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*The views expressed are those of the author alone and do not represent the position of the Africa Center for Strategic Studies or the Department of Defense.*

I want to thank Chair, Representative Bass, as well as Ranking Member Smith and the members of this subcommittee for the invitation to speak to the panel on Russia’s activities and influences in Africa.

Russia has arguably expanded its influence in Africa more rapidly than any other external actor over the last several years, after largely withdrawing from the continent following the Cold War. Russia has realized this expanded influence even though it provides less than one percent of the foreign direct investment going into Africa. Understanding Russia’s tools of influence, therefore, is vital to countering those with destabilizing effects.

To help frame this discussion, I would like to begin by briefly reviewing Russia’s strategic objectives. While Russia’s engagements in Africa are often portrayed as opportunistic, Russia is systematically pursuing several overarching priorities that guide its actions.

### **Russia’s Strategic Objectives in Africa**

A central Russian objective in Africa is to gain influence over strategic territory along the southern Mediterranean and Red Sea. This has been seen most explicitly in Libya where, working against the United Nations’ efforts to establish a stable, unified government in Tripoli, Russia deployed mercenaries from the Wagner Group in 2019 in a heavy-handed play to install its proxy, Khalifa Haftar, as the new strongman leader.

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Should Russia ultimately succeed, this would provide Moscow an enduring military presence in North Africa on NATO's southern flank. Combined with elevated engagements in Algeria and Egypt, Russia is posturing to be a powerbroker in the southern Mediterranean. This has been accompanied by Russian efforts to secure naval port access in the Red Sea, most visibly in Port Sudan, through support to the military government in Sudan.

By establishing a naval presence in North Africa and the Red Sea, Russia would be in a position, among other things, to disrupt global maritime transport (including Western naval movements) through the chokeholds of the Suez Canal and the Bab al-Mandab strait between Yemen and Djibouti. Over 30 percent of global container traffic relies on these corridors.

A second Russian strategic objective in Africa is to displace Western influence. This has been most obviously seen in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali, where Russia has become the dominant security partner of the isolated and compromised civilian government in CAR and the military junta in Mali.

In the process, Russia is vying to enhance its posture as a Great Power whose interests must be considered in every region of the world. This objective has taken on greater importance in the wake of Russia's further invasion of Ukraine as Moscow seeks to avoid international isolation and demonstrate that it remains a viable global actor.

A third strategic objective of Russia's engagements in Africa is to reshape the rules-based international order enshrined in the United Nations Charter.<sup>2</sup> Undermining principles such as respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence of member states – at the heart of Russia's aggression toward Ukraine – are central features of the transactional and patron-client based world view that Russia is promoting in Africa. Facilitated by concerted disinformation messaging aimed at denigrating democracy as an unviable governance model, this objective seeks to offset the inherent disadvantages Russia faces in a rules-based, democratic global order.

### **Relying on Asymmetric and Destabilizing Means**

While Russia maintains modest conventional diplomatic, economic, security, and cultural relations in Africa – engagements that are often welcomed on the continent – it is through unofficial methods that Russia has gained most influence in Africa in recent years and which are most problematic. These low-cost, high influence tools – such as

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Siegle, "[Putin's Threats to the International Order Loom over Africa](#)," in *Side Effects: Ukraine's Perfect Storm Looming over Africa*, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, May 6, 2022.

the deployment of mercenaries, disinformation, election interference, and arms for resources deals – are invariably opaque and destabilizing.<sup>3</sup>

These tools are typically employed as part of a package in support of vulnerable political actors – often authoritarian regimes lacking legitimacy and politically isolated – who are then indebted to Moscow. This “elite cooption” or “state capture” approach gains Russia enormous influence over the leadership, and thus government, in these countries lacking robust checks and balances.<sup>4</sup> The result is compromised African sovereignty. Subsequent government actions taken to benefit Russia and the isolated regime are often detrimental to the interests of citizens in the affected countries.

In addition to the cases of the Central African Republic, Mali, Libya, and Sudan referenced earlier, Russia is seeking to leverage expanded influence on the continent by cultivating similar patron-client relationships with at least another half a dozen African leaders. Given the gains it has realized with this strategy, we can expect Russia to further attempt to expand its influence in Africa in the coming years.

Beyond these targeted efforts to prop up sympathetic autocratic leaders in Africa, Russia has been the leading purveyor of more generalized disinformation campaigns on the continent with at least 16 known operations.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the explicitly pro-Russian, anti-West, anti-democracy themes, these campaigns have been used to amplify grievances in countries with democratic governments, softening the ground for subsequent Russian influence. The objective often is less to convince as to confuse citizens – thereby creating false equivalences between democratic and nondemocratic political actors, precipitating disillusion and apathy.

Russian success in reaching a large African audience online with limited costs has encouraged an expansion of these tactics. Over time, Russian disinformation campaigns in Africa have become increasingly sophisticated in camouflaging their origins by outsourcing posting operations to local “franchised” influencers who are supplied content from a central source.<sup>6</sup> These strategies are making it both harder to detect and to remove such insidious influence campaigns.

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Siegle, [“Russia’s Asymmetric Strategy for Expanding Influence in Africa,”](#) London School of Economics Africa Blog, September 17, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Siegle, [“How Russia is Pursuing State Capture in Africa,”](#) London School of Economics Africa Blog, March 21, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, [“Mapping Disinformation in Africa,”](#) *Spotlight*, April 26, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, [“Russian Disinformation Campaigns Target Africa: An Interview with Dr. Shelby Grossman,”](#) *Spotlight*, February 18, 2020.

## Implications for Governance and Stability in Africa

A common assessment of Russia's engagement in Africa is that since Moscow is not investing significant resources on the continent, its effects are marginal. However, this overlooks the level of instability that can be created in Africa even with limited resources. Given Africa's generally underfunded governments, weak states, and lax oversight capacity, Russia's low-cost tools of influence can have profound impacts on the politics, sovereignty, and stability of the continent.

African leaders who collude with Russia's influence campaign are effectively trading off the interests of their compatriots for personal political and financial gain. Lacking a constitutional basis for authority, these regimes are receptive to Moscow's support to help sustain their hold on power. Africa's recent spate of coups, accordingly, expands the pool of potential suitors for Russian support.

As seen in the Central African Republic and Mali, once Russia gains a foothold, it has used its tools of coercion and disinformation to intimidate opposition voices, as well as traditional partners and donors, to further consolidate Russian influence. Extricating Moscow from its privileged role in the domestic politics of these countries will be a major challenge for these societies.

Another destabilizing implication of Russia's cooption of African leaders is the weakening of democracy. This is partly an instrumental outcome of Russia's clientelistic model that exploits African countries with weak checks and balances. In the process, popular participation and African agency are sidelined. This is reinforced by messaging from Russian official and disinformation channels that presidential term limits need not be respected, truth is irrelevant, and countries face a choice between democracy and security.

A deterioration in democratic norms has direct implications for African security and development. Three fourths of Africa's conflicts and 85 percent of the continent's 36 million forcibly displaced people originate in authoritarian governments.<sup>7</sup> Since the continent's democracies have realized substantially higher levels of stability, sustained growth, rule of law, control of corruption, and living conditions, Russian efforts to roll back democratic governance norms will have far-reaching effects on Africa's security and development goals.

The undermining of democratic norms in Africa also runs counter to the aspirations of the 75 percent of Africans who consistently state that they prefer democratic government over any other political system.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "[Autocracy and Instability](#)," Infographic, March 9, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> E. Gyimah-Boadi, Carolyn Logan, Josephine Sanny, "[Africans' Durable Demand for Democracy](#)," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 32 (3), July 2021.

Geo-strategically, if Russia becomes established as a key power broker in Libya with unfettered naval and air base access in the southern Mediterranean, it is in a stronger position to threaten Europe and disrupt NATO maritime movements in times of crisis. Tripoli, for example, is only 600 miles from Rome. It is both symbolic and instructive, therefore, that the UN-recognized government in Tripoli has clearly condemned Russia's aggression in Ukraine – a position that would surely flip if Russia were to implant a proxy in any new unified government that emerges from ongoing negotiations.

The destabilizing effects of Russian disinformation are amplified in Africa given the high starting levels of fragility. Democracies rely on trustworthy information – for citizens to make informed decisions about candidates, to express their preferences, seek compromises, advance transparency, and hold leaders accountable. Democracies also rely on trust between elected leaders and ordinary citizens. This trust is badly frayed if the information environment is overwhelmed with false and polarizing narratives. Disinformation makes it exceedingly difficult, accordingly, for citizens to play their foundational role in a functioning democracy. In addition to fomenting instability, disinformation fosters disillusionment and disengagement, opening wide the door to external influence.

While ostensibly justified as a means of enhancing security, Russia's deployment of Kremlin-backed mercenaries in Africa, typically through the infamous Wagner Group, are invariably aimed at advancing the political interests of Russia's proxies. This includes providing the personal protection for African leaders working under Russia's tutelage. Wagner troop deployments, which are partially paid for in cash and kind by their African hosts, are not sufficiently extensive to change the conflict trajectories in these countries facing insurgencies. Instead, these mercenary deployments are typically focused on carving out key spheres of influence, including gold and diamond mines, for the supported regime. In fact, the human rights abuses that characterize every Wagner deployment in Africa are further fueling these insurgencies. In CAR and Mali, for example, Wagner abuses against the Fulani community risk further tearing the fragile social fabric of these countries. Ironically, then, where Wagner has been deployed to quell instability, instability is likely to expand.

In short, Russia's irregular means of gaining influence in Africa are destabilizing for the continent and disenfranchising for African citizens. As these Russian actions exacerbate instability and humanitarian crises, undermine Africa's nascent democracies, and are aimed at reshaping the international order away from a rules-based system, they run counter to the interests of the United States.

## **Mitigating Russia's Malign Influences in Africa**

Russia's engagements in Africa are a combination of conventional (trade, diplomatic, security cooperation, economic, cultural, and education exchanges) and unconventional (state capture, mercenaries, arms for resources, disinformation, and election engineering) tools. It is important to differentiate these approaches and recognize that it is the latter category of activities that is most destabilizing and deserving of attention.

With its decades' long and robust diplomatic, foreign direct investment, trade, development, security, and cultural ties with Africa, the United States' engagement on the continent is several orders of magnitude greater than that of Russia. Mitigating Russia's malign influences, therefore, must be part of a broader U.S. engagement in Africa, not a singular end of its own. Otherwise, U.S. Africa policy risks falling into a tail wagging the dog mindset.

The United States' security and economic interests in Africa are advanced by long-term partnerships with stable, economically inclusive, and democratic governments committed to the rule of law. It is these contexts that are most conducive to domestic security, private sector investments that generate jobs and profits, and cooperation against threats to the international order. There is, accordingly, a high level of overlap between African and American interests.

The United States can build on these shared interests by working with like-minded African governments, African civil society groups, regional organizations, and the United Nations to uphold the principles of a rules-based international order in Africa enshrined in the African Union charter. It is African governmental, media, civil society, and business leaders who must ultimately defend African interests against external spoilers. There is much the United States can do, however, to support and strengthen African agency and interests.

A key pillar for strengthening the rules-based order in Africa is for the United States to further incentivize democratic processes on the continent – the strongest antidote to malign Russian influence. This means distinguishing among African governments in the application of U.S. policy subject to how these governments come to power. It also entails strengthening democratic institutions that can provide the domestic guardrails against autocracy and its vulnerability to external cooption. These include bolstering election management bodies, as well as strengthening African judiciaries, media, and professional militaries. It also means working with African actors to revitalize the African Union's ban on mercenaries.

In addition to strengthening mutually beneficial U.S.-Africa relations, prioritizing democratic governance—including the condemnation of coups—denies Russia a key entry point for influence on the continent. The United States must avoid falling into the Cold War trap of competing with Moscow for the affections of African autocrats. This is a competition that the U.S. will surely lose—and works counter to U.S. and African interests.

Another pillar deserving of attention is strengthening African capacity to expose malign Russian actions, such as disinformation. Best practices from the Baltics, which have extensive experience in countering Russian disinformation, have relied on coordinated efforts between commercial technology companies, news services, social media platforms, and government agencies. Some of these efforts tap networks of citizen volunteers to seek out and counter fake news.

Africa is starting from a much lower institutional capacity to combat these influences. Yet, young Africans have demonstrated extraordinary talent and innovation in adapting new digital technologies for the public good. U.S. support can strengthen the capacity of African governmental and non-governmental fact-checking and digital detective firms to identify fake Russian-sponsored accounts, trolls, and disinformation campaigns. In addition to funding, technical support is needed to rapidly share counter disinformation best practices.

The United States can also assist with stronger outreach to social media firms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to elevate their efforts in exposing and taking down disinformation campaigns using their platforms in Africa. These social media companies are often perceived as giving low priority to moderation and removal of malicious content in Africa.

A final point of attention is the recognition that Russia has been able to rapidly expand its malign influence in Africa in recent years because it has faced few reputational or economic costs for its actions. We can expect to see Russia continue to extend its influence on the continent until the costs for doing so exceed the benefits.

U.S. Treasury sanctions on Russians implicated in destabilizing actions in Africa are a vital step toward increasing the costs for Russia's malign activities and should be expanded, in coordination with European partners, to maximize their impact. While such sanctions may not immediately curtail Russian bad behavior, they do increase the cost of doing business. These sanctions also signal and substantiate the criminal nature of nefarious Russian activities on the continent to African governments and media.<sup>9</sup> Not only does this raise awareness but it demonstrates to African interlocutors that there are

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph Siegle, "[Russia and Africa: Expanding Influence and Instability](#)," in Graeme Herd (ed) *Russia's Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment*, George C. Marshall Center, 2021.

potentially crippling costs tied to these engagements. To reinforce this point, U.S. sanctions should be extended to the networks of Russian banks and natural resource parastatals as well as African beneficiaries who are enabling this malign behavior. Denying these firms access to international financial markets will increase the tangible costs to Russia and create stronger incentives to change course.

In recent years, the United States has strengthened the legal platform from which it can pursue legal and financial remedies for destabilizing activity sponsored by Russia or other international actors in Africa. These, along with the Global Magnitsky Act, Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, the Countering American Adversaries through Sanctions Act, and other legislation provide the United States with a robust menu of legal options for increasing penalties on Russia for acting as a spoiler in Africa.

By giving heightened attention to these issues the United States can help Africa become less of a permissive environment for disruptive Russian activities in Africa at the expense of African stability, sovereignty, and democracy. This is in both African and U.S. interests.

Thank you.

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