangements. Here Wagner has played a key role, propping up regional regimes in countries like Mali, Sudan, and the Central African Republic – and garnering serious goodwill for the Kremlin in the process.

The benefits for Russia have been substantial. As of 2019, Russia had signed military cooperation agreements with nearly 30 different countries on the continent. These agreements range from simple memorandums of understanding to more complex deals that entailed training of local forces, arms sales, and joint military exercises. As part of those understandings, Russia has established military bases in Eritrea and Libya, and begun training local security forces in Nigeria, Chad, Madagascar, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Tanzania. In the Central African Republic, Sudan, and Egypt, it has done both.

Russia has also gained valuable economic leverage. In places like the Central African Republic, Wagner has secured significant mining and logging rights. In Sudan, entities tied to Wagner head Yevgeny Prigozhin have reportedly carried out gold mining activities in tandem with regime security forces. (Last year, Wagner operatives were even linked to a scheme to smuggle gold from Sudan to Russia.) In Mali, meanwhile, the economic benefits that have accrued to Wagner have been much more direct; the group has reportedly inked a contract with the Malian government worth \$10 million monthly to reinforce the country's armed forces.

These benefits help to explain why the Kremlin, even amid its ongoing war against Ukraine, has continued to prioritize engagement with the continent.

ADVERSITY, AND OPPORTUNITY

But the Kremlin's continental footprint is now in flux. Moscow's decision, in late June, to back out of the Black Sea Grain Initiative, coupled with Wagner's sudden, abortive mutiny against the Kremlin this summer, has cast a shadow over its African engagement. Russia's departure from the Black Sea Grain Initiative was seen, in the words of one Kenyan official, “as a stab [in] the back” of its African partners. As a result of the decision, African nations will not be able to get grain from Ukraine, and will be forced to get it from Russia. Indeed, last month, as a confidence building measure in the wake of his government's pullout from the BSGI, President Putin offered to supply six African states with thousands of tons of grain for free – a scenario that Oxford University professor Samuel Ramani has likened to “full-fledged grain diplomacy.”

Then there is Niger. The recent military coup there, which displaced pro-Western president Mohamed Bazoum, has thrown the country's traditional alliances into question – and opened the door for a closer relationship with Moscow. Niger's new ruling junta has reportedly already held consultations with Wagner officials about a role for the paramilitary force in propping up its new government. As a result, Russia could soon assume a significant stake in the mineral-rich African nation, much to the detriment of Washington and other Western capitals.

Most recently, the apparent death of Wagner head Yevgeny Prigozhin in a plane crash on August 23rd is liable to reverberate through the continent. Notably, the incident – which is being widely viewed as belated official retaliation against Prigozhin for his June mutiny – claimed the life of other key Wagner officials as well, suggesting the group’s profile is about to undergo significant changes, including potentially in Africa as well.

LOOKING FORWARD

Africa undeniably represents a major strategic prize. The continent is on the cusp of a population explosion, and is projected to account for nearly 2.5 billion people by 2050. As its population booms, the opportunities for foreign powers to project their influence, and shape perceptions, in Africa will likewise grow.

Russia’s extensive investments – especially in light of its ongoing war in Ukraine – reflect a recognition of this reality. Yet how its African profile evolves in the years ahead will depend a great deal on its ability to continue to build ties with, and quell doubts in, regional capitals on the continent.

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