

Russia's "Great Return" to Africa?



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- “La perception russe de sa propre sécurité : mythes et réalités” [The Russian perception of its own security: myths and reality], *Sécurité globale*, Vol. 1, No. 5, 2016.
- “Le brouillard manichéen de la relation franco-russe” [The manichean fog of the Franco-Russian relationship], *La Revue des deux mondes*, September 2015.

Abstract

Russia's comeback to Africa has been widely discussed since 2017. How significant really is it and how does Russia's Africa policy play out in practice? This paper aims to answer these questions, based on the testimony of Russian and African experts and participants whom the author met on different assignments. There is no doubt that Russia is back in Africa. Yet Moscow's approach is based less on a grand strategic design aimed at domination than on an opportunistic and pragmatic search for influence that is dictated, in essence, by economic imperatives.

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Introduction

In December 2017, Moscow received an exemption from the United Nations arms embargo on the Central African Republic (CAR) to equip and train CAR units (around 1300 men).¹ Ever since, discussion has swirled about Russia's return to Africa, from Luanda and Port Sudan to Cairo and Pretoria. For instance, France's Minister of the Armed Forces, Florence Parly, stated on the sidelines of the Dakar Forum in 2018 that Russia's involvement in CAR would not promote stability in the country.² If we go beyond the narrative that Russia is simply "reconquering" a space that post-Soviet Russia had abandoned, Russia's return to Africa raises three main questions. First, is it solely the result of a "windfall effect" or is it, rather, the product of a well-thought-through strategy, like Russia's "pivot to Asia", that started in Vladimir Putin's first term? Secondly, how has Russia's return manifested itself: in diplomacy, the military sphere, natural resources or the economy? Lastly, how does Russia's Africa policy work alongside those of other powers that were already active on the African continent?

This paper will attempt to start answering these questions. First, it is beyond doubt that Russia's return to Africa is much more modest than recent media coverage would have one believe. Second, the tools used by Russia uses point to indirect action and influence executed by certain private and state actors. Third, Russia's prospects in Africa probably rest on two pillars, military-technical cooperation and the exploitation of natural resources.

Translated from French by Cameron Johnston.

1. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSCA) in the Central Africa Republic is already 11,650-people strong.

2. See the interview that the French Minister of the Armed Forces F. Parly gave to B. Roger, "Nous sommes prêts à intervenir si le Burkina Faso nous le demande" [We are ready to intervene if Burkina Faso asks us to], *Jeune Afrique*, 1 November 2018, www.jeuneafrique.com.

Myths and Realities of an Opportunistic Return

Russia's recent recovery of interest in Africa

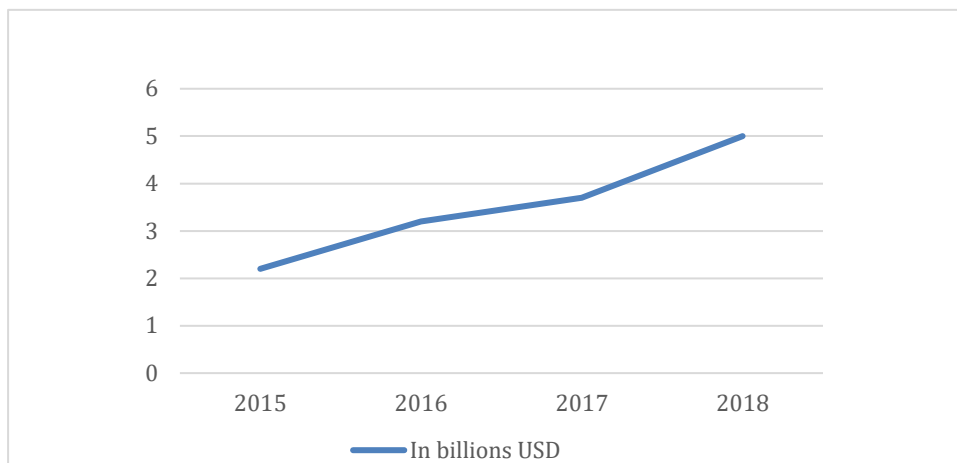
Russia's political engagement in Africa pales in comparison with its investment in Asia. Since his first term in office, Vladimir Putin has toured Asian countries to develop bilateral ties. Africa was of only marginal importance to him. Whereas Asia beyond the Urals is part of Russian cultural history, to the point of appearing in Russia's coat of arms (the two-headed eagle), Africa is imagined as a far-away land, despite Alexander Pushkin's part-Ethiopian origins. In Russia's hierarchy of priorities, the Arctic and the High North are among the Kremlin's strategic interests, partly because of the natural resources to be exploited there and Russia's military presence in the Murmansk region. Africa, meanwhile, occupies a second tier, because of its limited economic prospects and the residual influence of the former European colonial powers. In the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, Africa is relegated to the last paragraph (99) where which calls for "multidimensional interaction".

The Kremlin's revival of its Africa policy after 2014 can be explained by the interaction between three factors: sanctions imposed on Russia by the West after the annexation of Crimea, the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union, and the beginning of Russian airstrikes in Syria on 30 September 2015. Confrontation with the West has become a central element of Russian foreign policy. Motivated both by domestic political considerations and by a quest for international status, this confrontational stance drove the Kremlin into a headlong search for alternative partners. Russia hoped to find such partners in Africa, even though the continent is already the object of intense competition between the old colonial powers and emerging countries, including Russian partners such as India, China, Brazil, Turkey and Israel. The Russian authorities are also in search of new financial and economic resources that are beyond the reach of European and American sanctions. Thus, after an abrupt disengagement in the early 1990s, Russia appeared to rediscover the attractions of Africa, a continent in which the Soviet Union invested heavily, both politically and economically.

Russia: an economic lightweight in Africa

Russia remains an economic lightweight in Africa. According to Russian official statistics,³ Moscow's trade with Sub-Saharan Africa does not exceed \$5 billion per year.

Trade between Russia and Sub-Saharan Africa



Source : official site for information on public markets, <https://torqi.gov.ru>.

If one includes North Africa for 2017, the volume of trade increases to \$17 billion. That is similar to the value of Brazil's trade with Africa, but is far below the levels reached by Russia's competitors. According to the African Economic Information Agency Ecofin,⁴ in 2017 African trade with the EU was worth roughly \$275 billion, compared to \$200 billion with China, \$70 billion with India, \$53 billion with the United States and \$20 billion with Turkey. One Russian journalist who specialises in economics argues that "the real goal of Russia's return to Africa is less about foreign policy than about promoting business in an area which is not subject to sanctions and where Russia is a latecomer. If the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is so engaged there, it is because it is the chosen tool for conquering markets, alongside the Defence Ministry".⁵

In terms of arms sales, Africa remains a market to be conquered, even if Russia is already operating there. Figures from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) indicate that most (78%) of

3. Given the lack of reliable statistics and contradictory sources, we have chosen to only record the last three years, as well as the first six months of 2018.

4. Agency created in December 2010 and based in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon, and Geneva, www.agenceecofin.com.

5. Interview with the author, Paris, 10 July 2018.

Russian arms transfers to Africa go to Algeria. Africa as a whole accounts for only 13% of Russian arms exports. Moreover, Russian exports of arms to Africa declined by 32% between 2008-2012 and 2013-2017.⁶ Rosoboronexport figures for 2011-2015 suggest that Russia accounts for about 30% of Sub-Saharan Africa's arms imports. These figures do not include certain maintenance contracts for Soviet equipment, which is still used in three quarters of African countries.⁷ For Russia, then, "reconquering" the African arms market merely means selling servicing or retrofitting contracts. In 2017, the body responsible for the whole sector and for Industrial and Technical cooperation, the FSMTS (Federal Service of Military-Technical Cooperation), announced that its order book was worth \$45 billion. Most of the equipment was destined for China, India and Vietnam while Africa lags far behind. African countries which received Russian arms in 2017 include:

- Algeria (four Iskander-E short range missile systems, six Su-30MKA combat aircraft, six Mi-28NE attack helicopters of 42 that were ordered in 2013, the first T-90SA heavy tanks, TOS-1 and BuK-M2E missile systems...awaiting a Kilo-class submarine);
- Egypt (46 MiG-29M/M2 multirole fighter aircraft, 19 Kamov-52 attack helicopters equipped with the AT-9 and AT-16 anti-tank systems, S-300 missile systems...);
- Kenya (one Mi-17 helicopter for the police);
- Nigeria (two Mi-35 helicopters);
- Mali (two Mi-35 helicopters ordered & to be delivered in 2019);
- Angola (retrofit of 18 Su-30K fighter aircraft);
- Equatorial Guinea (automatic weapons, 12 E6-type surface-to-air missile systems and two Pantsir-S1 missile systems);
- Burkina Faso (two Mi-171 helicopters);

A military journalist at a Russian daily newspaper told us that "African clients want modern systems. FSMTS's objective is to convince them that it is better to buy from the Russians than from the Chinese or the Israelis".⁸

6. P. Wezeman, A. Fleurant, A. Kuimova, N. Tian, S. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers 2017", SIPRI Fact Sheet, March 2018, p. 7.

7. I. Kononov and G. Šubin, "Sovremennaiia Afrika: Vojny i oruzhie" [Contemporary Africa: Wars and weapons], African Institute, RAN, 2013.

8. Interview with the author, Paris, 31 August 2018.

"Security for economic advantages"

The Russian actors active in Africa are mainly seeking to reap economic benefits in return for selling Russian goods and services in the security sector. To achieve this, and to strengthen its position in Africa, the Kremlin and the MFA have used the machinery of state to first launch an information offensive (2014) and then to deploy delegations on the ground (2018), with the Foreign Minister (Sergey Lavrov) and Secretary of the National Security Council (Nikolai Patrushev) at their head.

Russia has profoundly changed its narrative about Africa: from presenting the continent in a negative light before 2013, it began to emphasise its economic potential. This rhetorical shift was embodied by Mikhail Margelov, who served as the Kremlin's Special Representative for Africa until 2014.⁹ Russian media—national and international—followed suit, stressing Russia's importance for Africa and Africa's importance to Russia.¹⁰ The Institute for African Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences has also promoted this narrative through its Director Irina Abramova (an expert in Sub-Saharan Africa) by means of academic writings and meetings of experts. This academic support has helped Russia develop an unprecedented pan-African approach. The perception used to be widespread amongst Russian elites that Africa was divided between the "useful" and dynamic North and a less promising area South of the Sahara. This binary view of Africa has now disappeared, at least in public statements. When Vladimir Putin announced in 2017 that Egypt had signed a contract for Rosatom to build four nuclear reactors and to service them for 60 years, and when he received the CAR President, Faustin Archange Touadéra, at the St Petersburg Economic Forum in May 2018, he displayed an economic pragmatism that encompassed the whole of the African continent.¹¹ The Russian President is also seeking, implicitly, to advertise that Russia carries weight in a region where Western powers have traditionally held sway.

To effect change on the ground, the Deputy Foreign Minister and Kremlin Special Representative for Africa and the Middle East, Mikhail Bogdanov, oversaw the replacement of a number of his ambassadors

9. Appointed in 2001, Margelov sought visibility after 2013 to convey messages about Russia's economic activism in Africa.

10. See, among others: K. Babaïev, "Zachem Rossii nuzhna Afrika" [Why Russia needs Africa], *Moskovskij Komsomolets*, 8 November 2015, www.mk.ru; K. Klomegah, "Russia Struggles to Regain Influence in Africa", *Russia Beyond The Headlines*, 23 September 2016, www.rbth.com; "Poutine explique comment la Russie aidera l'Afrique dans le secteur énergétique" [Putin explains how Russia will help Africa in the energy sector], *Sputnik France*, 27 July 2018, <https://fr.sputniknews.com>.

11. "Vstrecha s Prezidentom Tsentral'noafrikanskoj Respubliki Fostenom Arkanzhem Tuaderoj" [Meeting with the president of the Central African Republic, Faustin-Archange Touadéra], Kremlin, 23 May 2018, <http://kremlin.ru>.

in 2017, in Mozambique, Morocco, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sudan and Cameroon. The Central African Republic, where Sergei Lobanov has been ambassador since 2011, represents a notable exception in this regard. Lobanov's longevity in office might be due to a desire for a long-term approach towards Russian policy in the CAR. As a former Russian diplomat suggested, however, it might also be that the post of ambassador to CAR has never been particularly sought after. The Russian embassy in Bangui is understaffed and does little to advance the ambassador's career, unlike posts in Luanda and Nairobi. The fact remains, though, that Lobanov enjoys the advantage of understanding the local environment and the context of the current crisis: he probably helped put in place Russian soldiers and paramilitaries there at the beginning of 2018.

Mikhail Bogdanov also took pains to prepare for the visit of his Minister from 5 to 9 March 2018. Sergey Lavrov concentrated his efforts on Sub-Saharan Africa, where Russia is weakest economically, in the hope of clinching framework agreements. Lavrov visited Angola, Namibia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia in succession. In each country, he promoted three pillars: a revival or increase in military and security cooperation; the opening of national economies to Russian investment and the relaunch of cultural and university exchanges. For Russia, it is about gaining a slice of the market, developing scientific and technical cooperation, no longer being excluded from the exploitation of natural resources and being seen as a major player in the fight against terrorism by African leaders. In other words, Moscow wants to develop partnerships in which it exchanges security for economic advantage. Such partnerships depend on three characteristics that are common south of the Sahara:

- The inability of governments to maintain order and security on their own territory despite Western support (e.g. the Sahel, the Central African Republic);
- The weariness of some African public bodies towards Chinese lending and trade with China: Russia promotes, in contrast, a model that, on the face of it, appears more interesting. In Mauritania, Ghana and even Ethiopia, governments have become disappointed with their Chinese partners as a result of loans whose terms are unfavourable in relation to the benefits that they provide. According to Russia, it wants to dispense with such onerous contracts and focus on the needs of the government in question;
- Lastly, the fear among most African leaders about "colour revolutions" against which Moscow seems to be able to protect them, as its military intervention in Syria has shown. Here, as in the Middle East and Central Asia, Russia is setting itself up as a security and stability provider in the

face of the threat of foreign interference and internal unrest.

In the five countries that were visited by Sergey Lavrov, Russia pointed to its permanent seat on the UN Security Council as a way of underscoring its right to support Africa in its struggle against insecurity. Moscow aspires to observer status in the G5 Sahel framework and pressed its claim with the five countries Lavrov visited, with later discussions held discreetly with Senegal and Mauritania.¹² More rhetorically but with no little impact on potential clients, Russia conjured up the spectre of "colour revolutions" with interlocutors at all levels: the Secretary of the Russian Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, did so on 26 June 2018 as part of his fortnight-long tour of Angola and South Africa. The aim of Patrushev's trip was to conclude cooperation agreements in the fight against Islamic terrorism and extremist groups, likely to prepare "colour revolutions" in these countries and in southern Africa more widely. Patrushev's travelling companion, Deputy Interior Minister Igor Zubov, recalled the part played by the United States and other outside powers in destabilising Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, and in the "Arab Springs". He called on Africa to resist hegemony of all sorts at a time when the framework of international relations built since 1945 was coming under strain.¹³ According to a South African journalist who followed the Russian delegations, "the Russian message was built around the need to find alternative solutions to those proposed by the West".¹⁴ Though this message might sound simplistic, it was repeated many times by the Russian Africa-watchers interviewed for this paper.

In the five countries which Lavrov visited—Angola, Namibia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia—relations are in the doldrums despite historic links with Moscow dating back to the Soviet era. The Kalashnikov assault rifle graces the coats of arms of Mozambique and Zimbabwe and many members of these countries' elites were trained in the USSR.

The new Angolan President, João Lourenço, is a graduate of the Lenin Military-Political Academy and, for many years, acted as Moscow's representative on arms sales and military training. According to a French lobbyist who lives in Luanda, "the current President has always been on the best of terms with the former Russian Defence Minister, Sergey Ivanov, as well as with his successor Sergey Shoigu".¹⁵ In spite of these promising historic links, however, the value of Russo-Angolan trade has not exceeded \$600 million per year over the last three years. By contrast, Chinese-

12. Informal interviews during the Dakar Forum of 2017.

13. P. Tarasenko, "Rossii poučit Angoly borbe s terrorizmom" [Russia is going to teach Angola to fight terrorism], *Kommersant*, 28 June 2018, www.kommersant.ru.

14. Interview with the author, Abidjan, March 2018.

15. Telephone interview with the author, Paris, 24 March 2018.

Angolan trade was worth \$14 billion per year over the same period. According to the same source, “a large part of the trade with Russia takes place in the ‘grey zone’ of the economy and it seems that Lavrov’s visit was the signal for a change of approach in terms of respecting financial rules. Moscow wants to be able to tell success stories. To do so, it needs transparent markets, recognised as such by international financial institutions such as the World Bank”. Although they have not disappeared entirely, briefcases stuffed with money are no longer commonplace: like China, Russia is concealing its hand behind increasingly complex instruments involving large state enterprises. In practice, this is about negotiating “counter letters” appended to contracts in which a government commits to give preference to a certain company in future operations [by mutual consent], even to give that company opportunities it did not ask for. In CAR, although the true state of the country’s natural resources is uncertain, Rosatom has already negotiated a privileged position, ensuring that it will be the first to explore for uranium deposits in the area of Bakouma. These entirely legal contracts (or Memoranda of Understanding—MoU) often conceal kickbacks designed to pay off middlemen and other facilitators.

Namibia, the second country on Lavrov’s tour, is perceived by the Russian Foreign Ministry as a “fraternal country” that the USSR helped during the South African Border War (1966-1988) which pitted Angola against South Africa. In talks with his Namibian counterpart, Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah, Lavrov suggested that the UN Security Council should be reformed to open it up to African countries. In Namibia, as elsewhere, Lavrov was intent on increasing economic cooperation which had dwindled in the preceding years: the volume of trade had decreased from \$134 million in 2011 to \$24 million in 2017. Several contracts were signed for Russia to supply small arms to Namibia. The Minister also confirmed that Namibia had signed a letter expressing interest in working with Rosatom which has been conducting scientific and technical cooperation programmes since 2017 in the hope of building nuclear reactors. Nevertheless, these documents should be seen less as a contract concluded than a discussion begun. Likewise, the Russian company Sukhoi responded to a call for expressions of interest by the Namibian airline Air Namibia with the Superjet 100: according to Sergey Lavrov, Sukhoi is amongst the favourites for the contract.

Lavrov’s third stop was Mozambique where the priority was military cooperation over surface-to-surface missiles. He offered to assist local forces fighting Al-Shabab-affiliated groups and invited them to integrate their data base with the FSB’s (Federal Security Service, one of the successors of the KGB). Once again, economics was central: Russia remains a second-order

economic partner for Mozambique and bilateral trade fell short of \$100 million in 2017. Moscow has therefore established an economic, scientific and technical commission whose first task, as part of a wider agreement, will be to give Mozambique access to Russian telecommunication satellites by 2020.

The penultimate stop on Lavrov's tour was Zimbabwe. During the Soviet period, Zimbabwe bought weapons from the Soviet military-industrial complex but the current closeness between Russia and Zimbabwe is due to the special relationship Vladimir Putin enjoyed with the former Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe. Zimbabwe's new Presidential team plans to maintain good relations with Russia. Nevertheless, the volume of trade is decreasing significantly, falling from \$67 million in 2016 to \$53 million in 2017. Russia is interested in Zimbabwe not only as a customer for its weapons, which Lavrov highlighted as a growth area, but also as a source of diamonds and rare metals that Russia could exploit. So far, Moscow has not managed to break through and arms sales alone are not sufficient to drive an increase in trade.

The Minister ended his trip in Ethiopia on the 120th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, which was celebrated in the Russian embassy in Addis Ababa. Bilateral trade is in the red: having fallen by 50% between 2016 and 2017, Ethiopia's trade with Russia is worth just \$80 million per year, much less than its trade with the USA and China, its two main trading partners. Unlike in the other four countries he visited, however, Lavrov paid less attention to relaunching trade than to the strategic importance of the Horn of Africa and Djibouti, where most of Russia's competitors have military or logistical bases (France, USA, China, Turkey, UAE, Japan...). Although Russia may see Ethiopia as a possible base from which to observe developments in the Horn of Africa, its potential influence in Ethiopia is limited. In the words of a former Ethiopian officer, "Ethiopia has a lot of respect for Russia militarily but Ethiopia threw in its lot with the United States a long time ago. We will continue to buy weapons from Russia because they are of good quality and we want to keep that avenue of supply open, but I do not see Russia returning to the heart of the strategic game in the Horn of Africa", with the possible exception of Sudan.¹⁶

It is worth noting that at the same time as Lavrov was touring Africa, the US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was visiting Nigeria, Chad, Kenya, Djibouti and Ethiopia. The two men crossed paths in the corridors of a hotel abutting the headquarters of the African Union. A retired American analyst

16. Telephone interview with the author, 3 July 2018.

cautioned that the “parallel nature of these visits should not be over-interpreted even though Russia logically sought to exploit this ‘mirror imaging’ to promote Sergey Lavrov’s tour”.¹⁷

In sum, Russia is driven by economic opportunism and does not aspire to emulate the role that was once played by the Soviet Union in Africa: it has neither the resources nor the ambition to do so. On the other hand, Russia does intend to play a part in the future of the continent and is not content to be excluded from its markets or access to its resources.¹⁸

17. Interview with the author, London, 20 July 2018.

18. I. Abramova, “Afrikanskoe turne S. V. Lavrova: novye vyzovy i perspektivy rossijsko-afrikanskogo sotrudnichestva” [Sergey Lavrov’s African Tour: new challenges and prospects for Russian-African cooperation], *Azia i Afrika*, No. 5, 2018, p. 2-10.

Russian Influence in Africa: Vectors and Signs

Inheriting the Soviet myth

The epic tale of the Soviet Union's involvement in Africa, cleansed of all its failures, is the platform that Russia uses to justify its return to the continent. In 2013, when Vladimir Putin paid homage to Nelson Mandela, he stressed the friendship that linked Mandela with Russia and the importance of the support given by Moscow in the fight against apartheid.¹⁹ The rhetoric surrounding Russia's return to Africa is all about reinterpreting great historical events to Russia's advantage and in its image. All of the information bulletins published by the Institute for African Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences set out to highlight the Soviet Union's role in the development of Africa.²⁰

Yet the Soviet Union's involvement in Africa during the Cold War was part and parcel of its global struggle against the West. Moscow did not have a strategy for Africa in and of itself. Africa was also not a priority for Russia after the fall of the USSR, as mentioned above. Rather, Russia's diplomatic interest in Africa is rooted in the late nineteenth century and developed in response to Russia's exclusion from the division of Africa by the European powers at the Congress of Berlin in 1885. This exclusion turned out to be grist to the mill of the "Red Mecca", a term used by Kremlinologists to refer to the USSR as a new normative and ideological point of reference. In November 1922, the year that the GPU (secret police and intelligence service, preceded by the Cheka) was created and the USSR born, the fourth Congress of the Communist International (Komintern) looked into the "African question", slavery and the responsibility of the United States. The new Soviet leaders had already hatched the idea of using the continent to score points in the Soviet Union's competition with the capitalist world. They also sought to spread communist ideology among the African-American

19. "Putin Calls Nelson Mandela 'Greatest Humanist of Our Time'", *The Moscow Times*, 13 December 2013, <https://themoscowtimes.com>.

20. Information Bulletin of the African Studies Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, September 2018.

community in the United States. One Ethiopian diplomat also claims that Soviet leaders had envisaged creating an African unit in the Red Army.²¹

Numerous African countries signed agreements on cultural cooperation with the USSR which allowed Soviet cultural centres to be installed on the continent. At the same time, Moscow provided financial support to local armies. In this way, *soft power* went hand in hand with *hard power*.

The memory of the Soviet Union in Africa is also one of failure and the abandonment of socialism. When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, Africa was no longer of major strategic importance. Gorbachev's priority was to prevent the collapse of the state, make ideology less pervasive within governing structures, right the economy and integrate the "common European home". In Africa, socialist parties were considerably weakened and nine embassies or trade representations were closed down.²² The strategic vacuum left by the USSR's rapid exit was quickly filled by Western powers and China: "You had never seen anything like it. From one day to the next, the Soviets packed their bags and were gone and the USSR was wiped off the map. What a godsend for the others!"²³

Cultural and academic cooperation

Beyond cultural cooperation in the strictest sense—promoting Russian literature, cooperation between museums—the Russian language and subjects such as history, mathematics and economics represent key elements in Russia's cultural diplomacy in Africa. Figures published by the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN) suggest that 400,000 African students have been trained in the USSR or Russia since the 1970s, quite a significant number. According to information gathered from the managers of student residences in the Belyaev and Yugo-Zapadnaya districts of Moscow, where most foreign students live, there may currently be fewer than 5000 African students studying at Russian universities, of which 3000 are on scholarships.²⁴ Most come to study the Russian language and Russian civilization with the aim of then applying for a scientific course. According to a teacher at RUDN who has worked there for roughly twenty years among foreign students, "there are fewer and fewer

21. Interviews with an Ethiopian diplomat, Paris, April 2018. He judged that an "African Red Army" went along with the Revolution.

22. A. Arkhangelskaya, "Le retour de Moscou en Afrique subsaharienne ? Entre héritage soviétique, multilatéralisme et activisme politique" [The return of Moscow in Sub-Saharan Africa? Between the Soviet heritage, multilateralism and political activism], *Afrique contemporaine*, Vol. 4, No. 248, 2013, p. 61-74.

23. Interview with a Ghanaian official, Paris, February 2018.

24. Also consult UNESCO statistics: <http://uis.unesco.org>.

African students but, in some respects, there were never as many as we thought. For instance, at the Pushkin Institute on Volgina Street, the African 'students' who stay in the hostel finished their studies a long time ago and use the facilities as if this was their home. But the management continues to count them as students...".²⁵

An important institution for academic cooperation between Russia and Africa, the Institute for African Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences enjoys official support from the Russian Foreign Ministry and publishes dozens of analytical and research publications. With its eleven research centres (Centre for History and Cultural Anthropology, Centre for Southern Africa Studies, Centre for North African and African Horn Studies, Centre for Transition Economy Studies, Centre for Global and Strategic Studies...),²⁶ the institute is a laboratory of ideas on Africa. It is both a resource that can be used to inform political action and a tool of influence. Since 2014, dissertations and doctoral theses carried out at the Institute have addressed a variety of themes: the prospects for an expansion of the BRICS, Russian interests in Africa, governance and stability in Africa, cooperation between South Africa and Russia, Islamic radicalism in Africa, political and security changes in the Sahel, African identity in the twenty-first century, a cultural and civilisational reading of Africa, the foreign policy of African states, the history of armed conflicts in Africa, the consequences of globalisation in Africa...Its bibliography is very rich: approximately one hundred essays and other pieces of work were published in 2018 and more in 2017. The Academy has published extensively on China's activities in Africa and the Institute's Director, Irina Abramova, regularly calls on Moscow to impose itself in Africa in order to contain Beijing's ambitions there, even to offer African states a Russian alternative.²⁷ It is highly likely that China's approach in Africa has influenced Russia's. Russian researchers have studied bilateral Sino-African mechanisms that aim to develop synergies between African industrialists and Chinese banks²⁸, along the lines of the China Africa Research Initiative.²⁹ By means of grants and money for research, the Initiative has allowed the China Development Bank to skilfully exploit the academy in the name of business. Likewise, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is interpreted in Russia as a diplomatic and economic model which allows China to penetrate the African market,

25. Interview with the author, Krakow, July 2018.

26. See the website of the Institute of African Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences: www.inafran.ru.

27. Abramova interviewed by K. Klomegah: "With Ambitious Goals, Russia Joins Foreign Players in Africa", *Modern Ghana*, 25 April 2016, www.modernghana.com.

28. I. Abramova, "Plenary Report: Potential of the African Continent in the Updated Strategy of Development of the Russian Federation", XIVth International Conference of Africanists, Moscow, 17-20 October 2017, www.inafran.ru.

29. The initiative was launched in 2016 and is attached to John Hopkins University.

particularly through Special Economic Zones (SEZ). It is therefore likely that the Chinese model helped inspire the creation of the African Business Initiative (ABI), a platform developed by the Kremlin and teams within the Ministry of Industry and Trade (MinPromTorg). The Minister, Denis Manturov, struck a similar chord in 2016 when he advocated the creation of numerous Russo-African bilateral forums in order to develop economic links between African and Russian manufacturers. Through such endeavours and despite its own status as an emerging economy, Russia wants to show that it can help African countries to develop.

The Institute also makes itself visible to outsiders by holding seminars around events on foreign trade (the St Petersburg Economic Forum) and the memory of African-Soviet cooperation.³⁰ It is a point of honour for Russia to support African initiatives commemorating national liberation movements and "painful" anniversaries for former European colonisers. For instance, in 2014, Russia was involved in marking the twentieth anniversary of the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda. The Academy of Sciences held a political-diplomatic event denouncing France's role in the genocide.³¹

In 2016, with the help of the American law firm Squire Patton Boggs, the Russian government launched the "African Business Initiative" under the leadership of Mikhail Bogdanov. Its aim is to develop an Africa policy which combines academic research, economics, diplomacy, defence and security. In more concrete terms, its aim is to position Russia as a mentor for African states that wish to establish themselves as regional powers, by supporting their armies and forming a strategic partnership with Moscow. A French observer who follows these matters closely stresses that the Initiative has spurred the Russian government machine into making up economic ground under the guise of helping African countries develop.³²

Media as a vector

The competition for Africa is also being waged in the media-sphere. Russia uses numerous channels of communication to draw attention to the French and English-language version of its two big international media, RT and Sputnik.³³ Their websites already attract many African viewers. Their

30. See the website of the Institute of African Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences: www.inafran.ru

31. A. Panov, "Ruanda 'Kwibuka-20': pamiat' o genotside, spory, diskussii" [Rwanda "Kwibuka-20": the memory of genocide, debates and discussion], *Azia i Afrika Segodnia*, No. 2, 2015, p. 54.

32. Interview with the author, Paris, 10 June 2018.

33. On this subject, see: K. Limonier, "Diffusion de l'information russe en Afrique : Essai de cartographie générale" [The spread of Russian information in Africa : Essay in general mapping], IRSEM research paper, No. 66, November 2018.

editorial line is critical of the former colonial powers and they present French policy in Africa as being driven by a type of neo-imperialism. In addition, a former employee with Google's public policy team claims that Russia invests in "Google Adwords" campaigns so that search engines which are linked to Google and consulted in Africa privilege information published by Russian media (Sputnik, RT, Tass and others).³⁴ The goal is to maximise the reach of this information across the main traditional and social media in Africa. It is too early to measure the impact of Russia's efforts but they should be watched closely in the years to come.

The diplomatic, military and security vector

As mentioned in Russia's 2016 Foreign Policy Concept (paragraph 99), Africa hosts a variety of regional organisations including the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the East Africa Community, the Southern African Development Community, the Arab Maghreb Union and the West African Economic and Monetary Union. The Russian Foreign Ministry seeks to present itself as a respectable interlocutor for such organisations and even to secure observer status within them. Russia has more vaulting ambitions for the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) in which it wants to be seen as the lead advocate and inspiration for an alternative path for Africa.³⁵ Russian officials believe that the BRICS tends to amplify Russia's influence in Africa because the organisation could be opened up to more African countries and serve as a model for the creation of new African organisations under Moscow's tutelage.

This approach takes as its inspiration Yevgeny Primakov, Russian Foreign Minister from 1996 to 1998 and Prime Minister from 1998-1999, who worked on Africa from 1999 with Nodari Simonia and Alexei Vasiliev, experts at the Russian Academy of Sciences. In December 2001, Primakov, then the President of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, visited Angola, Namibia, Tanzania and South Africa and called on Russia to construct a multipolar world. Primakov's vision was to rally as many African states as possible to Russia's banner in the hope of creating a new anti-Western bloc that could change the balance of power in the UN and widen the circle of states with a Permanent Seat in the UN Security Council (South Africa, Ethiopia, Angola, Nigeria). For Primakov, it was about modifying the world's geopolitical software to favour multipolarity. It is unlikely, however,

34. Interview with the author, Paris, July 2018.

35. B. Lo, "The Illusion of Convergence—Russia, China, and the BRICS", *Russie.Nei.Visions*, Ifri, No. 92, March 2016, www.ifri.org.

that such a strategy would gain traction in Sub-Saharan Africa, where anti-Americanism is still limited.

On the other hand, authoritarian African leaders are much more attuned to the threat of an "African spring". Moscow anticipated this fear in 2015 when it sent political advisers (*polittekhnologi*) to around a dozen African countries including Madagascar, CAR, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan.³⁶ These "consultants" offer local authorities their experience in public policy. Yet although they produce reports that justify their activity from an accounting point of view, these advisers are also, and above all, "diplomatic implants", even undercover agents. They have many functions, one being to sell security in exchange for benefits of all kinds. Beyond the arms sector, Moscow's security assistance is paid for with (promised) energy and rare-metal contracts for Russian companies which are active in those countries. In addition, these "consultants" have silent partners such as the St Petersburg-based businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin and one of his right-hand men, Yaroslav Ignatovsky. The exact relationships between these people are unclear, but their objective is evident: to position Russia favourably within each country's politics and even to influence elections.³⁷

Yevgeny Prigozhin's role is shrouded in mystery, but his name is linked time and again to private military companies that have been deployed to Africa (in particular, the Wagner group) in cooperation with the political consultants mentioned above. Prigozhin may also be linked to the Internet Research Agency, often described as a "troll factory" in Western media. Prigozhin's holding companies (OAO Slavianka, Konkord etc) have a near-monopoly on food and cleaning for the Russian armed forces, which makes him an important actor on behalf of the Russian Ministry of Defence. According to a banker close to Ghanaian business circles, "the oligarchs never come out in the open. Their intermediaries give advice through John Does and by means of structures of varying complexity. The oligarchs' aim is less to help [African] states or their leaders than to invest money that has been obtained illegally. The Economic Community of West African States tracks these structures very closely. We think that because of sanctions against the Russian state, Africa is seen as a new way of laundering money before re-injecting it into Europe: hence the importance of having political and diplomatic accomplices".³⁸

36. Senegal and Mali are also being targeted for the creation of such cells.

37. A. Pertsev, "Rossijskie polittekhnologi izvedaiut Afriku" [Russian political technologists try their luck in Africa] *Kommersant*, 20 April 2018, www.kommersant.ru.

38. Interview with the author, Paris, 22 June 2018.

The case of the Central African Republic is particularly interesting in this regard. Does Russia want to work with this country or simply use it as a receptacle for shady investments or as a transit route? "In CAR, there is an agreement between Russians who are protecting the concealed assets of close associates of the Russian government and Bangui, which allows them to create whatever structures they like and opens corridors for them to access neighbouring countries. In such circumstances, CAR has become an ideal place for money flows, the physical movement of liquid assets and the opening of bearing accounts. You should examine the countries around CAR to find the beginnings of an explanation. We know, for instance, that in Equatorial Guinea, Russia has invested heavily in recent months in construction and public works. From this angle, the CAR rear operating base looks like a useful sanctuary". According to this source, Russia's activity in CAR is driven less by a desire to win geopolitical battles against the Europeans than the need to create bases in order to safeguard financial structures which handle money belonging to Vladimir Putin's inner circle.

This hypothesis, which is tied up with money laundering on a grand scale, partly explains the use of private militias. These are not new in Africa. Russian Private Military Companies, though their existence is officially outlawed, have been operating in Africa for around twenty years, from the former Zaire to Ivory Coast and Sudan.³⁹ Their mission has often been to protect the financial interests of politicians under cover of carrying out more classical operations. According to one of their number: "When you leave the power ministries to serve in a Private Military Company (PMC), the whole admissions process is carried out by the secret services because the [PMC] that employs us is also in the service of the state. The Kremlin knows what we are doing. But we know that if we get into difficulties, our presence and the true nature of our operations will be denied".

Our interlocutor confirms that over the past twelve years, the number of Russian militiamen has expanded in Asia, Syria, the Gulf of Aden, Ukraine and Africa. Numerous entities have directed them, including Antiterror Orel, Slavonic Corps Lmd, Sewa Security Services, Lobaye Ltd, the Wagner group and Cossack groups. Members of these groups can be found in Sudan, CAR and Syria: in general, they are carrying out seemingly redundant missions such as protecting important individuals, providing security to delegations of Russian businessmen (Gazprom and Rosatom have connections with these PMCs, but their activities are mentioned on the companies' balance sheets under the euphemism "external services") and

39. During operations in the Ivory Coast (2003), Minister of Defence Michèle Alliot-Marie raised the shady role of these slavic militiamen, some of whom had entrées at the Hotel Ivoire.

military training. The notoriety of the Wagner Group is probably due to the fact that it handles contracts of the utmost sensitivity, such as the protection of the Kremlin's financial interests.

Nuclear energy, oil and gas

Is Russia conducting economic diplomacy in Africa with the aim of promoting its energy sector or are the big beasts of Russian energy simply acting opportunistically on a case-by-case basis? The second option seems more likely despite the Kremlin's undoubted ability to direct any industrial group in which the state holds shares.

For Rosatom and its partners, Africa is a market waiting to be conquered. By virtue of its status as a state corporation, Rosatom is directly linked to the Kremlin. But the decisions taken by its leaders are not dictated exclusively by political imperatives. Rather, Rosatom develops its own strategy and, at certain times and places, that strategy can be turned into a lever of power by the Russian state. The principle is the same for gas and oil. The outcomes of Russian energy diplomacy depend on the particular circumstances of the companies involved. Nevertheless, as the examples of Egypt and Algeria demonstrate, energy contracts can create opportunities for political influence.

A representative of Rosatom in Paris told the author that the Russian company exported its nuclear energy production to Africa as a "way of modernising national economies" and developing the continent.⁴⁰ African leaders also present integration into the "nuclear club" as a way of enhancing their countries' status. Against this backdrop, Rosatom seeks to extend its activities across Africa in the wake of its success in Egypt—the show-case for a particular Russian *savoir faire*—where it signed a contract last year for the construction of four pressurised water reactors (VVER), each of which produces 1200 megawatts (MW). Nevertheless, Egypt appears to be an exception: no other African state has yet entrusted Russia to build such reactors. Cairo has also not bought the standard Russian package (energy contract and promises for arms contracts) and continues to look to the West for certain weapon systems. In the Kremlin's ideal world, the client would enter into a strategic framework agreement giving Russian companies monopolies over all sovereign sectors. In southern and eastern Africa, however, despite diplomatic efforts to give Rosatom an edge, the company is finding it difficult to impose itself in highly competitive markets.⁴¹

40. Interview with the author, Paris, June 2018.

41. N. Schepers, "Russian incentives for nuclear hopefuls in Africa", IISS, April 2018, www.iiss.org.

In response, the international forum Atomexpo-2017, which is connected to the Russian nuclear industry and supported by the Kremlin and MinPromTorg, focused on Africa in the context of a new offer of civil nuclear *mini*-reactors. Several markets were accorded precedence: Zambia, with which a scientific and technical cooperation agreement and three contracts involving the Ministry of Education and Science were signed for training engineers; Ethiopia, with which a MoU was signed; Sudan, with a series of agreements for research into the production of hydroelectricity and geological prospecting (via a structure called Urango which specialises in uranium research) and the signature of a Russia-Sudan framework agreement in December 2017. Other countries, such as Mozambique, Mali, Zimbabwe and Rwanda, have signed non-binding expressions of interest. The idea of mini-reactors could put Russia in a promising position, in that the proposed product might help a new market to emerge alongside traditional nuclear reactors. In this type of case, and more in Africa than elsewhere, Rosatom plays on the innovative qualities of its product, in order to work with the potential client in drafting the specifications for the bid or the contract that is envisaged. In this way, Rosatom is no longer simply one potential supplier out of many, but an integrated member of the project from the earliest stages of its development.

In the gas and oil sectors, Russian companies also have their own strategies, even if Igor Sechin's chairmanship of Rosneft casts doubt on the commercial future of certain partnerships. At the St Petersburg Economic Forum in 2018, Rosneft signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Nigerian company Oranto Petroleum with the aim of carrying out joint exploration projects across the whole continent. Rosneft can now use Oranto as an intermediary to develop projects in Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria and South Sudan. According to an investigative journalist from Prague, this partnership could provide legal cover for Igor Sechin to discreetly move funds out of Russia.⁴²

Russia's influence in Africa appears much greater with respect to gas than to oil, with major contracts under way in Algeria (the Gazprom-Sonatrach agreement for the exploration, extraction and production of liquified natural gas) and Libya. Gazprom says it wants to repeat these successes in Ghana, Tanzania and Mozambique and sells itself as a developer of solutions for its clients. Under an ideal scenario, the client would entrust all aspects of the programme to Gazprom and allow its banking arm, Gazprombank, to secure guarantees and access to a pool of banking capital. Gazprom sees its presence in Africa as a way of accessing extra gas deposits which would support its strategy of increasing gas supplies to Europe to

42. Interview with the author, Vienna, May 2018.

190 billion m³. By delivering more gas to Europe from deposits in Africa, Gazprom would have less need to supply gas through certain countries, such as Ukraine. As in the case of Rosneft, the closeness between Gazprom's President Alexey Miller and Vladimir Putin should not conceal the fact that Gazprom must one day make the government a return on its investment. Any industrial company that owes its success in a complex environment to the state also knows that doing business in Russia requires an exchange of favours, particularly when Vladimir Putin is personally involved (as he is in various gas and oil contracts). This often takes the form of economic privileges granted to officials, including kickbacks.

Outlook: An Increasingly Clientelist Relationship

After CAR, Russia is probably not preparing any new dramatic initiatives in Africa. It appears unlikely that a new African direction will emerge in Russian foreign policy, despite the fact that Western sanctions will endure over the long term. Nevertheless, the concept, albeit overblown, of a Russian “return” to Africa plays into Moscow’s hands and fans the rhetoric of a resurgence in Russian power, which is a key element in legitimising the regime at home.

The novelty of Russia’s “return” to Africa will nevertheless fade with time and dissolve into the ideological rhetoric about a multipolar world, in which Russian policy includes dialogue with developing regions such as Africa. This will not prevent the Russian intelligence services (the Federal Security Service—FSB, foreign intelligence—SVR, military intelligence—GRU) from continuing to search for partners in Africa as part of the fight against terrorism. They may also set up official or clandestine sites for signals intelligence, and develop source networks with a view to gathering intelligence about Western states, their actions in Africa and their intermediaries in the home country. Since the military agreement signed between Russia and Madagascar in February 2018 for the delivery of small arms, the island has unwittingly started to become a clandestine base for the operations of Russian intelligence.

Economically, Russia will probably continue to promote the interests of its large companies, while its political elites will continue to search for tax and banking havens. Until the end of Vladimir Putin’s fourth term in office, moreover, we should expect more and more financial structures to spring up involving bank consortiums and shell companies which use Africa as a point of transit, in order to conceal their ultimate Russian beneficiaries. Russia’s involvement in Africa will have a tendency, therefore, to move into the “grey zone” and shady financing (structures for tax evasion, secret slush funds to finance intelligence operations, etc.).

In Russia, contracts stand or fall together and this tendency is likely to endure: successes in nuclear energy (Egypt), gas (Algeria) and major energy infrastructure projects are tied to the successful fulfilment of military agreements or the refinancing of debt. In this context, Sudan is certainly a

country to watch in the months to come. Moscow is seeking, in vain, to seal a framework agreement that would bring together business and energy interests, on the one hand, and military and security services, on the other. The management of Khartoum, however, is particularly complex and unstable. Sudan is not prepared to hand Russia an economic and political monopoly, preferring to seek a variety of backers (Beijing invested \$17 billion in Sudan in 2017 alone). Sudan's banks have nevertheless forged links with Russian banking groups, as observers learned in November 2017 during the Sudanese President, Omar al-Bashir's, visit to Russia. During his meeting with Vladimir Putin, the Sudanese President called on Russia to find solutions to protect it against the United States which, according to al-Bashir, wanted to break up Sudan into various autonomous provinces. His argument was probably designed to play on Putin's anti-Americanism for, in reality, relations between Sudan and the United States are not all bad: in 2017, for instance, Washington decided to lift an economic embargo that had weighed on the country since 2017.

The Sudanese head of state also invited the Russian President to consider building a military base on the Red Sea. This invitation, which was relayed to Moscow by the head of the Federation Council's Committee on Defence and Security, Viktor Bondarev, might have been taken to mean that Sudan was falling rapidly into Moscow's orbit. Since then, however, almost nothing has happened apart from Russia being granted some military facilities to move [materiel] into CAR from pre-existing billets. Vladimir Putin is suspicious of the links between Khartoum and Doha which is one of the backers of the al-Bashir regime. It is therefore unlikely that a Russo-Sudanese strategic axis will emerge, except in dubious banking.

Beyond the survival of the regime, Russia is conscious of its vital need for natural resources. It has no intention of giving up the search for them. It is therefore seeking to follow in China's wake in securing its share of Africa's bounty. A trend is emerging for Russia to entrench its position in places that are rich in rare metals. According to a French diplomat who used to serve in Russia, "alerted by its scientific community, the Kremlin has realised that Russia does not have inexhaustible supplies of certain metals. Africa, by contrast, is overflowing with them. Vladimir Putin therefore gave his teams a blank cheque to make up lost ground and position men in strategic locations that were still unoccupied such as CAR...".⁴³ Among the resources that Russia will need in the years to come are copper, niobium, gallium, coltan, cobalt, iron, platinum, zinc, manganese, titanium, mercury and chromium.

43. Interview with the author, Paris, September 2018.

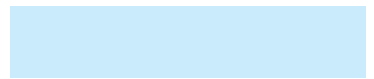
In conclusion, Russia's return to Africa is more modest than one might believe by listening to the Russian government or Russian and international media. It is also tied to domestic economic difficulties: large companies, as well as small and medium-sized enterprises, have a vital need to export to markets that are not subject to sanctions. The domestic Russian market is no longer enough. An economic lightweight on the continent, Russia now needs Africa more than Africa needs Russia, particularly in light of Africa's vast natural resources. On the one hand, Moscow will continue to seek out new contracts. On the other, it will look to diversify its sources of supply in agricultural products and other foodstuffs so as to circumvent traditional routes that fall under sanctions. In this regard, the African continent is important indeed.

It would therefore be an exaggeration to attribute to Moscow a pre-conceived strategy to weaken the West on the African continent. Rather, it is moving towards an increasingly clientelist relationship with authoritarian and opportunistic African regimes.

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