

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.

This research brief examines the intersection of climate change, regional instability, and geopolitical rivalries, with a specific focus on Russian influence in North and West Africa. 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.

CONTEXTUALIZING INSTABILITY IN NORTH AND WEST AFRICA

North and West Africa are far from monolithic, and neither are the challenges affecting the security and stability of these regions.

- Democratic regression, violence from non-state actors, livelihood instability, and transnational crime create a complex and varied landscape of threats.
- Climate change poses a direct hazard to both regions while simultaneously exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities.
- 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.
- Political instability and state fragility are mutually reinforcing, creating a vicious cycle that allows non-state actors to gain influence and further erode governance.

RUSSIA'S 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. Russia leverages pre-existing vulnerabilities by positioning itself as a critical economic and political actor to advance its geopolitical aims.

Russia's Disinformation Operations

Russia strategically leverages disinformation to disrupt democratization, destabilize regimes, strengthen allies, and further its geopolitical ambitions. Russia has emerged as a dominant force driving the recent escalation in disinformation campaigns according to 2024 analysis.

KEY DIMENSIONS OF RUSSIA'S ACTIVITIES IN NORTH AND WEST AFRICA

- Extensive disinformation operation designed to undermine western powers and destabilize local governance structures.
- Investments in resource infrastructure, tapping into the continent's abundant mineral and energy reserves to secure strategic economic footholds.
- Direct and indirect military involvement, including collaborations with state forces and support for non-state actors.

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- Russia orchestrated 85 operations across 22 countries, including 16 classified as “Trans-African.”
- Over half of West Africa’s 71 campaigns were directly linked to Russian initiatives.
- Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger—the core Sahel nations—have been disproportionately targeted by Russian initiatives.

Russian information campaigns aim to sway public opinion, influence elections, and reshape national narratives. 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. 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. 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 has relied on targeted measures, such as debt forgiveness, to achieve strategic goals.

- Notable example: mid-2000s when Russia forgave Libya’s significant debt in exchange for agreements involving energy development, arms deal, and transportation infrastructure.

Russia has adopted a “politics first” approach to solidify foundations for potential economic expansion in Africa. Russia’s engagement is predominantly trade based:

- Approximately 80% of Russia’s grain exports to Africa are directed to North African countries- underscoring a pattern of dependence.
- Russia has signed nuclear cooperation agreements with Algeria, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Libya, Mali, Morocco and Nigeria, alongside commitments to build nuclear power plants in Burkina Faso, Mali and Nigeria.
- Russia has made economic deals with Nigeria in energy and infrastructure (although Russia hasn’t upheld its side of the infrastructure commitments).

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.

Russia’s Security and Military Interventions

Russia’s military activities across North and West Africa are integral to its broader strategy of countering Western influence and consolidating its foothold.

- Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger- Russian Private Military Companies (PMCs), particularly WG/AC, have been linked to incidents of political violence.
- Mali- Russian forces have shown readiness to suppress political dissent with extreme measures (Moura Massacre).
- Togo- A Russian military partnership was established to help build a military camp near their border to counter Salafi-Jihadi threats.
- Nigeria- Russia agreed to supply military helicopters and then announced a Nigeria-Russia military-technical cooperation.
- Libya- 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.

CONCLUSION

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. 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. 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.