



Climate Security, Great Power Competition, and Adversarial Geopolitics in North and West Africa

Rapid Review 2: Russian Influence

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

This interim report is part of the project, “Climate Security, Great Power Competition, and Adversarial Geopolitics in North and West Africa,” part of the Asymmetric Threat Analysis Center (ATAC), a joint program between START and UMD’s Applied Research Lab for Intelligence and Security (ARLIS). ATAC is funded by the Department of Defense under award no. HQ003421F0481. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Defense.

ABOUT START

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Executive Summary

This case study is a part of the larger research initiative titled “Climate Security, Great Power Competition, and Adversarial Geopolitics in North and West Africa.” This study examines the intersection of climate change, regional instability, and geopolitical rivalries, with a specific focus on Russian influence in North and West Africa.¹ This case study highlights the complex challenges that climate-induced instability and governance vulnerabilities present in these regions, creating opportunities for external actors like Russia to expand their strategic foothold. Key insights and findings of this study are summarized below:

Key Insights

- 1. Climate Security and Regional Instability:**
 - Climate change acts as a threat multiplier, intensifying pre-existing vulnerabilities in North and West Africa.
 - Environmental degradation, resource scarcity, and forced migration disrupt community dynamics, aggravating conflict and socio-political instability.
 - Insecurity is especially acute in the Sahel, where weak governance and violence from non-state actors converge with climate-induced pressures.
- 2. Russia’s Strategic Objectives:**
 - Russia’s actions aim to diminish Western influence while expanding its geopolitical and economic reach.
 - Leveraging tools such as disinformation campaigns, military partnerships, and resource exploitation, Russia capitalizes on regional vulnerabilities to consolidate influence.
- 3. Disinformation as a Key Instrument:**
 - Russian disinformation campaigns have surged, particularly in West Africa. These campaigns undermine democratization, destabilize governance, and foster dependency on Russian narratives.
 - The private military companies (PMCs) operating in the region, along with affiliated local networks, play a pivotal role in amplifying pro-Russian propaganda and anti-Western sentiments.
- 4. Economic and Resource Focus:**
 - Russia’s economic engagement is transactional, emphasizing short-term gains in exchange for strategic concessions.
 - Efforts in sectors like nuclear energy and resource extraction aim to control critical commodities while reinforcing trade dependencies.
- 5. Military and Security Involvement:**
 - Russia has bolstered its military presence through PMCs, aligning with authoritarian regimes and exploiting governance gaps.
 - Activities in countries like Mali, Libya, and Algeria illustrate a pattern of leveraging military partnerships to deepen influence.
- 6. Implications for Governance and Development:**
 - Russian activities undermine democratic progress, entrench authoritarian regimes, and exacerbate socio-political instability.

¹ For the purposes of this study, “North Africa” refers to Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, while West Africa includes Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d’Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

- Climate change magnifies these vulnerabilities, complicating efforts to address regional security and development challenges.

Recommendations

To counteract Russia's destabilizing influence and advance stability in North and West Africa, a multifaceted strategy is proposed:

- **Security:** Strengthen military cooperation with key regional states and support defense initiatives that align with local priorities.
- **Economic Development:** Prioritize investments in economic infrastructure and initiatives that address root causes of instability, such as poverty and governance deficiencies.
- **Disinformation Countermeasures:** Develop tailored communication strategies to combat Russian narratives, enhance media literacy, and engage directly with local communities.
- **Diplomatic Engagement:** Build trust through sustained partnerships with regional governments, civil society, and grassroots organizations.

This comprehensive approach aims to mitigate Russia's influence while fostering resilience, stability, and democratic governance across North and West Africa.

Introduction

This case study is a part of the larger research initiative titled “Climate Security, Great Power Competition, and Adversarial Geopolitics in North and West Africa.”² This study examines the intersection of climate change, regional instability, and geopolitical rivalries, with a specific focus on Russian influence in North and West Africa.³ This case study highlights the complex challenges that climate-induced instability and governance vulnerabilities present in these regions, creating opportunities for external actors like Russia to expand their strategic foothold. This report is structured as follows: it begins with an overview of instability in North and West Africa, emphasizing how these conditions create opportunities for Russia to expand its influence. It then explores the region's complex security dynamics, providing a foundation for the subsequent in-depth analysis of Russia's strategy, influence operations, and activities in the economic and energy sectors. The report concludes with a summary of key findings and a set of actionable recommendations.

Contextualizing Instability in North and West Africa

Complex Challenges and Security Dynamics

North and West Africa are far from monolithic, and neither are the challenges affecting the security and stability of these regions. Issues such as democratic regression, violence from non-state actors, livelihood instability, and transnational crime create a complex and varied landscape of threats. Compounding these challenges, climate change poses a direct hazard to both regions while simultaneously exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities.

The Sahel emerges as a pivotal area where the intertwined challenges of North and West Africa converge. This region, characterized by weak governance and unregulated areas, serves as a nucleus of instability. Although the specific issues differ across and within these regions, significant parallels exist.⁴ West Africa and the Sahel are grappling with escalating violence, humanitarian emergencies, and socio-political unrest, all exacerbated by climate change and global events like the Ukraine conflict.⁵ Despite ongoing efforts by domestic security forces and international allies, insecurity is spreading – most alarmingly in the central Sahel, which now faces unparalleled instability. Coastal West African states are also experiencing heightened violence, threatening neighboring landlocked nations by disrupting critical transportation routes.⁶ North Africa, meanwhile, is dealing with intensifying political, economic, and social instability, much of which stems from the spillover effects of insecurity in the Sahel. The resumption of hostilities in the longstanding Western Sahara conflict

² See larger desk study for a thorough and detailed review of the literature and research referred to in this subsection.

³ For the purposes of this study, “North Africa” refers to Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, while “West Africa” includes Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d’Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

⁴ For the purposes of this study, “Sahel” refers to part or all of the following North and West African countries: Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal.

See Zoubir and Abderrahmane (2021, p. 20), which cites previous work by Zoubir.

Zoubir, Y. H., & Abderrahmane, A. (2021). 1. Political, Economic, and Security Challenges in North Africa. In K. Mezran & A. Sanguini (Eds.), *North Africa 2030: What the Future Holds for the Region* (pp. 11–34). Ledizioni LediPublishing.

⁵ United Nations. (2023, January 10). ‘Unprecedented’ insecurity in West Africa and the Sahel, Security Council hears. *UN News*. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/01/1132332>

⁶ United Nations. (2023, January 10).

has further destabilized the Sahel-Maghreb region.⁷ This confluence of security, social, and political issues fosters a volatile environment that obstructs efforts to restore stability and advance development.

Among the many interconnected threats facing North and West Africa, violent non-state actors represent some of the most significant obstacles to regional stability. These groups—ranging from Islamist organizations like Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) to ethnic militias in countries like Mali and Nigeria and separatist movements opposing the Malian and Moroccan governments—both exploit and deepen state weaknesses across the regions. Adding to the complexity, foreign mercenaries and civilian militias allied with state militaries have sometimes targeted civilians, further destabilizing the regions.⁸ Political instability and state fragility are mutually reinforcing, creating a vicious cycle that allows non-state actors to gain influence and further erode governance.⁹

This instability, driven by non-state actors, socio-political unrest, and climate-related challenges, creates opportunities for external state actors such as Russia. Leveraging these vulnerabilities, Russia seeks to weaken Western influence by exploiting conflicts and security gaps to advance its geopolitical aims. By positioning itself as a critical economic and political partner, Russia aims to diminish the Western presence in the region and solidify its influence amid these dynamics.

Russian Strategy in North and West Africa

Overview

Russia's engagement in North and West Africa reflects a calculated strategy aimed at curtailing Western influence, bolstering its international standing, and pursuing its political and economic interests, including securing access to valuable natural resources and shaping regional trade dynamics.¹⁰ Although Russia has not fully achieved these ambitions, its persistent efforts to extend its influence and deepen its involvement through diverse channels signify its strategic determination. The region's escalating vulnerabilities and instability, compounded by climate-induced challenges, provide Russia with additional avenues to exploit the evolving geopolitical landscape.

Given Russia's expanding presence in North and West Africa—marked by disinformation campaigns, resource extraction, and military partnerships—the region has emerged as a critical arena of geopolitical contention. As regional instability worsens, Russia appears poised to cement its military influence by supporting state forces and leveraging non-state proxies. This pivot towards enhanced military engagement signifies a notable shift in security dynamics, as Russian-backed entities could exacerbate instability or sway regional military operations. Understanding how Russia's military

⁷ See Zoubir and Abderrahmane (2021, pp. 11-12).

⁸ For more information on this topic, please see the rapid review published by START center titled: “Climate Security, Great Power Competition, and Adversarial Geopolitics in North and West Africa: Farmer-Herder Conflict”

⁹ “These three countries experienced military coups between 2020 and 2023. Mali went through a two-stage putsch in September 2020 and April 2021, which launched a new phase in its long political and security crises that began in 2012. Burkina Faso followed in 2022, with a coup in January and another in September. In Niger, there was a coup in July 2023, even though the security situation was much less serious than it had been in Mali and Burkina Faso.” Yabi, G. (2024, September). The Sahel's Intertwined Challenges. *F&D Finance and Development Magazine*. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2024/09/the-sahels-intertwined-challenges-yabi>

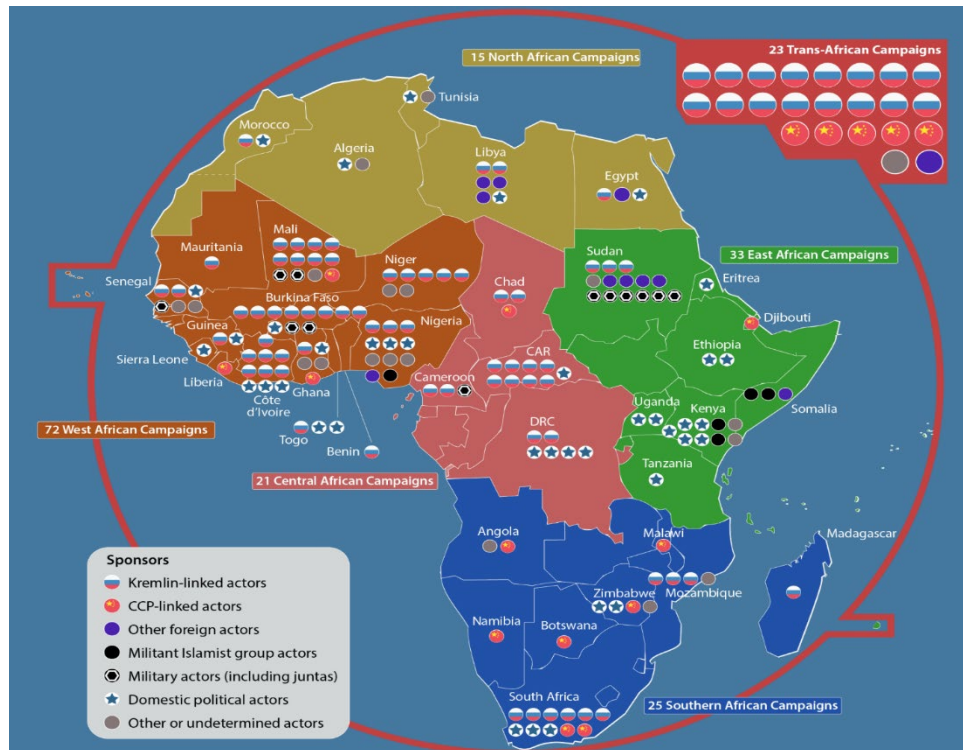
¹⁰ Young, B. R. (2024, September 12). Russia Is Riding an Anti-Colonial Wave Across Africa. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/09/12/anti-colonialism-movement-global-south-russia-africa/>

expansion might reshape the security architecture is vital, with implications extending to regional governance and broader international security initiatives.

This study examines three central dimensions of Russia's activities in North and West Africa, emphasizing the multifaceted strategies Moscow employs to consolidate its influence. Firstly, it explores Russia's extensive disinformation operations, designed to undermine Western powers and destabilize local governance structures. Secondly, it delves into Russia's investments in resource infrastructure, tapping into the continent's abundant mineral and energy reserves to secure strategic economic footholds. Finally, the study investigates Russia's direct and indirect military involvement, including collaborations with state forces and support for non-state actors such as the Wagner Group. By dissecting these mechanisms, this study aims to illustrate the scope of Russia's regional ambitions and its broader challenge to Western dominance on the global stage.

Russia's Disinformation Operations

Figure 1. Regional Map of Disinformation in Africa over the Last Decade¹¹.



The proliferation of disinformation campaigns in Africa increasingly jeopardizes regional stability and the democratization process, with their occurrence surging significantly in recent years. A March 2024 analysis documented 189 disinformation campaigns across the continent—nearly quadrupling the count recorded in an April 2022 report by the same center—while recognizing that this figure

¹¹ Figure 1 from ACSS (2024, March 13). This ACSS report documents disinformation campaigns beginning as early as 2009, though the bulk of the cataloged cases began in recent years, as evidenced by the dramatic increase in the count as compared the total recorded in an April 2022 report by the same center: Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS). (2022, April 26). Mapping Disinformation in Africa. *Infographics*. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-disinformation-in-africa/>. See footnote 12 for an explanation of the discrepancies between regional numbers in the discussion and those stated in the ACSS figure.

underestimates the actual scope. North and West Africa have borne a disproportionate impact, accounting for almost half of these incidents (84 campaigns) targeting nations within Africa, with a majority of occurring in West Africa.¹²

Russia has emerged as a dominant force driving the recent escalation in disinformation campaigns, orchestrating 85 operations across 22 countries, including 16 classified as “Trans-African.” West Africa has been particularly inundated, with over half of its 71 campaigns (37) directly linked to Russian initiatives. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger—the core Sahel nations—have been disproportionately targeted. In Burkina Faso, 8 of 11 country-specific campaigns were tied to Russia; in Mali, 8 of 12; and in Niger, 5 of 7. While North Africa has experienced fewer campaigns overall (13), Russia’s presence is still notable, with one-third (4) of these efforts connected to its agenda. These operations, such as those in Libya, aim to bolster General Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) while undermining the United Nations’ peacebuilding mission to favor LNA’s objectives.¹³

Russia strategically leverages disinformation to disrupt democratization, destabilize regimes, strengthen allies, and further its geopolitical ambitions. These efforts range from expansive continent-wide campaigns to precise operations targeting specific nations. Local collaborators aligned with Moscow also contribute to these initiatives, as demonstrated by the disinformation activities orchestrated by the juntas in Burkina Faso and Mali.¹⁴ Russia employs a multi-pronged approach to enhance its influence across Africa, combining technical expertise, local alliances, and tailored narratives to maximize its reach. Its information campaigns aim to sway public opinion, influence elections, and reshape national narratives.¹⁵ Central to this strategy is the integration of local actors into disinformation networks, with groups like the Wagner Group/Africa Corps (WG/AC) playing a pivotal role.¹⁶ WG/AC works in synergy with platforms such as the “African Initiative” information agency, which disseminates pro-Russian messaging and anti-Western propaganda by recruiting and engaging local actors.¹⁷ Following the death of Wagner’s former leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, personnel from his operations transitioned into roles within the African Initiative, further blending military and media capabilities to advance Russia’s strategic aims.¹⁸ Establishing local offices in countries like Burkina Faso and Mali and hosting events to bolster Russia’s image solidify these efforts, which erode Western influence, weaken democratization efforts, and exacerbate regional instability, leaving fragile states vulnerable to exploitation.¹⁹

The growing prevalence of Russian disinformation campaigns in North and West Africa presents grave consequences for regional stability, governance, and international relations. By exploiting vulnerabilities like socio-political unrest, weak governance, and economic difficulties, Russia

¹² Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS). (2024, March 13). Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa. *Infographics*. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/>
The regional designations in the March 13, 2024, ACSS report largely overlap with those adopted in this paper, with two exceptions. The ACSS report includes Mauritania in West Africa, as opposed to North Africa, and it also includes Egypt in North Africa, though Egypt falls outside of this paper’s scope. In the discussion that follows here, the numbers presented for West Africa exclude Mauritania, while those presented for North Africa include Mauritania and exclude Egypt (distinct from the approach in the ACSS report and in Figure 1, drawn from that report).

¹³ ACSS (2024, March 13).

¹⁴ ACSS (2024, March 13).

¹⁵ Ramani (2023, p. 200).

¹⁶ United States Department of State. (2024, February 12). *The Kremlin’s Efforts to Spread Deadly Disinformation in Africa*. <https://www.state.gov/the-kremlins-efforts-to-spread-deadly-disinformation-in-africa/>

¹⁷ United States Department of State. (2024, February 12).

¹⁸ United States Department of State. (2024, February 12).

¹⁹ United States Department of State. (2024, February 12).

destabilizes democratic institutions and undercuts Western influence. This aligns with its broader geopolitical strategy, as disinformation serves as a low-cost mechanism to weaken rivals while advancing Russian narratives. In the central Sahel, Russia's campaigns in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have not only fueled anti-Western sentiment but also created conditions conducive to the success of Russian-aligned actors, such as the Wagner Group.

The ripple effects of these operations extend beyond individual nations, influencing the broader region. Russian disinformation erodes public trust in institutions, exacerbates communal tensions, and deepens conflicts by amplifying grievances. Targeted misinformation on issues like climate change and health policy manipulates public understanding and policy debates, compounding instability. Such actions obstruct regional integration and cooperation, hindering African and international efforts to tackle collective challenges. Furthermore, the reliance on Russian narratives fosters dependencies, making countries more susceptible to economic and military entanglement with Russia. This dependency perpetuates cycles of instability and foreign manipulation, deepening the challenges faced by the region.

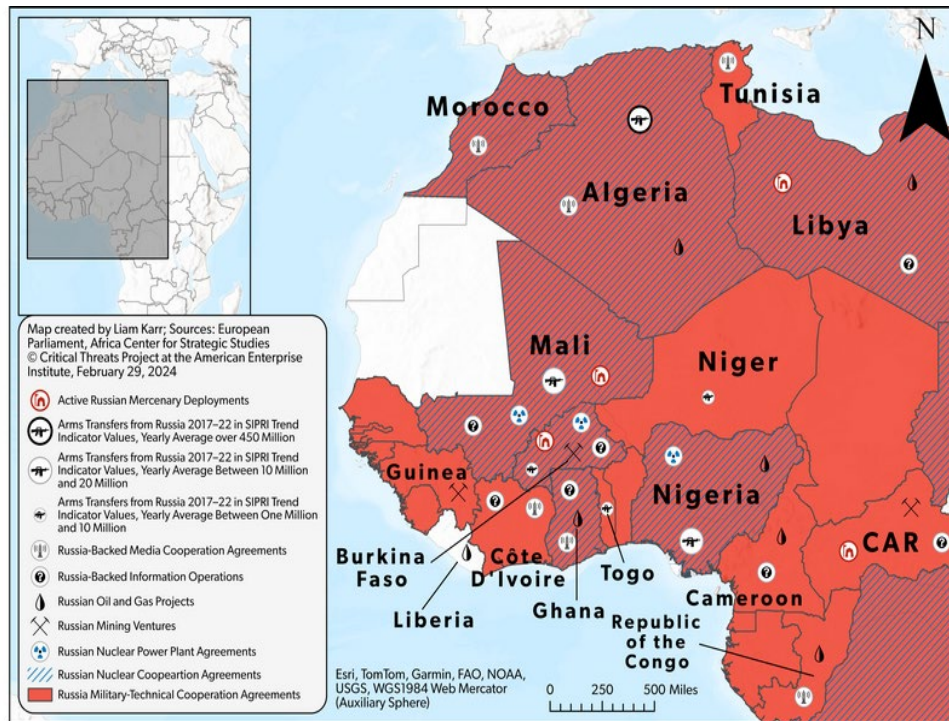
Russia's Influence in the Economy and Energy Sector

Russia's economic engagement in Africa remains limited in scope and scale, characterized by minimal long-term investment and selective, transactional approaches. Russian foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa accounts for less than one percent of total FDI inflows to the continent, highlighting a lack of sustained economic commitment. Rather than substantial capital deployment, Russia has relied on targeted measures, such as debt forgiveness, to achieve strategic goals.²⁰ A notable instance occurred in the mid-2000s when Russia forgave Libya's significant debt in exchange for agreements involving energy development, arms deals, and transportation infrastructure. While these initiatives have yielded specific benefits, they illustrate the transactional nature of Russia's economic strategy, which lacks the depth to foster enduring influence across the region.²¹

²⁰ Siegle, J. (2023, January 3). Decoding Russia's Economic Engagements in Africa. *African Center for Strategic Studies: Spotlight*. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/decoding-russia-economic-engagements-africa/>

²¹ Wehrey and Weiss (2021).

Figure 2. Russia-Backed Engagement in Northwest Africa.²²



Shifting its focus, Russia has adopted a “politics first” approach to solidify foundations for potential economic expansion in Africa. However, its engagement remains predominantly trade-based, with 70 percent of Russia’s trade focused on just four countries: Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, and South Africa. Furthermore, many African nations rely heavily on Russia for key commodities like grain. Approximately 80 percent of Russia’s wheat exports to Africa are directed to North African countries—Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia—as well as Nigeria, Ethiopia, Sudan, and South Africa. This pattern underscores Africa’s dependence on Russian agricultural exports while highlighting the limited diversification of Russia’s broader economic ties with the continent.²³

Though self-sufficient in energy resources, Russia has shown increasing interest in developing Africa’s oil and gas sectors.²⁴ This strategy reflects an intent not merely to expand energy partnerships but to maintain control over critical oil and gas reserves, reinforcing its influence in global markets²⁵ By leveraging energy as a geopolitical tool, Russia seeks to enhance its standing in Africa while simultaneously asserting its role in international power dynamics.

Russia has further extended its influence in Africa by capitalizing on its expertise in nuclear power. Agreements on nuclear cooperation have been signed with Algeria, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Libya, Mali,

²² Figure 2 from Karr, L. (2024, May 9). Africa File, May 9, 2024: America and Russia’s Shifting Roles in West Africa; IS Africa Media; Russia’s Morphing Stance in Sudan. *Critical Threats: Africa File*. <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/africa-file-may-9-2024-america-and-russias-shifting-roles-in-west-africa-is-africa-media-russias-morphing-stance-in-sudan>. Note that “SIPRI” is Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

²³ Siegle (2023).

²⁴ Horn Observer Contributor. (2022, July 27). Russia Scores Dismally in Oil and Gas Sector in Africa. *Hornobserver.Com*. <http://hornobserver.com/articles/1687/Russia-Scores-Dismally-in-Oil-and-Gas-Sector-in-Africa>

²⁵ Siegle (2023).

Morocco, and Nigeria, alongside commitments to build nuclear power plants in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Nigeria (See Figure 2 above).²⁶ For instance, in 2014, a Russian firm agreed to assist Algeria in constructing a nuclear power reactor,²⁷ which, though still non-operational, was reinforced by a renewed agreement in March 2024.²⁸ These nuclear partnerships are complemented by economic deals with Nigeria in energy and infrastructure, although Russia has struggled to fulfill its infrastructure commitments.²⁹ Additionally, Russia has leveraged its political influence to gain access to valuable resources, such as mineral reserves in Guinea. Figure 2, above, illustrates Russia's involvement in mining and oil and gas projects across multiple African nations.

Russia's resource-driven strategies in North and West Africa have significant geopolitical ramifications. By securing access to critical resources such as oil, gas, and minerals, Russia bolsters its political and economic influence in the region, often challenging the interests of Western powers. This engagement fosters dependency, deepening ties with autocratic regimes and military juntas, while undermining democratic progress. Russia's actions have exacerbated regional instability, complicated global markets, and posed challenges to international climate and development goals. Ultimately, its resource-focused policies reshape governance structures in Africa and alter the continent's alignment within the broader global power struggle.

Russia's Security and Military Intervention

Given the delicate security dynamics in the region, it is essential to assess how Russia's expanding military presence could alter the security environment, potentially influencing regional governance and broader international stability initiatives. A significant instrument Moscow employs in the security domain is the Wagner Group (WG), now rebranded as Africa Corps (AC), active in locations such as Mali and Libya. Formerly under the leadership of Yevgeny Prigozhin, WG/AC has become more aligned with the Russian Ministry of Defense since his passing. This realignment has narrowed WG/AC's operational focus, concentrating on military assistance and operations, while diminishing its involvement in broader regional engagements.³⁰ Although WG/AC is Russia's most prominent private military company (PMC) operating in Africa, it is not the sole PMC advancing Moscow's interests on the continent.³¹

Russia has strategically deepened its influence in the central Sahel by capitalizing on strained relations between Western powers and military regimes in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Russian PMCs, particularly WG/AC, have been linked to incidents of political violence in Libya, Mali, and Mauritania. In Burkina Faso and Niger, Russian contractors are present in smaller numbers, primarily supporting the juntas.³² From the perspective of these regimes, Russian support is attractive due to its lack of Western-style human rights constraints. Unlike their French counterparts, Russian forces have shown a readiness to suppress political dissent with extreme measures, as evidenced by the Moura

²⁶ Karr, L. (2024, February 29).

²⁷ Ramani (2023, p. 149).

²⁸ Algeria "[s]igned a pact with Russian company Rosatom in March 2024 to assist development in the areas of peaceful nuclear energy, research reactors, and the nuclear fuel cycle." *Algeria*. (2021, October 20). The Nuclear Threat Initiative. <https://www.nti.org/countries/algeria-5/>

²⁹ Ramani (2023, p. 186) discusses how Russia did not fulfill its agreement with Nigeria to build railroad.

³⁰ Nsaibia, H., & Ladd, S. (2024, August 21). Q&A: The Wagner Group's new life after the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin. *ACLEDD (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data)*. <https://acleddata.com/2024/08/21/qa-the-wagner-groups-new-life-after-the-death-of-yevgeny-prigozhin/>

³¹ Ramani (2023, p. 200) describes Wagner as "dominant" but references other Russian PMCs.

³² Nsaibia and Ladd (2024, August 21).

massacre in Mali, where hundreds of civilians were killed in coordination with Malian forces.³³ These actions underscore Russia's prioritization of regime stability over ethical concerns, enhancing its appeal to authoritarian governments.

Russia has also extended its military partnerships to coastal West Africa, increasingly competing with the United States and its allies. Notable examples include its support for Togo in building a military camp near the Togo-Burkina Faso border to counter Salafi-jihadi threats and strengthen regional security cooperation.³⁴ In October 2019, Russia agreed to supply military helicopters to Nigeria, a milestone in their defense collaboration. That same month, plans for a military-technical cooperation agreement were announced, though official ratification occurred almost two years later, marking a significant advancement in bilateral military ties.³⁵

In North Africa, Russia maintains robust military cooperation with Algeria, including arms supplies, training programs, and investments in oil, natural gas, and nuclear energy sectors. Since 2002, Russia has accounted for 76 percent of Algeria's arms imports, although arms sales to Algeria decreased by over 30 percent between 2018 and 2022, compared to the period 2013-2017.³⁶ Joint military exercises in late 2022 and visits by Russian security officials to Algeria highlight their collaboration. Nonetheless, Algeria's policy of nonalignment creates divergence on issues such as Wagner's role in Mali and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.³⁷

Russia's approach to Libya reflects its complex policies post-Gaddafi. Despite its reluctance regarding his ouster, Moscow has heavily supported General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), expanding its presence through PMCs and state military forces. The Wagner Group, alongside regular Russian military personnel, has established control over critical airbases and oil facilities in Libya's central and southern regions, emphasizing strategic resource and infrastructure access.³⁸

Russia's military activities across North and West Africa are integral to its broader strategy of countering Western influence and consolidating its foothold. By leveraging PMCs, defense agreements, and military partnerships, Moscow reinforces its presence while aligning with regimes that support its geopolitical objectives. Beyond military engagements, Russia utilizes disinformation campaigns to shape narratives, destabilize opposition, and undermine Western alliances. This shift toward information warfare underscores the multifaceted nature of Russia's involvement in Africa.

³³ Young, B. R. (2024, September 12).

³⁴ Karr, L. (2024, February 29). Africa File, February 29, 2024: Russia Eyes Gulf of Guinea, JNIM Massacres Civilians in Burkina Faso. *Critical Threats: Africa File*. <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/africa-file-february-29-2024-russia-eyes-gulf-of-guinea-jnim-massacres-civilians-in-burkina-faso>

³⁵ Ramani (2023, p. 185).

³⁶ Henneberg, S., Rumley, G., & Yavorsky, E. (2023). *Algeria-Russia Relations After the Ukraine Invasion* (No. 3740; PolicyWatch). The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/algeria-russia-relations-after-ukraine-invasion>.

Another source put Algerian arms imports at 69% from Russia from 2016-20 and noted that Algeria was the third largest recipient of Russian arms exports during this period, accounting for 15% of these exports. See Tables 1 and 2 in Wezeman, P., Kuimova, A., & Wezeman, S. (2021). *Trends in international arms transfers, 2020* (SIPRI Fact Sheet). Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

³⁷ Henneberg et al. (2023).

³⁸ See p. 13 in Wehrey, F., & Weiss, A. S. (2021). *Reassessing Russian Capabilities in the Levant and North Africa* (The Return of Global Russia). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Russian engagement in North and West Africa reflects its overarching ambition to expand global political and economic sway. Instead of prioritizing regional stability, Russia strategically advances its interests through disinformation campaigns, investments in military and security operations, support for violent non-state actors, and attempts to dominate critical resource markets. These maneuvers frequently exacerbate democratic fragility and hinder developmental progress, particularly in states already grappling with weak governance structures.

The degree of receptivity among African nations to Russian influence and the scope of Russian involvement varies widely. This divergence is shaped by factors such as domestic political, economic, and social stability, alongside external pressures. Russia's approach is opportunistic, targeting nations where the conditions align with its strategic goals. However, its capacity for sustained influence is limited by resource constraints. Despite this, Russia effectively exploits the geopolitical vacuum created by diminishing Western military and economic presence, such as the withdrawal of French and American forces from the central Sahel.

Russian activities, especially disinformation efforts, pose risks to Western-led initiatives aimed at fostering stability and democracy across the region. Nevertheless, the scope of this threat should not be exaggerated, as Russia lacks the capability to fully supplant Western influence. Furthermore, analyses of Russian strategies in Africa must move beyond simplistic comparisons with East-West dynamics observed in other regions. Such comparisons often fail to capture the distinct political and economic realities of African states.

The growing impacts of climate-induced instability add complexity to this geopolitical landscape, providing Russia with additional opportunities to expand its influence. By exploiting vulnerabilities in agricultural productivity and governance aggravated by climate change, Russia seeks to solidify its presence in resource-rich regions and strengthen trade dependencies. While these strategies present obstacles to Western actors, they underscore the intricate interplay of local and global factors shaping the region's trajectory. Effectively addressing these challenges demands tailored, localized approaches rather than generalized assumptions about Russia's intentions and capabilities.

Recommendations

Russia's increasing involvement in Africa raises significant concerns, as the Kremlin employs irregular strategies to broaden its influence. These tactics erode the foundations of democratic governance and rule-of-law systems that many African nations have strived to establish, posing a severe threat to the continent's security and development. Russia's actions simultaneously undermine the United States' standing and alliances in the region. To counter Moscow's expanding footprint in North and West Africa, the United States and its allies must adopt a multifaceted strategy that combines military, economic, and diplomatic measures.

From a security standpoint, North and West Africa face a convergence of threats, including terrorism, organized crime, and political instability. The United States should deepen military partnerships with geopolitically pivotal nations that are directly impacted by these threats, such as Libya, or with countries neighboring zones of instability. For instance, bolstering military ties with nations surrounding Niger after its recent military junta's rise to power could help contain regional spillovers and signal U.S. support for the Nigerien people. Furthermore, continued military training, equipment

provision, and joint operations are essential to sustaining influence and fostering trust in the region. While Russia relies heavily on arms trading and mercenaries to establish its presence, the ongoing war in Ukraine provides an opportune moment for the United States to secure a larger share of the region's growing defense market, thereby diminishing Russia's leverage.

To effectively counter Russian influence, the United States and its allies must also strengthen economic ties with North and West African nations. While Russia's interventions are primarily centered on military engagement, this opens the door for the United States to differentiate itself by emphasizing economic development initiatives. Investments in economic projects can tackle the root causes of instability and radicalization—critical issues in the region. Even Russia's relatively close relationship with Algeria has seen friction over whether resources directed to the Sahel through groups like Wagner would be better spent on development. Moving forward, the United States should align its agenda with the priorities and concerns of regional stakeholders. This includes addressing domestic and inter-state dynamics, as well as vulnerabilities exacerbated by climate change, to craft intervention strategies that resonate locally.

Disinformation campaigns are a linchpin of Russia's irregular influence operations in Africa. These low-cost, high-impact efforts effectively propagate anti-Western narratives while promoting Moscow's regional agenda. To counter this, the United States must adopt a proactive approach to communication that engages effectively with local audiences. Enhancing messaging strategies and tailoring them to resonate with regional communities can reshape perceptions and counter Russian narratives. Additionally, investing in educational and media literacy programs can empower local populations to identify and resist disinformation. Alongside these efforts, traditional diplomacy remains vital. Sustaining strong ties with government officials, regional and local organizations, civil society, and grassroots movements is crucial for shaping credible narratives and fostering trust.

Addressing Russia's growing influence in North and West Africa demands a cohesive strategy that aligns regional priorities with U.S. geopolitical interests. By integrating military, economic, and diplomatic approaches, the United States and its allies can not only counter Moscow's destabilizing actions but also advance regional security, prosperity, and democratic governance. This comprehensive framework will strengthen U.S. partnerships, rebuild confidence among African nations, and establish the United States as a reliable ally in addressing the region's interconnected challenges.



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