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Russian Influence and its implications in Africa

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Honorable Chairlady [Karen] Bass, Ranking Member [Christopher] Smith, Honorable Members of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations, it is my honor and a pleasure to be here today to testify at this session examining the realities of Russian activities and influence in Africa and its effects on the continent.

I am the Executive Director of the Institute for Security Studies, a policy research organisation with headquarters in Pretoria, South Africa. The ISS has 125 staff in Africa, with offices in Addis Ababa, Bamako, Dakar and Nairobi. Over the past 31 years, the ISS has worked to promote human security, peace and development in Africa by advancing the promise of peace and prosperity. The ISS works through evidence-informed research in support of public policy and programming, capacity building and strategic dialogues processes. One of the ISS' key strategic aspirations for the current 2021-2025 cycle is to contribute to enhancing Africa's agency in the world through the rationalization of Africa's engagement with multiple actors. This is the prism through which we explain and understand the role of foreign actors in Africa.

Viewed from Africa, Russian activities across the continent are not taking place in a vacuum; therefore, **context matters**. Current global dynamics are shaped by three simultaneous processes.

Firstly, deepening multilateral fractures undermine the effectiveness of global governance, with tensions between three of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UN Security Council), namely the United States, the UK and France (P3) and China and Russia (P2). These dynamics entrench competition rather than cooperation in finding solutions to pressing global challenges.

Secondly, democracy as the prime, aspirational governance model, is being challenged globally, due to the mainstreaming of extreme ideologies. The growing influence of these ideologies thrive at the expense of social cohesion, and weaken inclusive public institutions, necessary for democracy to take root and flourish. The United States is no exception.

It is against this backdrop that, thirdly, Africa's increasing agency in international relations is shaped. Africa's agency is particularly visible on issues pertaining to peace, security and development, within a global system where the deck is stacked against the continent. Growing

institutionalized African autonomy has triggered an interrogation of partnerships, commitments and expected outcomes of the continent's engagements with old and new powers.

Based on prior and ongoing work conducted by the ISS, I would like to share **four key observations** and **four key implications** of Russian's renewed interest in Africa.

The first observation is that the post-Cold War decline of Russian engagement in Africa, witnessed a turning point since President Vladimir Putin's maiden visit to Africa in 2006 – which has facilitated an increase in political, military and economic engagements between Russia and African states. This grand 're-engagement', is particularly notable with respect to trade and security cooperation. However, when compared to other major and emerging global powers, Russia has remained a fairly marginal actor across the continent.

Second, the Sochi 2019 Russia – Africa Summit has further enhanced both official and quasi-private sector Russian interests in Africa. Both streams connect to determine Russia's influence and appeal in Africa. **In understanding Russian appeal in Africa, history matters.** Historical and personal ties built with liberation movements during the Soviet era in support for independence in Africa coalesces with Russia's contemporary rhetorical commitment to decolonization, providing a trusted basis for partnership. That trust is the currency of Russia's soft power in Africa. What Russia has done *well* is to reframe all USSR engagement pre-1990 as 'Russian engagement'. However, for some countries in Africa that 'rebrand' took longer and tensions remained – with the past 20 years being the period of 'new' relations built.

Moreover, the former Soviet Union provided a particularly appealing ideological basis which the continent's various liberation movements readily supported, given the anti-imperialist underpinnings that resonated with their own struggles.

Despite Russia's renewed interest in Africa, **China, the European Union and the United States remain Africa's top three trading partners**, and therefore have the most to gain and lose from threats to peace, stability and development in Africa. In terms of development assistance, Russia's rhetorical commitment is often not matched in real allocation to Africa with only Madagascar and Mozambique featuring among Russia's top 10 ODA recipients in 2019 (with Cuba, Kyrgyzstan and the DPRK being the top three). Furthermore, data shows that in 2020, of the \$62.1 million Russia allocated to humanitarian funding, only \$4 million went to Africa. This is despite Africa requiring the most humanitarian support due to continuing conflicts across the continent, as well as climate emergencies.

Thirdly, the viability of the democratic developmental state model has been increasingly questioned across Africa in recent years due to a number of failed political transitions. . While the demand for democracy remains high in Africa, the failure of protracted anocratic transitions to deliver development, effective security sector reform and other social service dividend continues to undermine peace and stability in Africa. The insertion of Russian private security contractor into the security equation in some transitional countries does not bode well either. Anecdotal evidence at this stage points to worrying human rights implications of private Russian security

contractors engagements in Mali and the Central African Republic where they coexist with two ongoing United Nations mission – the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic.

On the other hand, the governance models that delivered on the Asian tigers, as well as China's rise to becoming a global power appear to be appealing alternatives to some developing countries in Africa. Consequently, rule of law and respect for human rights are increasingly compromised as developing states pursue developmental outcomes; this zero-sum incompatibility between the rule of law and development was repudiated following the third wave of democratization in the late 20th century. For states that prize economic growth as a pathway to development, this has bolstered the appeal of potential allies who share alternative norms, principles and values. The appeal of these alternative models are further strengthened given the fact that the US' democratisation agenda toward Africa only really took root in the post-Cold War period – once this firmly supported US national interests. As a result, many of the continent's leaders and former liberation movements still regard the democratic-developmental model with suspicion.

Finally, non-official Russian investment in Africa, though minimal, generates outsized impact and return on investment. Russia has invested considerable resources in state-owned media which cover issues that are often marginalized by 'mainstream media' and yet find resonance within communities in search for alternative narratives and news stories. Hence Russia uses its media to advance its project and its role in the world, undermine democracy and counter western narratives/values. These state-back media efforts have also been leveraged to constantly capitalize on the missteps of the US and other Western powers operating in Africa; again, leading Russia to maintain an outsized level of impact and influence across the continent, with relatively little diplomatic or financial investment.

However, the bigger challenge is posed by the use of social media to micro-target individuals and communities for clearly and narrowly defined ends that tends towards the reproduction of oligarchic governance. The deals that bind Russian private security contractors to some governments in Africa (including transitional ones) remain occlusive, although the services come at long-term material costs. The return on investment, though, enhances the wealth of the Russian oligarchs and amplifies their capacity to expand the marketing of private security services in spaces where legitimate governance is traded for praetorian protection.

This brings me to four main implications for Africa.

Firstly, a **reconfiguration of security alliances** is taking place against the backdrop of malign influences seeking to leverage tenuous colonial histories to Russia's advantage. In specific cases in West and Central Africa, private security contractors supplant bilateral security arrangements with partner countries in occlusive deals that undermine accountability – both in finance and human rights. The two cases in point reflect the direct targeting of France (and by extension the United States) to in order replace established security arrangements with elected governments.

In this emergent security environment, capitalization on narrow self-interests within some African states, to once again service malign external interests, needs to be guarded against.

Unfinished and misaligned security sector reform/governance continues to drive instability in transitional states. The resulting erosion of accountability in security service provision deepens elite rivalries and imperils the most vulnerable. The insertion of private security contractors in such contexts are a useful stop-gap operational choice which poses medium to long-term risks.

Secondly, the instrumentalization of sovereignty and inviolability of national territories is a subterfuge to undermine cooperative multilateralism. It reifies the infallibility of the state, progressively eliminating accountability and citizen-based legitimation processes. This recourse to sovereignty limits the maneuverability of the multilateral system to fully operationalise conflict and crisis prevention mechanism which are less costly than the deployment of protracted peace operations. It also has implication for the use of sanctions as behavior modification in international relations – through the creation of alliances than undermine sanctions regimes.

Thirdly, as the world grapples with ecological transitions, Africa retains the mineral and material resources to drive the fourth industrial revolution. Despite the temptation to return to dealing Africa as an area for proxy influence, there is room to engage innovatiely with the continent's youth, women and emerging Science, Technological, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) communities. The continental evolution of democratic and governance norms and principles allow provide opportunities for the consolidation of democratic governance. African agency should be taken seriously.

Finally, Russia approaches Africa from a non-colonial position with a rhetorical commitment to decolonization and countering western hegemonies. These find resonance on a continent which has for too long been marginalized in global affairs, and within which multinationals (often with western headquarters) escape punishment for egregious corruption, rule of law and human rights violations in Africa, admittedly often in complicity with their African partners.

As the Sub-Committee deliberates, here are some policy possibilities for the United States:

1. Support for delivering optimal development outcomes from democracy
2. Economic cooperation which fosters technology transfer
3. Foster people-to-people exchanges
4. Support effective reform of the United Nations Security Council
5. Ramp up support for African civil society