



## Chapter 10

# Russia and Africa: Expanding Influence and Instability

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### *Russia's Strategic Goals in Africa*

After a year-long siege of Tripoli in western Libya, warlord Khalifa Haftar and his forces beat a hasty retreat in mid-2020 from their collapsing front lines to territory controlled by his proxy coalition of tribal groups and militias in central and eastern Libya. Along with them were an estimated 1,200 Russian mercenaries with the Wagner Group. They were in Libya as part of a Russian gambit to carve out a zone of influence in this geographically strategic territory linking Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. Russia has been supporting Haftar's forces with snipers, Mig-29 and Su-24 fighter jets, SA-22 surface-to-air missile, anti-aircraft systems, and hundreds of flights delivering military logistics since 2019.<sup>1</sup> Despite the military setback, and subsequent ceasefire and formation of a fragile Government of National Unity, Russia is on track to achieve its key objectives including gaining revenues from oil fields in eastern Libya, naval access to deep-water ports in the eastern Mediterranean, and establishing itself as a powerbroker in a region bordering NATO's southern flank.

Libya provides a vignette of how Russia pursues its strategic goals in Africa: expanding geopolitical influence through low cost ventures that hold economic windfalls for Moscow and President Vladimir Putin's close associates.<sup>2</sup> In this way, Russia's strategy in Africa is both opportunistic and calculating. It is opportunistic in that it is willing to take risks and quickly deploy mercenary forces to crisis contexts when the opening presents itself, similar to what Moscow did in Syria. It is calculating in that it aims to expand Russia's power projection including over strategic chokeholds in the eastern Mediterranean and Suez Canal that could affect NATO force deployments in times of crisis.

It is further calculating in that it sees Africa as a way to balance Western influence through what amounts to asymmetric tactics. Moscow's forays into Africa extend the geostrategic playing field. Russia has similarly recognized the polarizing effect that large inflows of Syrian refugees have had on European politics. Keeping a hand on the spigot regulating refugee flows from Africa, therefore, provides Russia further leverage over Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> "Russia, Wagner Group Continue Military Involvement in Libya," *Defense News*, July 24, 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2287821/russia-wagner-group-continue-military-involvement-in-libya/>.

<sup>2</sup> Kimberly Marten, "Russia's Back in Africa: Is the Cold War Returning?" *The Washington Quarterly*, December 2019, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1693105?journalCode=rwaq20>.

Russia's interest in Africa, triggered by Moscow's isolation following its annexation of Crimea and ventures into eastern Ukraine, also provides an opportunity to advance Putin's vision of a post-liberal international world order.<sup>3</sup> This takes the form of challenging democratic norms and the principles of a rules-based international system. Rather than offering an alternative model, as does Chinese authoritarianism, the Russian strategy appears to be aimed at smearing the perception that democracy offers a more effective, equitable, transparent, or inclusive form of governance. This worldview, in which all political systems hold moral and governance equivalence, plays to the advantage of Moscow's elite-focused, transactional, and unregulated model.

The practical application of this worldview in Africa is inherently destabilizing. The undermining of legitimate governments, fomenting social polarization through disinformation campaigns in fragile states, and propping up unconstitutional claims on power tears at the thin social fabric of many African societies. Coupled with the reported cooption of at least eight African leaders, Russian actions are sidelining the many African voices calling for reform and greater popular participation. The effect is a stymieing of African agency.

Africa, with its weak governments, abundant natural resources, colonial legacies, proximity to Europe, and 54 votes at the United Nations General Assembly, provides Russia an easy and attractive theater where it can advance its interests with limited financial or political costs.

Russia's approach to expanding its influence in Africa stands in stark contrast to the Biden Administration's emphasis on democracy as a foundational platform for international security, cooperation on transnational challenges, and development.<sup>4</sup> Defending freedom, supporting a free press, upholding universal rights, and respecting the rule of law are all central elements of the administration's strategy to contain and reverse advancing authoritarianism globally. The new administration's pledge that the United States will be present and reengage on global governance issues is perhaps most relevant in Africa as it represents an opportunity to fill a void that has been created by the U.S.'s relative absence in recent years. It is in this vacuum that Russia and other external actors have sought to advance a very different agenda for Africa.

### ***Primary Means by which Russia Seeks to Achieve Goals in Africa***

With an economy the size of South Korea or Spain, and little in the way of manufacturing products that are appealing to African markets, Russia manages a modest level of trade with Africa, amounting to roughly \$20 billion per year (about one-tenth that of China). Nor does it offer compelling ideological, social, or cultural resonance for many in Africa. Despite this, Russia has gained outsized influence in Africa in recent years by playing the cards it has well. Where it has realized most influence – Libya, Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Mali – Russia has agilely employed a combination of mercenary and disinformation interventions in support of isolated leaders or proxies. This is the pointy spear of a more conventional set of engagements that aim to foster a positive Russian image while providing a platform to advance its elite-based diplomacy.

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<sup>3</sup> Lionel Barber, Henry Foy, and Alex Barker, "Vladimir Putin Says Liberalism has Become 'Obsolete,'" *Financial Times*, June 27, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>.

<sup>4</sup> "Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World," speech by President Joseph Biden at the U.S. Department of State Headquarters, Washington, D.C., February 4, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>.

## ***The Wagner Group***

Mercenaries from the Wagner Group (closely tied to Russia's military intelligence agency, GRU) have been deployed in Libya, CAR, Sudan, and Mozambique. In each case, following the Syrian model, the Russians supported a beleaguered leader facing a security challenge in a geographically strategic country with mineral or hydrocarbon assets.

In addition to its Libya intervention, Russia struck a deal with the elected president of CAR, Faustin-Archange Touadéra in 2018, to help stave off a threat from the Islamist Seleka militia groups. An estimated 400 Wagner troops were deployed to northern CAR. A Russian, Valery Zakharov, became Touadéra's national security advisor and Minister of Foreign Affairs. Charles-Arnel Doubane was subsequently sacked for voicing disapproval of undue Russian influence. Reports suggest Wagner simultaneously negotiated a revenue-sharing deal with the rebels while gaining control of lucrative gold and diamond mines in the north.<sup>5</sup> Wagner was also involved in repelling a separate rebel offensive on Bangui following flawed elections in December 2020 that kept Touadéra in power with active Russian backing. Reliant on the Russians for his security, Touadéra's policy options and the sovereignty of CAR itself are compromised.

In Sudan, Russia was a backer of longtime dictator Omer al-Bashir. This included the deployment of Wagner forces to support the Sudanese military while gaining access to gold mines in the west of the country. When Bashir was faced with nationwide protests in 2019, the Wagner Group reportedly advised Bashir to crack down harshly on the protesters. Russia appears to have maintained influence with the military leaders who ultimately toppled Bashir, including maintaining previously negotiated mining agreements.

There are also reports of Wagner having deployed to assist the Mozambican government respond to the rapidly expanding militant Islamist group threat in the north. Non-coincidentally, the region is home to a multibillion-dollar gem mining operation and liquefied national gas reserves.

In each case, Russia has officially denied a role or even the presence of Russian mercenaries in these contexts. Typically involving a few hundred forces, the deployments are relatively low-cost, which are likely more than compensated by the fees paid and mineral revenues gained. In the process, Russia gains greater influence in a region where it had little previous presence.

## ***Disinformation Campaigns to Undermine Support for Democracy***

In the aftermath of the August 18, 2020 coup in Mali, jubilant supporters of the military's action came onto the streets in Bamako to celebrate. Curiously, some of those celebrating were waving Russian flags. Many others were holding identical pre-printed posters celebrating Malian-Russian cooperation, photos of Vladimir Putin, and messages thanking Russia for its support. The scene was remarkable in that Russia does not have strong bilateral, cultural, or historical ties with Mali.

While seemingly incongruent, the pro-Russian sentiments were consistent with a line of messaging that began in Bamako a year earlier following the signing of a fuzzy security cooperation agreement between Mali and Russia. Social media sites blamed the former colonial

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<sup>5</sup> Kimberly Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 35, Issue 3 (2019): 181-204, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142?journalCode=rpsa20&>.

power, France, for Mali's militant Islamist insurgency in the north and called for France to pull out the 5,000 troops it had deployed to help combat the jihadists. These themes were subsequently picked up in protests organized by opposition groups in the months leading to the coup.

While the details behind the sudden pro-Russian messaging in Mali remain to be fully understood, the experience parallels other Russian-sponsored disinformation campaigns in Africa. These began in 2018 with clunky efforts to influence the presidential election in Madagascar. These were followed by anti-French messaging on social media in CAR subsequent to the signing of a security cooperation agreement with Russia.

The most well-documented instance of Russian disinformation in Africa is in Libya. Starting in January 2019, criticisms of the West, the United Nations, and the UN-backed Government of National Accord became common on Libyan social media networks. The same pages and users praised Russia's role as a stabilizing actor. The messaging in Libya also seemed aimed at obscuring the truth and sowing confusion – for both domestic and international audiences. While mainstream news outlets drew attention to the allegations of systematic human rights violations by Haftar's forces including the targeting of hospitals and migration centers, the pro-Russian social media platforms contended that all sides were responsible for human rights abuses. Investigative analysis by Stanford's Internet Observatory working with Facebook and Twitter was able to identify dozens of social media accounts with hundreds of thousands of followers that presented themselves as authentic domestic voices, but were actually based outside of Libya.<sup>6</sup> As a result of this investigative work, these fake accounts and pages were eventually shut down.

Russia's disinformation efforts have begun "franchising" their model by creating or sponsoring African hosts for the pro-Russian and anti-West messaging. This approach gives the disinformation campaign more cultural context while making it more difficult for ordinary readers to identify inauthentic accounts. Disinformation operations linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin have now been seen in Angola, the DRC, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.<sup>7</sup> In one model, Russian operatives posing as a fictional news organization, Peace Data, were able to contract unsuspecting journalists in foreign countries to submit content on polarizing topics.<sup>8</sup> With so many African journalists relying on small paid jobs, this approach is likely a highly effective recruitment method. In another instance, a Russian-sponsored Ghanaian troll factory was used to foment social polarization.<sup>9</sup> In South Africa, Russian-sponsored messaging has attempted to inflame racial tensions.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Russian Disinformation Campaigns Target Africa: An Interview with Dr. Shelby Grossman," *Spotlight*, February 18, 2020, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/russian-disinformation-campaigns-target-africa-interview-shelby-grossman/>.

<sup>7</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, "The 'Hybrid' Role of Russian Mercenaries, PMCs, and Irregulars in Moscow's Scramble for Africa," The Jamestown Foundation, January 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-hybrid-role-of-russian-mercenaries-pmc-and-irregulars-in-moscows-scramble-for-africa/>.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Dwoskin and Craig Timberg, "Facebook Takes Down Russian Operation that Recruited U.S. Journalists, amid Rising Concerns about Election Misinformation," *Washington Post*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/09/01/facebook-disinformation-takedown/>.

<sup>9</sup> Clarissa Ward, Katie Polglase et. al., "Russian Election Meddling is Back – Via Ghana and Nigeria – and in Your Feeds," *CNN*, April 11, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/12/world/russia-ghana-troll-farms-2020-ward/index.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Sukhankin, "The 'Hybrid' Role of Russian Mercenaries."



Disinformation messaging is, at times, linked to broader diplomatic support to help friendly African regimes remain in power. As Guinean President Alpha Conde was seeking an unconstitutional third term, Russian Ambassador Alexander Bregadze said on national television in 2019 that rotating leaders was not necessarily a good thing and that “Constitutions are no dogma, Bible, or Koran...It’s constitutions that adapt to reality, not reality to constitutions.”<sup>11</sup> Russia’s biggest aluminum producer, *Rusal*, has expansive bauxite mining interests in Guinea.

### ***UN Voting***

The ties between Russia’s influence campaigns in Africa and Moscow’s broader anti-democratic ideological agenda is seen in the courting of African members of the United Nations Security Council.<sup>12</sup> Africa has three rotating seats (the “A3”) on the 15-member Security Council. By wooing these members, Russia has been able to marshal these votes in support of Russian interests. In January 2019, when the Security Council considered a request from opposition figures in the Democratic Republic of Congo to conduct an investigation into the widely viewed fraudulent presidential election, the A3 (Côte d’Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, and South Africa, at the time) sided with Russia in blocking the initiative. Similarly, in April 2019, the A3 supported Russian efforts to block a statement condemning the coup in Sudan invoking the principle of non-intervention. In that same month, the A3 voted with Russia to block a UK-sponsored resolution calling for a ceasefire in Libya and condemning the actions of Libyan warlord, Khalifa Haftar. Paradoxically, Russia has thus been able to use African votes at the Security Council to undermine African agency and democratic voices of reform on the continent.

### ***Conventional Engagements***

Russia also maintains a series of conventional security, economic, and cultural initiatives in Africa. The most high-profile of these was the Russia-Africa Summit of October 2019 where Vladimir Putin hosted forty-three African heads of state in Sochi. At the Summit, Putin promised debt forgiveness and to double trade with Africa over the next five years. Russia has also realized some soft power gains by promising millions of doses of COVID-19 vaccines to African countries. Despite these instances of high-profile outreach, conventional engagements do not appear to be where Moscow derives the greatest geopolitical benefit in Africa, at least in the short-term.

### ***Security Cooperation***

Russia has signed roughly two dozen security cooperation agreements in Africa in recent years, a significant expansion from the limited security ties it maintained on the continent over the previous two decades. One tangible aspect of these agreements has been an attempt by Russia to secure port and base access to support naval operations in the Red Sea and Mediterranean. Particular attention has been given to the ports of Berbera (Somaliland), Massawa and Assab (Eritrea), Port Sudan (Sudan), and various facilities in Libya. This suggests an interest to project force along the strategic maritime chokeholds of the Bab-el-Mandeb strait (Djibouti-Yemen), the Suez Canal, and the eastern Mediterranean. Russia has also explored port access in southern Africa with Mozambique and has conducted joint naval exercises with South Africa.

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<sup>11</sup> “Russian Ambassador Sparks Backlash with Suggestion Guinea Change Constitution,” *Reuters*, January 11, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-guinea-russia/russian-ambassador-sparks-backlash-with-suggestion-guinea-change-constitution-idUSKCN1P51SO>.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Stronski, “Late to the Party: Russia’s Return to Africa,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 16, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/16/late-to-party-russia-s-return-to-africa-pub-80056>.

Russia maintains a modest professional military education program for African military personnel, training roughly 500 African service members per year. While limited in numbers, these programs provide Russia a platform to impart its interpretation of civil-military relations within the continent. Emblematic of this potential influence is the link made in the press that several of the senior officers involved in the August 2020 coup in Mali had recently returned from training in Russia. At the least, these professional military education opportunities provide Russia ongoing access to mid- and senior-level African military officers over the course of their careers.

### ***Economics***

Russia's \$20 billion in trade in Africa, is heavily imbalanced toward Russian exports of arms and grain to Africa. Mineral, diamond, and oil contracts are typically negotiated by Russian parastatals such as *Rosneft* and *Lukoil*. This is a sector in which Russia brings technical expertise and financing. The details surrounding these contracts, however, are nearly always shrouded in secrecy, making it difficult to assess their true value or the contributions they may bring to African treasuries. Russia has natural resource deals with roughly twenty African countries.

Russia is the leading exporter of arms to Africa controlling forty-nine percent of the overall arms market in Africa.<sup>13</sup> Algeria, Angola, Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, Sudan, Senegal, and Zambia are the leading customers of Russian arms in Africa. Russian arms are seen as affordable, easy to maintain, and reliable. African customers are increasingly willing to purchase more sophisticated weaponry from Russia, including fighter aircraft, helicopters, tanks, and air defense systems.<sup>14</sup> It is not uncommon for Russia to leverage its arms as part of an "arms-for-resources" deal.

Russia has also attempted to negotiate nuclear power deals on the continent. In 2020, Russia's State Atomic Energy Corporation, *Rosatom*, provided a \$25 billion loan to begin construction of Egypt's first nuclear power plant – a \$60 billion facility. The hefty price tag and limited technical capacity would seemingly make this a less viable industry for Africa. Nonetheless, Russia is at varying stages of negotiation with seventeen African countries and has preliminary nuclear project deals in Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sudan, and Zambia.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Education***

Russia maintains a series of educational and cultural exchanges with Africa. An estimated 15,000 Africans study at Russian universities mainly from Nigeria, Angola, Morocco, Namibia, and Tunisia.<sup>16</sup> This represents a steady growth that Moscow says will continue. Given the limited opportunities for tertiary education for many Africans, these scholarships are highly welcomed by the recipients. They also facilitate loyal and long-term ties to these individuals, who often go on to senior roles in government.

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<sup>13</sup> Dr Aude Fleurant, Alexandra Kuimova, Dr. Diego Lopes da Silva, Dr. Nan Tian, Siemon T. Wezeman, and Pieter Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2019," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), March 2020, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/fs\\_2003\\_at\\_2019.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/fs_2003_at_2019.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Sukhankin, "The 'Hybrid' Role of Russian Mercenaries."

<sup>15</sup> Sukhankin, "The 'Hybrid' Role of Russian Mercenaries."

<sup>16</sup> Maina Waruru, "Russia: Ambitious Plans to Grow African Numbers," PIE News, October 3, 2019, <https://thepienews.com/news/russia-ambitious-plans-grow-african-student-numbers/>.

### ***Opportunities, Limits, and Challenges to Russian Engagement in Africa***

Russia has been able to quickly expand its presence in Africa precisely because Africa represents a highly permissive environment for Russia's malign engagements. The weak legal and regulatory environment in much of Africa means Russia – through Wagner, disinformation, or elite-based diplomacy – largely has free reign in its operations. This is even more the case since it is the isolated and often authoritarian African governments that welcome Wagner's interventions. The reliance on private military contractors means that the financial costs to Moscow are limited. While Wagner does occasionally incur casualties, these setbacks are not widely reported in Russia and do not trigger popular pressure to curtail Russia's forays into Africa.

Russia also bears few reputational costs for its interventions. By design, there remains a high level of opacity surrounding the deployment of Russian mercenaries and disinformation campaigns. Russia's elite-based diplomacy, moreover, is aimed at coopting and sustaining friendly regimes. Therefore, information of Russia's meddling in Africa is partial and difficult to substantiate. Criticism from official African sources is rare. The fact that much of this malign behavior is conducted by third-party actors, furthermore, provides Russia an arms-length posture from which it can deny any knowledge or support for these actions. This dampens the collective outrage and coordinated action that could constrain further Russian interventions in African affairs.

At the same time, the primary exports that Russia has to offer Africa – mercenaries, arms, and disinformation – are inherently destabilizing. This is a weak basis on which to build long-term relationships. While this does not appear to be a concern for Moscow or the African interlocutors who seek Russia's aid, the reputational costs of being perceived as a spoiler and solely pursuing transactional interests will over time undercut Russia's credibility. Rather, Russia is perceived as a partner of last resort – one in which you turn to in times of desperation or when interested in skirting financial or human rights norms.

### ***Implications for Africa and the West***

A common assessment of Russia's engagement in Africa is that since Moscow is not spending that much on these initiatives, the havoc it can create is marginal. That is, Russia may be a nuisance but not a priority concern. That assessment, however, overlooks the level of instability that can be created in Africa with a relatively small level of resources. Given Africa's generally underfunded governments, weak states, and lax oversight capacity, Russia's pursuit of low-cost narrow objectives – coopting political leaders and accessing resources – can have profound impacts on the politics, sovereignty, and stability of the continent. Leaders in CAR, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, Congo, Madagascar, Mozambique, South Sudan, Sudan, and Zimbabwe are all seen as being in some way compromised by Moscow. Disinformation campaigns in other African countries are adding further strains to already fragile political systems.

Ironically, in instances where Wagner has deployed troops to quell instability, instability is likely to persist. Being a profit-seeking entity, Wagner has a strong incentive to see a manageable level of instability persist, thereby justifying Wagner's perpetuation. Since these arrangements often also entail Russian access to resources, arms sales, and heightened political leverage, Russian interests in Africa, cynically, are advanced by ongoing instability.

African leaders who have embraced Russia's "mercenary diplomacy" have effectively ceded a degree of African sovereignty to Russia, much as has happened in Syria. As in other instances where vassal states are created, this arrangement is likely to endure for a long time as these African leaders and countries will find it difficult to extricate themselves from their reliance on Moscow.

Geo-strategically, if Russia becomes established as a key power broker in Libya with unfettered naval and air base access in the eastern Mediterranean it is in a stronger position to threaten Europe's southern borders and disrupt NATO maritime movements in times of crisis. Sirte is only 700 miles from Rome. Russia is already staking its claim for untapped oil and gas reserves off the Libyan coast. Russia's interest in securing port access in the Red Sea expands its capacity to be a disruptive force for naval and maritime passage along Africa's east coast, as well.

Russian influence in Libya and the Sahel provides Russia access to key nodes of African migration and human trafficking routes. Russia thus has the ability to provoke humanitarian and political crises for Europe while challenging spheres of historically European (primarily French) influence in Africa.

Another strategic implication of Russian engagement in Africa is the weakening of democracy. This is partly an instrumental outcome of Russia's clientelistic model of coopting African leaders through opaque agreements disadvantageous to African countries. In the process, popular participation and African agency more generally, are sidelined. This is reinforced by an ideological message from Russian representatives and disinformation that presidential term limits need not be respected, truth is irrelevant, and democracy affords no advantages over authoritarianism.

A deterioration in democratic norms has direct implications for African security and development. Nearly all of Africa's conflicts and forcibly displaced populations originate in authoritarian governments.<sup>17</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 second and third-order effects.

## ***Recommendations***

In Russia's dual-pronged official/unofficial strategy in Africa, it is the unofficial mercenary diplomacy strategy that is of most concern. This approach, which draws on Russia's "comparative advantages" in Africa – the willingness to deploy mercenaries, disinformation, arms sales, and natural resource extraction through opaque compacts – is inherently destabilizing for the continent. In short, African stability is not a priority for Russia. As it is largely pursued on a patron-client basis with compromised African leaders, moreover, Russia's unofficial strategy runs counter to the interests of the vast majority of African citizens.

The United States' security and economic interests in Africa are advanced by long-term partnerships with stable, 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.

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<sup>17</sup> Wendy Williams, "Shifting Borders: Africa's Displacement Crisis and Its Security Implications," *Africa Center Research Paper*, No. 8, October 2019, <https://africacenter.org/publication/shifting-borders-africas-displacement-crisis-and-its-security-implications/>.



This point was noted by President Biden in his inaugural foreign policy address, “[America’s global power and abiding advantage is rooted in advancing] democratic values: defending freedom, championing opportunity, upholding universal rights, respecting the rule of law, and treating every person with dignity.”<sup>18</sup>

With broad diplomatic, foreign direct investment (\$45 billion), trade (\$65 billion), development (\$10 billion), security (\$600 million), and cultural ties with Africa, U.S. engagement on the continent is an order of magnitude greater than that of Russia.

Despite these extensive initiatives, there is a common perception that the United States has not been playing its historical leadership role in recent years, creating a power vacuum on the continent that Russia has tried to fill. A first priority for U.S. engagement in Africa, therefore, is to clearly articulate the shared interests and vision that the United States holds with Africa. In so doing, the United States can underscore that U.S. policy in Africa encompasses far more than simply countering Russia (or China).

A second priority is for the U.S. to weigh-in on Russia’s geo-strategic positioning on the continent, particularly in Libya where the establishment of a Russian foothold poses a long-term threat to NATO. This does not mean that the U.S. should deploy forces to what is already a highly complex theater.<sup>19</sup> However, it should commit to supporting United Nations-backed stabilization efforts, while further isolating the influence of rebel warlord, Khalifa. Most pertinently, the United States is needed to help unify the efforts of European and NATO allies in this context. The lack of a cohesive European response has enabled Russia to expand its leverage in this strategic region.

A third priority is for the United States, working with African and international partners, to be more diplomatically active in conflict mitigation efforts. Countries such as CAR, Mali, Mozambique, and Sudan face genuine security challenges. If these countries perceive their security threats as spinning out of control and that they lack other options, they may be inclined to strike a deal with Moscow to send Wagner. These deals almost inevitably compromise the sovereignty of the African host and are difficult to terminate. It is in the interest of the United States and African stability to find options other than Russian mercenaries. To be clear, the United State should not be drawn directly into these conflicts. By working with host nations and regional bodies, though, U.S. diplomatic, technical, and financial support can serve as a stabilizing counterweight to Russian destabilization.

The U.S. must not solely play the role of firefighter to Russia’s arson in Africa. The United States should help by exposing and confronting Russian misbehavior. Yet, it is African governmental, media, civil society, and business leaders that must ultimately defend African interests against external spoilers. Similarly, the U.S. must work more closely with African members of the UN Security Council so that shared interests of security and development are advanced at these international fora.

A fourth priority is to help Africa fight Russian disinformation campaigns, which aim to foment political and ethnic polarization, distrust, and instability. Best practices from the Baltics, which have developed sophisticated counter-Russian disinformation methods, have relied on

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<sup>18</sup> “Remarks by President Biden on America’s Place in the World.”

<sup>19</sup> Tarek Megeresi, “[Geostrategic Dimensions of Libya’s Civil War](#),” *Africa Security Brief No. 37*, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, May 18, 2020.

coordinated efforts between commercial technology companies, news services, social media platforms, and government agencies.<sup>20</sup> Some of these efforts tap networks of citizen volunteers to seek out and counter fake news.<sup>21</sup>

Africa is starting from a much lower institutional capacity to combat these influences. Yet, young Africans have demonstrated great 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 Africa, with ruling parties often the direct beneficiaries of Russian disinformation campaigns, such efforts may need to be organized via regional hubs rather than on a country-by-country basis.

A focal point for U.S. efforts to counter disinformation is the interagency Global Engagement Center based in the State Department. Established in 2016, the Center has mostly focused on countering terrorist messaging. These efforts need to be further developed to respond to Russian disinformation globally, especially in Africa.

The United States also needs 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. Facebook, in particular, has deemphasized mitigation efforts in countries outside North America and Europe.<sup>22</sup> The destabilizing effects of Russian disinformation in Africa, however, are amplified given the high starting levels of fragility.

The upshot is that if there is to be a change in Russian support for disinformation campaigns in Africa, Russia must bear greater reputational and financial costs.<sup>23</sup> Responses to Russian disinformation, thus far, have not nearly been proportionate to the damages exacted by Russian actions, which include election meddling, subverting democracy, propping up illegitimate leaders, and inflaming tensions in already fragile countries. All of these destabilizing actions have real and long-lasting political, economic, and human costs.

U.S. Treasury sanctions on Yevgeny Prigozhin for his destabilizing activities in Sudan and CAR are useful and should be expanded. While such sanctions may not immediately curtail Prigozhin and his allies, they serve an important purpose of signaling the criminal nature of Prigozhin's activities on the continent to African governments and media. Not only does this raise awareness but it demonstrates to African interlocutors that there are potentially crippling costs tied to these engagements. To reinforce this point, U.S. sanctions should also extend to the networks of Russian banks and natural resource parastatals as well as African beneficiaries who are enabling this malignant behavior. Denying these firms access to international financial markets will increase the tangible costs to Russia and create stronger incentives to change course.

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<sup>20</sup> Edward Lucas and Peter Pomeranzen, "Winning the Information War: Techniques and Counter Strategies to Russian Propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe," Center for European Policy Analysis and the Legatum Institute, August 2016, [https://cepa.ecms.pl/files/?id\\_plik=2715](https://cepa.ecms.pl/files/?id_plik=2715).

<sup>21</sup> Ken Sengupta, "Meet the Elves, Lithuania's Digital Citizen Army Confronting Russian Trolls," *The Independent*, July 17, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/lithuania-elves-russia-election-tampering-online-cyber-crime-hackers-kremlin-a9008931.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Craig Silverman, Ryan Mac, and Pranav Dixit, "I Have Blood on My Hands," *BuzzFeed*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/facebook-ignore-political-manipulation-whistleblower-memo>.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Siegle, "Recommended US Response to Russian Activities in Africa," May, 2019, <https://africacenter.org/experts/joseph-siegle/recommended-us-response-to-russian-activities-in-africa/>; this article originally appeared as a chapter in "Russia Strategic Intentions White Paper," *Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA)* publication series, NSI, May 2019, <https://nsiteam.com/sma-white-paper-russian-strategic-intentions/>.

In recent years, the United States has passed legislation that creates a stronger legal platform from which to pursue legal and financial remedies for destabilizing activity sponsored by Russia or other international actors. The Global Magnitsky Act allows the executive branch to impose visa bans and freeze the assets on individuals anywhere in the world responsible for committing human rights violations or acts of significant corruption. The passing of the European Magnitsky Act established in December 2020 broadens the means to apply such penalties in a coordinated manner in defense of democracy and human rights.

The Global Fragility Act calls for all parts of the U.S. government to coordinate strategies to prevent violence and extremism and to focus foreign assistance on averting conflict in fragile countries. The Act includes provisions for punitive actions to be taken against political actors that drive instability. These tools as well as the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, the Countering American Adversaries through Sanctions Act and laws pertaining to transnational criminal organizations provide the United States with a menu of legal means of increasing penalties on Russia for its destabilizing activity in Africa.

In this way, the United States can help Africa become less of a permissive environment for Russia and other external actors seeking to exploit Africa's vulnerabilities at the expense of African stability, sovereignty, and democracy. This is in both African and U.S. interests.

### ***About The Author***

**Dr. Joseph Siegle** is the Director of Research at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies. His areas of expertise include the role of democratic governance in advancing security and development; strengthening institutions of accountability; stabilizing fragile states; and the role of external actors in Africa. He is the author of “[Recommended US Response to Russian Activities in Africa](#),” part of the “[Russia Strategic Intentions White Paper](#),” Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) publication series, NSI, May 2019.

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