



**Statement before the House Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Africa**

***“Great Power Competition Implications in
Africa: The Russian Federation and its
Proxies”***

A Testimony by:

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Chairman James, Ranking Member Jacobs, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak here today regarding the impact of the Russian Federation's activities in Africa and its impact on U.S. national security interests.

While I am affiliated with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, CSIS does not take policy positions and so the viewpoints that I express here today are mine alone.

Next week, Russia will convene its second Russia-Africa summit in Saint Petersburg. The first time it convened such a summit, in 2019, 43 African heads of state and government arrived, exceeding the attendance of similar summits convened by the United Kingdom and France. But much has changed in the world since Covid-19 and Russia's war in Ukraine. African nations have been adversely affected by these developments and the associated economic, health, and security fallout from these significant global events.

Certainly, Russia bears an important share of the responsibility for rising global food and fuel prices and the global instability associated with its violations of international law and its efforts to undermine the global, rules-based international order. And yet, in Africa, I would argue that Russia will come to Saint Petersburg next week stronger than before.

This is primarily because Russia is employing a set of policies around the globe that in Africa, in particular, manifests itself as both opportunistic and strategic—taking advantage of shifting societal, political and security trends and fissures across the continent, while at the same time possessing a rationality that is uniquely tailored to appeal to African states and leaders fitting a specific profile.

Russia's strategy in Africa well pre-dates its war in Ukraine, going back to its initial invasion of Crimea in 2014 and the first round on international sanctions against it. But since the start of the current conflict, we have seen considerable efforts by Russia to quicken and deepen its efforts across the continent. Most importantly, Russia's efforts are low-cost and high-impact, challenging Washington's interests on a number of fronts.

Importantly, the Kremlin's interests in Africa are mutually reinforcing:

- First, to undermine democracy and the rule of law, along with Western efforts to bolster those values and institutions;
- Second, to break Russia's diplomatic isolation by both deepening and expanding Russian commercial, political and security ties with Africa's business and political elites;
- Third, to create new markets and commercial opportunities, that undercut Western sanctions, especially in those areas where Russia has already established a market advantage, namely in energy, mining, arms and agriculture;

- Fourth, to assert its own relevance on the international stage and the creation of a multipolar world by demonstrating its ability to shape political events and global outcomes in ways that demand that Moscow continue to be afforded a seat in international debates;
- And finally, to advance its own geo-strategic ambitions, in particular, by seeking a military presence and security partnerships in countries along the Red Sea, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean Sea and even the Atlantic.

Russian Tactics

These strategic objectives are coupled with a set of tactics that Russia employs to maximize the success and impact of its approach. Here, we don't see Russia creating fault lines in societies or engineering anti-Western sentiment from thin air. Rather, Russia targets and exploits those countries where these fault lines already exist. It then exacerbates and weaponizes them through a potent mix of corruption, disinformation and propaganda to advance their own interests.

To be clear, Russia did not invent anti-American, anti-French or anti-Western sentiment in Africa, as some have argued, but through its official pronouncements and unofficial propaganda, it nurtures and feeds these sentiments in ways that undermine U.S. interests.

Relatedly, Russia employs both formal and informal tactics to advance its strategic objectives. Its use of misinformation and disinformation, along with its deployment of security forces like the Wagner Group, afford Russia the latitude to manipulate everything from public sentiment to election outcomes to the local security environment, all under the guise of plausible deniability. These tactics, often pursued with and through local proxies, are often opaque and corrupt; making them difficult to detect; harder to dispel; and even more challenging to inoculate against.

This is because of the third tactic Russia uses, which is to target and prey upon weak, unstable and failing states to seek their entry for influence. In countries like Mali, Central African Republic and Sudan, Russia has used the formula of approaching countries in the throes of violence, instability and political uncertainty, along with a dearth of transparency, rule of law or democratic institutions, to sell these countries' leaders on a basket of security, economic and political partnerships that benefit both countries elites.

Additionally, Russian political and security involvement often comes with a commercial component. Under these arrangements, Russian security assistance, political support and financial interests become entirely intertwined with those of the host countries. So, while this may enable Russia to "sell" its assistance as self-financing because payments come directly through ownership stakes in national assets, like mining or timber concessions, it makes untangling these relationships even more difficult than traditional bilateral ties.

Finally, by targeting military, political and business elites, Russia is capable of exerting country-wide and even regional influence while keeping largely secret the details of its relationships. There is no ideology underpinning Russia's in-roads as during the Cold War. In these countries, it is purely transactional. Under these terms, African leaders get political cover from Russia at the United Nations and in other international fora; security for themselves at home; a continued hold on power; off book revenue streams; and a counter to Western-led reform processes.

But in this scenario, it's the African people who suffer the most: experiencing an uptick in violence, human rights abuses and social strife; along with a further hollowing out of local governance institutions, extensions of illegitimate governments and decreasing levels of economic growth and human development.

U.S. Interests Affected by Russian Strategy

There is no question that in deepening and expanding these ties, even and especially if those ties are largely limited to already weak states, U.S. national security interests are being impacted.

- First, there is no evidence to suggest that the promises Russia and its Wagner Group partners make to African officials about restoring security or pushing back against jihadist groups are coming true. Just the opposite. Assessments are that aside from securing ruling elites, the threats of violent instability in areas where Wagner has a presence are spreading. With the withdrawal of international peacekeepers from places like Mali, Western allies will be challenged to contain a deepening security crisis.
- Secondly, these weak states and Russia's inability to effectively provide security there suggest that neighboring states could be adversely impacted by growing instability on their borders. Ghana's President recently warned of the spillover effects in his country from the Wagner Group. Countries like Niger and Côte d'Ivoire, already weak and facing internal challenges, could be further destabilized as a result of Russia's failure to deliver internal security in those areas where international security forces are no longer present.
- Third, just as they did in Syria, Russia is emerging as a critical influencer in the mass migration movement coming from Africa. Being able to foment instability across vast swaths of central Africa, where displacement and migration are already at historic highs, could well exacerbate a migration challenge from Central and the Horn of Africa and put renewed pressure on European allies on NATO's southern flank to respond.
- Looking at the map of Africa one can further discern a pattern of engagement and influence that could see Russian exerting pressure and gaining footholds in countries from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean and across to the Gulf of Guinea—giving Moscow leverage over the illegal movement of people, arms and minerals and possibly a security foothold at critical shipping choke points in these areas.

- Lastly, we should not discount the overarching threat to U.S. national interests, beyond the security realm, to having democratic institutions and values, which Washington has invested in over the decades in a bipartisan fashion, systematically attacked and undermined across Africa. This is especially true as it stands in stark contrast to the wishes of citizens across the continent who continue to express, through polling, their overwhelming desire to live under systems of democratic government. Efforts to undercut that desire through rigged elections; co-opting political elites; and manipulating the information environment, all risk further destabilizing social and political cohesion within states that can least afford it.

Responding to Russian In-Roads

Make no mistake, Russia is making and seizing opportunities in Africa; but its actions remain strategic. Even as it executes its war plans in Ukraine and contends with new, internal challenges from the recent Wagner Group mutiny, Russia is succeeding in its efforts to make new friends, acquire greater influence, and undermine Western interests in Africa. It is playing on historical ties to these nations; stoking long-held grievances over colonialism and paternalistic attitudes from the West; and pointing out glaring inconsistencies when it comes to Washington's pursuit of its interests in Africa compared to the values it routinely articulates.

In response to these challenges, there are a number of steps that Washington can and should be taking to counter this malign influence.

- First, as the expression goes, 'sunlight is the best disinfectant.' Washington is positioned to help counteract false and misleading Russian narratives in African states through support to local level watchdogs, independent media and through online efforts to track and trace online disinformation. Some of this is being done already. In countries like Sudan, where we know online disinformation was used to undermine the country's transition to civilian rule, USAID has funded an online monitoring tool so that citizens and leaders can know exactly where the disinformation is coming from and who is spreading it. Singling out the Russian hand in these schemes can help to combat its spread and empowers local actors. These tools should be available to every U.S. embassy in Africa and shared with host governments.
- In this same vein, U.S. foreign assistance should be targeted and ramped up in those African states where we know Russia is seeking new inroads. For example, the U.S. Embassy in Chad does not even have a USAID mission, even though the country has been targeted by the Wagner group for its location at critical crossroads between the Sahel and the Horn of Africa and bordering the Wagner strongholds of Sudan and Central African Republic. To that end, U.S. assistance should be better aligned to help host nations more effectively counter the nature and scope of the threat posed to them.

- Third, Washington must improve its own messaging towards African nations which have made clear that they do not want to be the subjects of new Cold War competition nor do they want to be presented with ‘us or them’ choices. Africans have been resentful of threats of U.S. sanctions for working with Russia and any efforts that creates distance between us and our African partners provides fertile ground for Russian influence to metastasize.
- Lastly, when it comes to promoting peaceful, stable, democratic nations in Africa that are capable of resisting the siren song of Russian influence, our values and our interests are already well aligned. In countries experiencing democratic backsliding, like Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea, it would be easy and consistent with past practice to punish those states through sanctions and isolation as an expression of our democratic values. But we should do so knowing that we risk ceding further influence to Russia. Instead, we must not concede these setbacks and instead be able to deepen engagement out of our own national interest without conferring praise or legitimacy and excusing anti-democratic behavior.

In conclusion, it is worth recalling that Russia has achieved these remarkable inroads in African nations through its guile, deception and corruption. It remains an insignificant trade partner to African states, standing at only one tenth the value of China. Similarly, it contributes insignificantly to Africa’s health, well-being or development. And yet, its political and security inroads on the continent are substantial. Combating this trend will be neither quick nor easy, but it remains imperative that we do so. For our own national interests and the interests of our African partners.