



**United States Institute of Peace**

**“Great Power Competition Implications in  
Africa: The Russian Federation and Its proxies”**

**Testimony before the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs,  
Subcommittee on Africa**

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Chairman James, Ranking Member Jacobs, distinguished Committee members, I very much appreciate this opportunity to discuss Great Power competition in Africa, specifically: (1) actions taken by Russia and its proxies; (2) the way those actions harm both African and U.S. interest throughout the continent; and (3) why our support for accountability, transparency and the rule of law is essential to counter Moscow's destructive activities in Africa. These Russian activities harm U.S. interests throughout the African continent. This hearing is especially timely given the Russia-Africa Summit next week, and of course, the recent mutiny by the Wagner Group, which plays a key and destructive role in several African countries.

I serve as vice president of the Africa Center at the United States Institute of Peace, I direct the work of USIP's Africa Center, although the views expressed here are my own. I have over 20 years of experience working on peace, security, and development issues in Africa.

For almost 40 years, USIP has actively worked to prevent armed conflicts and mediate peace, while supporting U.S. national security interests worldwide. As part of its work across Africa, USIP is working with countries in the Sahel to promote political stability and prevent and counter violent extremism. I have recently returned from the Sahel, where Russia and its proxies are very active.

## **Introduction**

In recent years, the focus on China's influence in Africa, while certainly warranted, has overshadowed Russia's growing presence in Africa. Since a decade ago, Russia has rekindled its interest in Africa, cultivating strong relationships with South Africa and other countries, particularly those vulnerable to instability and conflict. The Russia-Africa summit to be held next week will be a milestone in Russia's renewed diplomatic African engagement. However, the Wagner Group's mutiny last month has sent a shockwave in the region and reminded Russia and its proxies of their weakness, and challenges Russia has to meet in its Great Power ambitions.

Nevertheless, Russia's relative success in Central African Republic, Mali, and Sudan should force the U.S. and Western nations to question their strategy of engagement with African countries, particularly those experiencing political instability and violence that are susceptible to Russia and its proxies' influence.

## **Russian Motivations and Patterns of Engagement and Its impact**

While Putin's Russia has no visible grand plan for Africa, a pattern of opportunistic engagements and collusion between the Russian state and shadowy private entities seeks three main goals: (1) to maximize profits through commercial predation by proxies, thus helping evade Western sanctions against Russian individuals and entities; (2) to disrupt and erode Western influence in Africa; and (3) to strengthen Russia's geopolitical influence and great-power ambitions. Putin's Kremlin pursues these goals via three broad activities:

*Misinformation, Propaganda, and Overinflated Historical Ties* - Lacking significant economic ties to Africa, Russia adroitly pursues other means of influence. One worrisome tactic is its manipulation of African public opinion through misinformation campaigns, including sophisticated social media. Moscow has often portrayed itself as a staunch supporter of African nations seeking autonomy and sovereignty, emphasizing historical narratives of solidarity, such as providing educational opportunities and military support during the Cold War era. These efforts have allowed Russia to garner support and win votes at the United Nations, all the while diverting attention away from criticisms of President Putin's brutal aggression against Ukraine. Russia and its proxies sow resentment against the United States and international rule of law to strengthen its global standing.

*Protective Alliances with Corrupt, Insecure Elites.* Russia sees instability and violent conflicts as opportunities to sell African combatant groups weapons, military training, military advisory and mercenary services. Here, the Putin regime operates largely through Kremlin-guided but ostensibly private military or mercenary firms such as the Wagner Group<sup>1</sup> or Sewa Security Services.<sup>2</sup> Russia uses these military capacities to ally with often corrupt leaders or factions while seeking extractive or predatory commercial opportunities (described below) in exchange. Russia currently supports civilian- or military-led government forces amid the violence of the Central African Republic, Sudan, Mali and Libya. After decades of operating in Africa mainly as an arms exporter, Russia

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<sup>1</sup> Congressional Research Service. "Russia's Wagner Private Military Company (PMC)," (March 2023). <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12344>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury. "Treasury Sanctions Russian Proxy Wagner Group as a Transnational Criminal Organization," (Jan. 6, 2023). <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1220>

now seeks vastly broader, deeper interventions to influence African nations' conflicts, governance, economies, and security architectures<sup>3</sup> – all to facilitate Russian commercial activities and predation. Amid this shift, Russian weapons sales and transfers to African countries have increased from around \$500 million to over \$2 billion annually<sup>4</sup>.

Predatory Profit, Including Extraction of Natural Resources. Increasingly since Putin's war on Ukraine, his regime and its proxies have sought profit by extracting natural resources in Africa without contributing to economic development. Here also, the Wagner Group has been a primary proxy, seeking trade deals from elites in exchange for the security-related services described above. To support these transactions, in part to fund its operations in Ukraine, Wagner's business model has included political backing and guidance, information campaigns, and logistical support for African clients such as the Central African Republic's government, under which it receives rights to exploit the country's main gold mine along with extracting diamonds and timber. Local CAR business leaders have described to me how Wagner has crowded local businesses out of entire sectors of the economy.<sup>5</sup>

Wagner's activities have included grave human rights abuses and an increase in regional instability. It promotes rule by force rather than by democracy and law, endorses corruption over transparency, drains local business and government revenues rather than bolstering them, and maintains authoritarian regimes dependent on Wagner's parasitic presence. Anecdotal evidence and data on violence<sup>6</sup> show that Wagner's brutal efficiency can help forcefully secure client regimes — but in ways that will only intensify the longer-term corrosion of states, alienation of populations, extremist responses, and insecurity. This approach perpetuates corruption and

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<sup>3</sup> Congressional Research Service, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Adam R Grissom, Samuel Charap, Joe Cheravitch, Russel Hanson, Dara Massicot, Christopher A. Mouton, Jordan R. Reimer (2022). "Russia's Growing Presence in Africa : A Geostrategic Assessment." Rand Corporation. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR4399.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4399.html)

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Sany. "In Africa, Here's How to Respond to Russia's Brutal Wagner Group," (April 6,2023). <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/04/africa-heres-how-respond-russias-brutal-wagner-group>

<sup>6</sup> The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), "Wagner Group Operations in Africa – Civilian Targeting Trends in the Central African Republic and Mali," (August 2022), <https://acleddata.com/2022/08/30/wagner-group-operations-in-africa-civilian-targeting-trends-in-the-central-african-republic-and-mali/>

undermines transparency, accountability, and democracy—the values most Africans aspire for and that the United States makes considerable investments to support.

*A predictable pattern of engagement* - Overall, by considering these factors—preexisting relationships, profitable opportunities, political and military elites seeking outside backing (political financial, diplomatic support), risks of political instability and transitions, and Great Power aspirations (including military bases, maritime routes, strategic zones of influence)—help predict the countries that the Kremlin and its proxies will target next in Africa: Cameroon, Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Uganda. The U.S should be considering these possibilities in U.S. policy making.

### **Challenges to Russian Expansion**

In African polities as in Russia, the corruption and brutality of Moscow’s behavior breeds resentment and opposition. Indeed, experiences of African countries — and now of Russia after last month’s Wagner Group mutiny — show how the Putin machinery for seizing power and wealth is not simply predatory but parasitic, ultimately corroding and hollowing the governance systems and economies on which it feeds. My own interviews with citizens of Wagner-afflicted African countries underscore that Wagner’s predatory behavior ultimately undermines Russia's reputation and the goodwill it seeks to build with Africans. And now, the Wagner mutiny has dealt a significant blow to Russia’s “brand” as a great power or a reliable security partner.

The Wagner Mutiny’s Resonance in Africa. The Wagner uprising has caused uncertainty and concern in countries like Mali and the CAR, where leaders rely on Wagner forces to maintain power. The Kremlin appears intent on maintaining Wagner operations abroad while asserting more control over the company’s management. Specifically, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said Wagner’s work in the CAR will continue. To whatever degree Russia’s government officially takes ownership of Wagner, it could also become responsible for the crimes, predation, and human rights abuses committed by Wagner mercenaries. This could further weaken Russia's self-description as an anti-colonial force and a provider of stability in Africa. It could expose Russian officials to potential prosecutions for crimes and human rights abuses by Wagner and its mercenaries.

## **Responding to Russia in Africa: Stay Engaged.**

Russia and its proxies hope that by deepening the Sahel's chaos, they can persuade the United States and other democracies to abandon the region. The US and its allies should stay engaged.

Key steps will be these:

Expose Russian malign activities - Working with African partners, the United States should underscore the realities of the Kremlin's approach to Africa, including the Russian toolkit, the principal actors and the consequences of its engagement. This includes supporting African media and investigative journalism to expose Russia's support for corrupt schemes and oppressive regimes. The African men and women doing this work are among the bravest in Africa, risking retaliation. This exposure of realities should illuminate the manipulative approach used by the Russian-linked criminal networks and their local cronies to subvert democracy, violate local laws, or use blackmail or violence to force out of business hard-working local entrepreneurs. Such a campaign, using African, rather than U.S. voices, would create a durable, strategic narrative because truthful and locally owned.

Reduce the causes of Africans' vulnerability to Russia. The United States should advance its overhaul, already underway, work to address the root causes of countries' vulnerability to Russia, such as poor governance, poverty, and terrorism. Russia and its proxies feed on chaos and violence. An effective response by democracies, Western and African, will require offering Wagner's client states a broader, more realistic and respectful relationships than shown by prior international efforts to counter insurgency and extremism in the region. In the United States, a sober, bipartisan assessment found past U.S. policies too short-term and too narrowly focused on building Sahel states' military skills rather than improving governance and economies.<sup>7</sup> That reevaluation resulted in the 2019 Global Fragility Act<sup>8</sup>, bipartisan legislation which this Committee produced. Weaning African states from dependence on Wagner will mean applying the principles of that reform within the equal partnership promised by U.S. leaders.

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<sup>7</sup> Kamissa Camara, "It Is Time to Rethink U.S. Strategy in the Sahel," United States Institutes of Peace (April 2021), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/04/it-time-rethink-us-strategy-sahel>

<sup>8</sup> USIP Staff, "The Global Fragility Act: A New U.S. Approach," United States Institutes of Peace (January 2020), [The Global Fragility Act: A New U.S. Approach | United States Institute of Peace \(usip.org\)](https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/01/global-fragility-act-a-new-us-approach)

Harness Africa's economic opportunities - The U.S. should also strengthen strategic partnerships with Africa by driving growth, especially small to medium-size investments, through instruments such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act, PROSPER Africa, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and facilities through the U.S International Development Finance Corporation.

Enable regional security cooperation – Specifically, the United States should work with Sahel countries, the African Union and regional commissions such as the Economic Community of West African States. It should support the building of security responses designed and led, not by the United States or France (as in the past), but from within Africa, with the United States and other Western democracies as *enablers*. African-led approaches can build on ECOWAS interventions in Liberia (in the 1990s) or in Gambia (in 2016-17) or the South African Development Community and Rwandan forces in Mozambique to replace foreign military-led models.<sup>9</sup>

In conclusion, it's worth asking why Americans should care about competing in Africa or investing in its stability. The answer is clear: Africa is poised to shape the 21st century as the world's fastest-growing demographic and economic power.<sup>10</sup> By 2050, Africans will make up a quarter of the global population. Whether Africa succeeds in achieving effective governance and development, as Congress has sought in the bipartisan 2019 Global Fragility Act, will be determined whether the continent becomes a prosperous contributor to the global and U.S. economies in the next two or three decades, or a site of deepening crisis that exacerbates the current worldwide problem of refugee displacement. Africa's trajectory will significantly shape the world in which our children and grandchildren will live.

Making a positive difference is challenging, for sure. But as challenging as it is, the U.S. should not cede the playing field to Russian forces of destruction. There are too many Africans in these

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph Sany, "In Africa, Here's How to Respond to Russia's Brutal Wagner Group," United States Institute of Peace (April 2023), [In Africa, Here's How to Respond to Russia's Brutal Wagner Group | United States Institute of Peace \(usip.org\)](#)

<sup>10</sup> Victor Oluwole, "Africa projected to outpace Asia as world's fastest-growing region," (May 2023). Business Insider Africa, [Africa projected to outpace Asia as world's fastest-growing region - Mo Ibrahim foundation report | Business Insider Africa](#)

Wagner-targeted countries who want strong and mutually beneficial relations with the U.S. The good news is that we have willing and able partners.

Thank you for inviting me to testify, and I look forward to your questions.

*The view expressed in this testimony are those of the author and not the U.S. Institute of Peace.*