



Russian Strategic Intentions

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Chapter 12. Russian Activities in Africa

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Abstract

Russia's interests and objectives are geostrategic, economic, political, military, and to some extent cultural. Their outreach is expanding. Moreover, Moscow's success in Syria is helping to fuel this outreach and create opportunities Moscow likely hadn't planned on prior to the intervention. Most importantly, Western inaction made it easy for Putin to step in and assert himself. Political objectives matter to the Kremlin in a zero-sum worldview: for Russia to win, the US has to lose. Political priorities for Moscow are creating a perception of Russia as a great power, a key regional powerbroker, more reliable than the US, and a partner that stands by its friends and can talk to everyone, pulling Western allies closer to Moscow. Economic objectives are also important, including access to energy and natural resource markets. Lastly, soft power plays an important role. Moscow's outreach to North Africa goes back to the beginning of Putin's presidency, whereas its venture into the rest of Africa is far more recent, but will increasingly matter in the years ahead. China is clearly a more dominant actor in Africa, but Russia is making inroads. Ironically, it is China that poses a greater overall threat to Russia than does NATO and the West, but Moscow prioritizes anti-Americanism. Ultimately, a strong and coherent US presence is the best deterrent for Russia in Africa.

Russian Interests and Objectives in Africa

Russia's interests and objectives are geo-strategic, economic, political, military, and to some extent cultural. Russia has historically been far more active in North Africa than in the rest of the continent, especially in Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. However, Russia began active outreach to the rest of Africa at least three years ago, and this outreach is expanding. Moreover, Moscow's success in Syria is helping fuel this outreach.

North Africa

The Arab Spring originated in Tunisia. Moscow saw these events as a continuation of what it perceived as US-sponsored regime change, which had to be checked lest it one day oust Putin himself. Putin doesn't believe it's possible for people to rise up against their ruler on their own.

To give one relatively recent example, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov highlighted the Kremlin's conviction that Washington stands behind regime change throughout the world:

"Anywhere, in any country—in Eastern Europe, in Central Europe—there are a lot of facts when the US embassy literally runs the [political] processes, including the actions of the opposition ... I think they [Americans] themselves don't consider it an intervention because, first, they [think they] can do anything, and second, it's in their blood" (RIA Novosti, 2017).

To give an earlier example, in December 2016, one major Kremlin-controlled publication described the Arab as a "series of government coups ... initiated by the American special services" (REGNUM News Agency (Moscow), 2016).

The Arab Spring also caused Putin to temporarily lose influence he labored to gain with the regimes that were overthrown. But beyond the Arab Spring, Moscow always had interests in the region. One primary driver of those interests is desired access to the Mediterranean coast. Kremlin rulers historically saw this access as critical to Russia being able to achieve great power status and provide greater leverage over Europe. Putin is the latest iteration of this history. Moscow's interests and objectives on the Mediterranean go hand in hand with access it seeks simultaneously in the Black and Caspian Seas. Thus, port access is important for Moscow, especially as it is trying to expand its anti-access/area of denial (A2AD) layout in Syria.

Peeling Western allies away from the United States and closer into Moscow's sphere of influence is a critical Russian objective. Putin seeks to establish himself in a peacemaker role, and in so doing presents himself as a more reliable actor who can not only talk to everyone but also will do what he says he will do, unlike perceptions of the US. Reducing American, and more broadly Western influence, is an important Russian objective in North Africa.

Economic objectives are also important, such as access to energy and markets. To give one example, Libya's oil-rich east is important for the Kremlin. Algeria's energy market is important to the Kremlin. Moscow is building Egypt's nuclear power plant and recently began support for Morocco's nuclear energy program (Davidson, 2018; "Russia and Morocco sign agreements", 2017; "Morocco and Russia to Sign Nuclear Deal", 2018). Sudan's energy resources are also important to the Kremlin ("The return of Russia to Africa", 2018).

Lastly, soft power matters also, in terms of relating to different cultural groups. Moscow seeks connections with Christian communities while at the same time presents Russia as a country that understands the Islamic world, given its geographic proximity to the region, unique history with it, and its large and growing Muslim minority. Indeed, some Russian officials make the hajj, a journey rarely seen among American government or military personnel.

The Rest of Africa

Economic objectives are important in Moscow's outreach to the rest of Africa. Since at least March 2014, when the West sanctioned Russia over its illegal Crimea annexation, Moscow looked outside the West for economic opportunities.

Putin also understands Africa's enormous potential, and as such stated that "Africa cannot be on periphery of international relations" (RIA Novosti, 2016).

Moscow seeks the continent's natural resources in addition to energy and arms sales. But political objectives are also tied closely to economic ones. African countries are a large bloc within the UN General Assembly, and three African countries are on the UN Security Council. Additionally, Russia's outreach within Africa cannot be entirely separated from Moscow's Middle East objectives. The Horn of Africa allows power projection into the Middle East. The Gulf of Aden provides influence over the Suez Canal. Oleg Ozerov, Russian Foreign Affairs ministry's deputy director for Africa and ambassador to Saudi Arabia noted recently that African countries requested Russian assistance after observing Russia's "success in counterterrorism operations in Syria" (Valdai Club, 2018). When Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir met with Putin in November 2017, Syria was among their discussion topics, showing how the Kremlin works multiple angles in its diplomacy. The Syria factor mattered because, among other issues, Putin is working on rehabilitating Assad, and Bashir is helpful in achieving that end, especially since most recently, Bashir became one of the first Arab leaders to visit the Syrian dictator ("Sudan's President Bashir asks Putin", 2017; "Sudan's president is first Arab

leader”, 2018). That Bashir stepped down in mid-April of this year as a result of massive protests is important, but doesn’t take away from the broader point of Putin working to leverage corrupt, authoritarian African leaders, if not war criminals, to achieve his own aims.

Just as in the Middle East, in Africa, Moscow seeks a powerbroker role and to sideline Western influence, while the region’s autocratic rulers welcome a fellow authoritarian’s support. In addition, the anti-Western undercurrent in Russia’s outreach to Africa seems to have a receptive audience in the region beyond autocratic rules. Russia was never a colonial power in Africa, and the region’s perceptions of Russia in terms of racism and prejudice issues (including its Soviet predecessor) likely do not correspond with Russia’s more grim reality in this regard. Here too, soft power matters. Historically the Russian Orthodox Church has had a relationship with Ethiopia’s Monophysitic church. (Matusevich, 2007). More recently, Moscow has been trying to attract white South African farmers to come to Russia, playing on Putin’s image as a protector of “traditional” values against what the West describes as the immoral, degenerate West (Ferris-Rotman, 2018).

Russian Actions, Short of Armed Conflict, in Africa

Overall Regional Steps: Diplomacy, Business, Military, Political

Overall, Moscow has built relations with all major relevant actors in North Africa, and is increasingly applying the same model to the rest of the continent. Moscow went on a broad charm offensive hosting multiple diplomatic exchanges with representatives from many African countries in recent years. Senior Russian officials such as Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov increasingly tour the continent. Most recently, in January 2019, Lavrov travelled to the Maghreb. Previously, in March 2018, he toured Africa to visit primarily former Cold War allies, ostensibly at the same time as then Secretary of State Tillerson.

Russian shadowy private mercenaries—in reality with ties to Russia’s Defense Ministry—are playing an increasing role in several African countries, including, for example, Libya and the Central African Republic (CAR) (Seddon & Wilson, 2018). Reportedly, Moscow has donated weapons and sent trainers to bolster the government’s fight, as well as expand the contractors’ role to work as mediators among different warring groups. Moscow’s weapon donations in particular highlight how the Kremlin uses activities to bolster its own leverage in a conflict situation and sideline Western actors while ultimately failing to provide genuine conflict resolution. Indeed, creating a dependence on the Kremlin and managing conflicts, rather than focusing on genuine conflict resolution, is likely Putin’s ultimate goal.

Moscow’s business outreach to Africa has increased. Reuters reports that since 2014, “Moscow has signed 19 military cooperation deals in sub-Saharan Africa, including with Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe, according to its foreign and defense ministries and state media” (Ross, 2018). It also has plans to establish “a five-person team at CAR’s defense industry” (Ross, 2018). Moscow involves itself in a variety of natural resource projects, supports the region’s strongmen through several means, including supporting their election strategies, sending teams of military instructors to train presidential guards and providing shipments of weapons. In Zimbabwe, Moscow agreed to invest in the country’s diamond industry.

Russia’s state-run Rosatom is working in Zambia and Rwanda on nuclear power, while Russian energy firms Rosneft and Lukoi are developing oil and gas fields across the entire African continent, focusing on Mozambique, Nigeria, Ghana, and Cameroon, Egypt and Algeria.

Overall, trade between Russia and Africa is growing. According to official Russian sources, in 2017, the volume of trade between Russia and African countries grew by over twenty percent from 2016, to \$17.4 billion dollars. In addition, Moscow also plans to hold its first Russia-Africa business forum this October (Ignatova, 2019).

North Africa

Russia's involvement in North Africa has been more robust than in the rest of the region.

In Egypt, Russia signed an agreement to build a nuclear power plant, and hold joint naval drills and other military exercises. Additionally, Egypt increasingly depends on Russian weaponry. In 2014, the two countries initialed arms contracts worth \$3.5 billion -- their largest deal in many years, to be funded by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The deal hadn't gone through yet, but recent media reports discuss Egypt's plans to buy "over two dozen" Russian Su-35 fighter jets in a \$2 billion deal to buy additional Su ("U.S. warns Egypt", 2019). The Egyptian military already owns several Russian helicopters; according to firsthand pilot accounts, they are a very good fit for Egypt's needs (Borshchevskaya, 2015).

Within this context, Egypt came to accept Moscow's position on Syria's Assad and last year declined a US request to send Egyptian troops to Syria.

On the economic front, Russian tourists are poised to return to Egypt in the near future. Their contribution is hugely important to Egypt. Egypt had emerged as the top destination for Russian tourists in recent years. For example, approximately 3 million of Russian tourists (out of a total of 10 million a year) have travelled to Egypt annually in 2014 for example, until the ban on Russian tourism to the country following the October 2015 terrorist attack that resulted in the death of all 224 passengers on board the Metrojet that crashed over the Sinai as the result of the attack. Putin lifted the travel ban last year. ("Resuming Russian tourism", 2018; Borshchevskaya, 2015). The two countries also created a free-trade zone. In recent years, overall bilateral trade has grown to approximately \$6.5 billion a year according to official government sources ("Russia and Egypt", 2018).

In Libya, Moscow has provided assistance in several ways, including printing money that reportedly was transferred to a branch loyal to Khalifa Haftar, as well as airlifting many dozens of Haftar's wounded soldiers and flying them to Moscow for treatment. Haftar himself has visited Moscow several times. In addition to the relationship with Haftar, Moscow has built ties with all major factions in Libya—Haftar, pro-Qaddafi factions, and the UN-recognized government of Serraj ("Russia makes move on Libya", 2019). Additionally, Russian "private contractors" are active in Libya, ostensibly helping on various business-related projects.

Algeria and Moscow signed a strategic partnership agreement in April 2001 and Algeria has long been a major purchaser of Russian arms, as well as a partner to some extent in the energy sector. The latter is growing, as in December 2018 Russia's Transneft and Gazprom increased cooperation with Algeria's Sonatrach ("Transneft and Sonatrach to develop cooperation", 2017). Reportedly, Russia may also start producing Russian Lada cars in Algeria ("Russia may start producing Lada", 2019).

In Tunisia, Russian tourists have played a major role in the economy for the last several years, picking up following Turkey's shoot down of a Russian plane in late 2015. On a trip to Tunis several years ago I routinely heard shopkeepers speak Russian to tourists. Tunisia also is home to a Russian

immigrant community that goes back to the Bolshevik revolution; Tunis has a Russian culture center—places that are known to be fronts for intelligence gathering activities (Lifhits, 2018).

In 2016, Morocco's King Mohammed VI came to Moscow for the first time since 2002, and signed agreements on improving economic relations. More recently, Moscow began providing support for Morocco's nuclear energy program. Motivating Rabat's policy may have been Moroccan frustration with both perceived Obama and Trump administration sympathy toward the Polisario Front's position with regard both to a human rights monitoring component to MINURSO's mission as well as lack of enthusiasm for Morocco's position on the Western Sahara. That the Polisario Front was a Soviet Cold War proxy is an ironic, but not insurmountable obstacle in Moscow's outreach to Rabat.

Perceived Threats to Russian Regional Interests

For all of Russia's strides in Africa, it's clear that China is the dominant actor in the region, especially outside of North Africa. Moscow officials don't directly talk of China as a threat—indeed it is the West they routinely name as a threat across the globe, but it's difficult to imagine Russia settling on playing second fiddle to anyone unless Russia undergoes a fundamental change. For now, at least they are settling on spheres of influence. Privately, however, Russians have feared China's rise for years.

Russian officials talk about terrorism threats emanating from the region. While theoretically it's easy to see such a threat to Russia, it is hard to reconcile that position with Moscow's actions towards terrorism—sometimes contributing to it, or failing to fight it with any consistency.

Ultimately, Moscow fears regimes turning pro-US. A strong and meaningful US presence more than anything is likely to deter Russia, especially one that signals US unwavering commitment, and one that is focused not only on geopolitics but also on long-term development and values, especially in Africa beyond the continent's north, where historically US involvement had been relatively limited and narrowly focused on Cold-war era competition.

Anticipated Potential Russian Actions in Africa

One possible action is a greater attempt to mediate the region's conflicts and by doing so giving Russia leverage over all major actors rather than create a genuine resolution. Egypt's growing tilt toward Moscow is increasingly worrisome (Borshchevskaya, 2018). In the absence of a clear US role, Libya appears to be a prime candidate for Moscow to play a larger powerbroker role (Borshchevskaya, 2017). Another potential set of actions are more energy, arms, and natural resource deals with Russia across the region, along with Moscow's continued attempts to gain berthing rights on the Mediterranean. Third, efforts to rehabilitate Syria's Assad are likely to continue.

Imagining a Win-Win Scenario

Putin's worldview is zero-sum, so it's hard to imagine a win-win scenario. For Putin to win—to look “great,” the US has to lose. Due to our fundamentally opposing values and worldviews, we are likely to have a hard time coming up with genuinely shared goals that both sides can truly work on together.

Conclusion

By now the West clearly sees Russia as an adversary. However, the broader issue in the backdrop of Russia's activities in Africa is that the West has yet to come up with a coherent policy towards Russia

itself, regardless of the region where it operates. Before turning to Russia's activities in Africa—and elsewhere—the West must define what broader strategic vision it intends to pursue with regard to Russia.

Western analysts often describe Putin as a mere short-term opportunist. Many dismiss Russia as a declining power that, if anything, can be a distraction from the larger emergent competition with China. Yet it is the West that has yet to think about Russia strategically. Russia lacks in resources but not determination. The West has the resources but lacks a clear vision. Resources can, over time, diminish in importance when our adversaries see that we are not serious about utilizing them, and when we remain ambiguous in the face of their determination.

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