



**Statement before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittees  
on Africa, Global Health, and Global Human Rights,  
and Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber**

***“Examining the Realities of Russian  
Activities and Influence in Africa and its  
Effects on the Continent.”***

A Testimony by:

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**July 14, 2022**

Chairwoman Bass, Chairman Keating, Ranking Member Smith, Ranking Member Fitzpatrick, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Global Human Rights, and the Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber, I am honored to share my views with you on this important topic. The Center for Strategic and International Studies does not take policy positions, so the views represented in this testimony are my own and not those of my employer.

## **Overview**

The War in Ukraine has generated a great deal of interest in the relationship or relationships between the Russian Federation (Russia) and African countries. This interest reached its apex in the aftermath of the March 2, 2022, vote on the “Aggression against Ukraine” Resolution (Resolution A/RES/ES-11/1) at the United Nations General Assembly’s 11<sup>th</sup> emergency session on the Ukraine Crisis.

While 141 member-states, including African countries, voted in support of the resolution, the breakdown of votes by African countries revealed a remarkable split among the 54-member block. Twenty-eight countries voted in favor, one country, Eritrea, voted against, seventeen countries abstained, and eight countries did not participate. This split has been at the center of policy debates in the West, leaving many analysts to wonder why the Africans did not, as a block, simply align with Western countries.

After all, some analysts in the West argued, the United Nations resolution aligned with the sacrosanctity of national borders that is enshrined in the Charter of the African Union. A resolution that supports and protects Ukraine’s national sovereignty is in Africa’s best interest, they further reasoned. The general feeling among Western analysts and policymakers has varied from disappointment to dismay to anger.

The only analysis worth undertaking in this case is one that acknowledges that Africa is not a country. Africa is fifty-four states strong. Each one of those countries has its own interests and considerations that shape its foreign policy. As such, African states are no different than their counterparts in other regions of the world. In other words, there is a rationale to the way these countries voted.

For instance, Eritrea, a state that has been marginalized and treated like a pariah by donor countries has maintained strong economic and military ties with the Russian Federation. Eritrea has also taken an anti-Western stance for decades and its vote in support of Russia was as much a continuation of its rejection of what it sees as Western hegemony and interference in Africa’s internal affairs. It was no surprise that Eritrea voted against the resolution – the only African state to do so.

The seventeen states that abstained also maintain strong ties with the Russian Federation, but they advanced varied reasons for their positions, including neutrality, the lack of dialogue, and the harmful effects of sanctions.

Uganda, which is set to assume the chair of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a forum of 120 member states, abstained in the vote, citing neutrality. The NAM is the world's second largest organization of states, after the United Nations. The Movement was born at the height of the Cold War and at the beginning of the great wave of decolonization in Africa. According to an African adage, "when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers the suffering." The Movement was an effort to guard against this kind of suffering. The NAM stands for principles, such as the respect of territorial integrity, national sovereignty, and non-interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign states.

South Africa abstained because it did not agree with the substance of the resolution and had called for a mediated dialogue and reconciliation between the warring parties. Furthermore, through a statement the South Africans pointed to a lack of transparency in the consultations leading to the resolution. Born out of difficult negotiations between two irreconcilable logics of society, post-apartheid South Africa has retained the conviction that there is no contradiction in international affairs that cannot be resolved through dialogue. Moreover, South Africa has had a turbulent relationship with Western countries, particularly the United States, dating back to the Apartheid era.

Zimbabwe, a country that has been under international sanctions, abstained in the vote. Its representative cited the complexity of the situation, the harmful effects of sanctions, and called for dialogue between the warring camps.

The twenty-eight countries and largest group that voted for the resolution, all of whom are members of the Non-Aligned Movement, strongly supported the principle of self-determination and national sovereignty. Martin Kimani, the Kenyan ambassador to the United Nations best represented their position when he unambiguously condemned Russia's aggression of Ukraine as a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

One can surmise that the eight countries that chose not to participate also have their own reasons, which we can presume reflect their national interests. Whether they abstained from voting, voted in favor or against the resolution, or did not show up for the vote, each one of these states had a rationale for its position.

Thus, the United Nations Resolution brought to the fore longstanding issues and underscored a few key elements worth noting:

### *Africa Matters*

Within the United Nations General Assembly, African votes are critical to all prominent issues. This means that African states cannot be ignored without consequences. They have leverage.

Much has been said and written about the resources and business and investment opportunities that Africa offers. It suffices to say that the continent has tremendous potential in sectors such as renewable energy, mining, agriculture, healthcare, and technology. Africa is at the intersection of global demand and supply dynamics. This has become even more apparent in the context of the

Ukraine War, with European countries seeking new sources of energy in Africa as the Russian Federation uses its oil and natural gas as bargaining levers.

With a young and growing population approaching two billion people, Africa has an expanding middle class with an increasing purchasing power. African youths represent an important labor pool, which, if offered the right training and job opportunities, could help alleviate the pressures of aging populations in other parts of the world.

The continent is an important business market and African states are possible allies that no world power can afford to ignore for long.

Still, U.S. diplomatic, economic, investment, and security engagement levels do not match the continent's potential. We ask why?

### *The World Is Multipolar*

No other states feel the pressures of the great and middle power competition more than African states. Long before the term 'globalization' gained currency, Africa suffered the negative effects of a globalization that was then based on the slave trade. When great-power competitions led to the two world wars, colonized Africa was forced to participate in them through war efforts for which the continent is still paying the price. From the day they achieved their independences, African states have faced relentless advances to join this war or support that initiative, many of which often have no bearing or relevance to Africans. The collapse of the Berlin War, the demise of the Soviet Union, the rise of China and the Arab Gulf States, have all heightened pressures on African states.

Consider Djibouti, a small country in the Horn of Africa at the intersection of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, as big as the State of New Jersey. Because of its strategic location on the Bab-al-Mandab, Djibouti is home to military bases of the United States, France, China, with Japanese, Italian, and European Union military presence, and substantial Turkish engagement. These partners exert tremendous pressure on the Government of Djibouti to satisfy their objectives, and often not to the advantage of, even against, the aspirations of the local populations.

Djibouti is hardly unique. African countries have learned to navigate relationships with foreign partners who are at odds or in conflict with each other.

The resolution on Ukraine was one such occasion for African states to assess the full spectrum of their interests and partnerships and make a choice.

### *The United States Has Fallen Short of Expectations and Needs to Reclaim Its Brand*

In the context of today's multipolar world, the United States remains the biggest player, with the commensurate influence and means. But U.S. influence in Africa has consistently fallen short of expectations since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This has created space for other powers, i.e., China, Russian Federation, Gulf Arab States, even non-state actors, to carve their own spheres of influence.

Both the United States and China share a significant advantage in Africa. Neither one is saddled with a colonial legacy. While China has successfully capitalized on its non-colonial status in Africa, the United States has not. For historical reasons, the United States works in close partnership with former colonial powers. And this is a problem in Africa.

U.S. policymakers still view Africa through a European colonial lens as they did in 1945. This is a serious obstacle to the development of an optimal and comprehensive U.S. Africa policy, as the European lens colors all dimensions of U.S. engagement in Africa.

Troika, a Russian term, is often used across Africa when the U.S. partners with two of its European allies to solve an African crisis. This default approach to African crises may feel comfortable and natural to U.S. diplomats. But it dilutes the U.S. brand and undermines U.S. standing among Africans who have come to see the United States as an extension of the former colonial powers.

China does not face that problem. The Chinese engage Africans through a Chinese lens. Today's great power competition in Africa reflects this gap between China and the United States. The U.S. mostly focuses on short-term security concerns but struggles to build sustainable relations with Africans. As of this writing, several important U.S. ambassadorial and special envoy positions remain vacant. This signals a lack of commitment to those countries and the challenges they face.

In fact, even though the United States has funded important security and humanitarian initiatives in Africa, these initiatives have not yielded strong bonds between the United States and African countries.

After more than a century of engagement with Africa through colonization, the Cold War, and the post-Berlin Wall world, the West has failed to help a single African country emerge as an autonomous, viable, dependable partner. In other parts of the world, a few countries have emerged to fill that role, i.e., South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines.

The lack of close, high-impact U.S. (and European) engagement with Africa has been an obstacle to effective mobilization of African countries as the West confronts Russian aggression in Ukraine. African countries have not rallied behind the West.

During the Covid-19 pandemic the U.S. and its Western European countries hoarded vaccines while African countries struggled to meet the public health needs of their populations. Furthermore, the U.S. refused to acknowledge the validity of the AstraZeneca and Covishield vaccines widely used across Africa to privilege U.S.-made Pfizer, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson vaccines. African countries were turned down when they petitioned the U.S. for the patents of those vaccines.

The West has controlled the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, setting up protocols and policies that affect the world. Despite their experience dealing with epidemics, African medical experts were mostly ignored. The lack of African voices and input contributed to the mistrust of the vaccine campaign across Africa that has undermined these initiatives. In contingencies like this, African public health practitioners should be readily consulted and represented for effective policymaking.

In the name of transitioning to green energy, African states were forcefully instructed to stop their natural gas and fossil fuel investment projects to save the planet, no matter their energy needs. Multilateral institutions and other Western lending groups denied these countries the capital and credit for such projects.

But given the rise in fuel prices, Europeans now seek to invest in oil and natural gas production in Africa. The U.S. has petitioned Saudi Arabia to increase its oil output. This hypocrisy hurts U.S. standing in Africa.

On the investment front, Africa has barely benefited from the various United States financial facilities and institutions, such as Prosper Africa, the Development Finance Corporation and Power Africa, which would help turn around things in the business sector and for the economy.

### *The Russian Federation Has Friends in Africa*

Unlike the United States or Western Europe, African states do not have an adversarial relationship with Russia. For several African countries, these ties with Russia preceded their independences, as the Russians supported them in their liberation struggles against colonial powers. Even though Russia suffered a major setback after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, it maintained its presence in Africa and kept its vast network of friends across the continent.

They never left Africa as press reports may suggest. They continued to operate, albeit at a reduced capacity.

Activities started picking up again in a noticeable manner around 2015. Russian engagement in Africa is characterized by opportunism, which is driven by geopolitical, defense, economic and financial objectives. They seek to prop up arms deals and create dependency on Russia. They exploit situations of crises and position themselves as an alternative to help solve the problem at hand. They approach their objectives through several avenues, including the traditional official diplomatic missions, defense cooperation agreements, oligarchs, and private military companies (PMCs). There is a symbiotic relationship between the private military contractors and defense cooperation missions. Sometimes PMCs lay the groundwork for military cooperation, and sometimes the defense agreements lead to opportunities for PMCs.

To date, the Russian Federation has defense cooperation agreements with twenty-seven countries, including Libya, Sudan, Cameroon, Angola, Tanzania, and Zambia. These agreements offer a wide range of services, including the exchange of information in the field of international defense and security policy, military education, military hydrography, medicine, exchange of experience, counterterrorism, counter-piracy, and the entry of Russian warships into ports.

The Russians work both with the military, such as the Sudan's Rapid Support Forces and Mali's Forces Armées du Mali, and militias in places like Darfur. Accordingly, the Russians have been successful in countries that are already experiencing crises. These include the Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, and Mozambique.

The Central African Republic is the prime example of Russian power assertion in Africa. Russia directs most of its military and economic assistance to Africa to this country, which the Federation now considers a key ally. The Wagner Group has been training the national army, the Forces Armées Centrafricaine since 2018. As part of the deal, CAR government granted Russian businesses important diamond mining concessions and allowed Russia to organize newspapers and radio stations in its capital. In early 2021, the Wagner Group helped the army curb a rebel assault on the capital.

Human rights groups have accused Wagner elements of torturing, raping, murdering civilians, forcibly recruiting child soldiers, and engaging in widespread looting.

In Mali, the Wagner Group has been at the center of the transitional government's efforts to assert its authority against both the French, who have assisted the country in its fight against the insurgency over the past several years, and the insurgents who have destabilized Mali. Under pressure from the international community, Mali has welcomed Russian assistance and is building its defense of the country around that support. As is the case in CAR, there have been reports of human rights abuses. Malian forces and Russian mercenaries have been accused of killing more than three hundred people in Moura in March.

The Wagner Group or Russian involvement does not cost these countries anything out of pocket since their work is financed through mining contracts. This is happening in CAR, Sudan, and Mali. It is especially useful to Moscow to be paid directly in unprocessed gold and minerals, given the comprehensive dollar and euro sanctions on them now.

France has seen itself and is seen by the United States as the indispensable power in its former colonies. This has been true for both the Central African Republic and Mali. The Russians are resetting the dynamics in the region and testing France's view of itself as the indispensable power in Francophone Africa.

Disinformation campaigns have also been a feature of Russian engagement in Africa. Reminiscent of the Cold War era, these campaigns typically aim to prop up isolated political regimes and are often anti-democracy, anti-West, and anti-United Nations. Social and traditional media have been used for these campaigns. In 2020, Facebook removed fake accounts that promoted Russia's policies and targeted CAR, Madagascar, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Mozambique, and South Africa.

However, some experts suggest that the discourse about Russian disinformation is part of Western disinformation.

### *What is the extent of Russian Influence?*

The Ukraine War has affected the world's economy with significant impact on African countries. The war has increased food and fuel prices, disrupted trade, constrained green transitions, and reduce the flow of development finance.

So long as the war in Ukraine lasts, it will sustain Russian influence in Africa.

Africa depends on Russia and Ukraine for wheat, fertilizers, and steel imports. Reportedly, Russia has been blocking Ukrainian wheat exports, destroying its crops and wheat stocks. If true, Russia

is in fact exacerbating the rising food costs and famine conditions in Africa beyond the effects of the war. Essentially, Russia is holding Africans hostage.

This presents an opportunity for Russia to help solve the global food and energy crisis by providing aid to African countries.

African leaders have called for the suspension of Western-imposed sanctions on Russia to allow the export of grains to offset food shortages.

Senegal's President and Head of the African Union Macky Sall met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in June to discuss ways to free up the obstacles that are impeding food exports. South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa called Putin to discuss deliveries of Russian agricultural products and fertilizers to Africa.

Under these conditions, the Russians are set to further strengthen their ties with African states.

### **Policy responses**

The varied responses of African states to the Ukraine War, as reflected through their votes at the United Nations General Assembly on March 2, 2022, demand that the United States, and its Western partners reexamine their approach to, and engagement in, Africa.

There are no short cuts or easy solutions to these challenges, but it is worth considering the following recommendations:

- U.S. policymakers should not approach Africa with a Cold War mindset and force Africans to choose between the U.S. and its competitors. The world has changed. Forcing Africans would be counterproductive and would backfire.
- U.S. needs a proactive, forward-looking, and bold policy engagement in Africa. Big challenges call for big responses. The U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief was such a bold idea.
- The U.S. must clearly define its interests and priorities in Africa, and fully invest in them. These days, Diplomacy, Democracy, Development and Defense, which are the pillars of U.S. foreign policy sound more like slogans. They need robust programs to support them.
- U.S. Congress should augment the USAID budget to expand programming across the continent.
- The U.S. Development Finance Corporation should be a household name in Africa like USAID.
- The U.S. needs to increase engagement with Africa with high-level visits to Africa.

The U.S. should give African presidents the same consideration they receive in China, Russia, Europe, and elsewhere.



- The U.S. should respect the agency and choices of African states. This means the U.S. needs to move away from being solely on the supply side but also learn to be on the demand side – and listen to African partners to meet their needs instead of giving the impression that Washington has turnkey solutions that are ready to be deployed to Africa. Africans will join the side of the United States when the U.S. makes and delivers on a better value proposition.
- The U.S. must prioritize the appointments of ambassadors and special envoys in Africa. All such critical positions must be filled in earnest. It signals U.S. commitment to those countries and the global challenges the U.S. shares with them.
- The U.S. needs to stop outsourcing U.S. interests in Africa to former colonial powers. They are often part of the problem, as is the case with France in the Sahel or CAR.
- In short-term, the U.S. must commit to helping African nations meet the food and fertilizers shortages caused by the Ukraine War. This would build goodwill as Africans remember their friends.
- And urgently, the U.S. needs to lead in resolving the acute food crisis in the Horn of Africa.

I thank you.