AFRICA

Russia’s Growing Military Footprint in Africa: Arms Deals and Defense Cooperation

MARCH 24, 2024

Even though political and economic sanctions following Russia’s unprovoked invasion of Ukraine have led to a recent decline in the Russian arms trade, in recent years the African market continues to thrive. Arms sales and military cooperation with many African countries remain Moscow’s strategic priorities. For instance, Russia has forged military cooperation agreements with 43 African nations since 2015, and only a few days ago, French sources confirmed a newly established military base in Burkina Faso. Russian military engagements with the African nations involve different degrees of cooperation and collaboration, including training military staff, supplying weapons, and providing counterterrorism assistance. In turn, these services enable Moscow to access military or civilian ports and air bases in Africa.

In providing 40% of the weapons sales to Africa, Russia was the continent’s major arms supplier between 2018 and 2022, followed by the USA (16%), China (9.8%), and France (7.6%). Russia’s other military activities in Africa encompass three areas: disseminating anti-Western sentiment, expanding Russian paramilitary forces and mercenary groups such as Wagner, and engaging in aggressive diplomacy.

Africa has recently been following the global trend of incrementing its armaments. The development of the military sector has occurred primarily in North Africa, with Algeria leading defense expenditures in Africa by 2023 to an amount exceeding $10 billion, followed by Egypt and Libya with $4.4 billion and $3.6 billion, respectively. The collapse in diplomatic relations between Morocco and Algeria since 2021, emanating from the dispute over the Western Sahara region, has led to tensions that have brought the two countries to the brink of armed

conflict. Consequently, Algeria has boosted its defense budget, modernizing its military and weapons system through its major arms supplier Russia, from Algeria received 72.63% of its foreign arms procurement in 2022. Notably, Algeria is the first foreign buyer of Russia's flagship combat aircraft, the Su-57 stealth fighter.

Russian Military Ventures in Sub-Saharan Africa

While North Africa remains the region with the highest military expenditure on the African continent, attention has now turned to the Sahel region, which is regularly disrupted by military coups and extremist groups. The increased weapons flow to countries such as Angola, Niger, and Mali has exacerbated this instability. These three countries are the largest importers in the subregion, as well as the most conflict-ridden nations, with Russia as the top arms supplier. For instance, Mali's weapons imports increased by 210% between 2013 and 2022. Early in 2023, the Malian government reportedly received Soviet-era Mi-8 helicopters, Czech-designed Albatros L-39 fighters, and Russian Sukhoi Su-25 fighter jets.

Burkina Faso, another country in the region rocked by a coup in 2021, is hosting Russia's first military base on the continent. French security sources have confirmed to Le Monde the location of the first Russian military camp of the Africa Corps, the new footprint for Russia's presence in the Sahel. Russia is also aggressively seeking another agreement with Sudan; if it is finalized, it would permit Russia to station up to three hundred troops on the base and create a logistical supply point for military ships, including nuclear ones, at Port Sudan. Russian press sources are also confirming the construction of a military base to train soldiers in the Central African Republic.

The Russian Diplomatic Offensive on the Continent

While Russian military activities in Africa remain modest compared to those of the US or China, they should not be underestimated. Russia has been making a slow but steady effort in recent years to create a military presence throughout the continent. The recent diplomatic activities of Russia are among the primary drivers of this aim. Since the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, Russia has become increasingly isolated from the West via economic sanctions. Consequently, Moscow is endeavoring to fortify ties with Africa. Serge Lavrov, the head of

Russian diplomacy, has made repeated visits to African nations, traveling to more than 13 countries during his four trips to Africa in 2022–2023. Certainly, establishing military relationships across the continent is paying off in the form of military accords. During the most recent Russia–Africa summit in July 2023, contracts totaling $4.5 billion were signed with African nations by Rosoboronexport, the only state intermediary in Russia allowed to export the whole range of military and dual-use items, technologies, and services. Another element contributing to a military rapprochement between Russia and African states includes Vladimir Putin's elimination of African nations' debts. For instance, 2006 saw a $7.5 billion deal for military supplies and weaponry in exchange for the Kremlin's cancellation of Algeria's estimated $4.7 billion debt. In addition, in 2008, Russia and Libya reached a deal to cooperate on arms contracts worth $4 billion in exchange for canceling $4.6 billion of debt. Furthermore, at the 2018 Russia–Africa Summit, Putin also announced military cooperation and pledged to erase $20 billion in debt owed by African nations.

Serving Moscow's Agenda with Putin's Shadow Warriors: The Wagner Group in Africa

Furthermore, Russia has entered Africa through clandestine means, such as the operations of private military companies (PMCs). In Africa, the operations of the Wagner Group, on which the US has imposed sanctions, are the most prominent. Following Yevgeny Prigozhin's failed coup attempt in June 2023, Russia's long-standing denial of any involvement with the Wagner Group in Africa came to an end when it was revealed that Russia had financed the group by contributing around $940 billion from May 2022 to May 2023. Moreover, the group's military significance, mainly in politically unstable African countries, has been undeniable; Wagner has reportedly provided backing to the junta administrations in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, among other Sahelian countries that have seen coups since 2020. Additionally, research indicates that the Wagner Group maintains a military presence throughout several other African nations, carrying out anti-democratic, anti-Western, and anti-UN disinformation campaigns in all of them. Wagner's operations serve to bolster authoritarian regimes and fortify Russia's position on the continent. In an attempt to reorganize Wagner assets under state control in December 2023 following Prigozhin's death in an allegedly accidental plane

crash, the Kremlin has established the Africa Corps, a new military organization, under the Russian Ministry of Defense.

Countering Russia's Military Influence in Africa: Strategies for the US and Europe Union (EU)

Neither the US nor EU should underestimate Russia's military presence and ambitions in Africa; a pressing need exists to pursue wise and well-aimed strategies. On the one hand, as part of the Biden administration's new chapter with the African nations announced in 2022, the US should formulate new policies and plans that extend beyond US–Africa summits and the US Strategy to Sub-Saharan Africa.

On the other hand, the EU has reconsidered its approach to the continent in the wake of France's withdrawal from the Sahel and is more strongly than ever engaged in forwarding a Global Gateway project to African nations as a substitute for China's One Belt, One Road initiative. To mitigate Russia's aggressive actions on the continent, the West should, nevertheless, adopt further measures.

The United States and the EU should take steps to address and counter Russia's misinformation campaign on the continent. Given the brutal colonial past, this requires EU member states to fundamentally shift their approach to Africa. Under the premise that Africans' fragility stems from the colonial era, Russia is exploiting anti-Western sentiments. Through various political initiatives and media channels, African states and societies should be informed about Russia's military activities on the continent as well as its support of mercenary groups like Wagner, which have disrupted democratic systems in African countries, backed civil wars, and resulted in civilian casualties numbering more than 1,800 Africans. The West should maintain a horizontal approach by developing strategies that support democracy, education, and well-being among African societies. In engaging with African states, the West must maintain open-minded dialogue on every aspect and proactively suggest projects and programs that are more constructive than those Russia is promoting.

Moreover, the US and EU should continue to support African countries in strengthening their military and defense capacities as well as the fight against extremist groups. While the EU's

initiatives on the continent remain mostly focused on peacebuilding efforts, a need exists for further measures to promote conflict prevention, negotiation, and mediation among the continent's countries.

In one change to date, the EU has replaced the previous African Peace Facility in operation since 2004 and set up an off-budget instrument, the European Peace Facility (EPF), established in 2021. With a budget of €10.5 billion aimed at promoting EU activities in preventing conflicts, peacebuilding, and promoting international security through military missions and peace-keeping operations, the EPF has deployed military training missions to Mali, Somalia, and Mozambique. Furthermore, in July 2023, the EPF granted €4.7 million to support the Nigerien Armed Forces with military equipment, added to two previous assistance packages of €65 million, which marked the first time that the EU used this facility to provide military supplies to a partner African country. However, the EU should have a clear strategy for defining the scope of the EPF in Africa, and questions remain whether the training missions will be replaced by the supply of military equipment to partner countries or whether military support will be focused on regions where EU training missions operate.

Furthermore, the EU should strengthen its collaboration with the African Union (AU), which mainly deals with conflict prevention and resolution among its member states. Even though both parties in the last EU Summit held in February 2022 agreed to strengthen their support for defending democracy, human rights, peace, and security, the EU should take concrete steps, also involving the EPF, to collaborate more closely with the AU in preventing conflicts, mediating peace, and exchanging knowledge and experience.

The thoughts and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not reflect the views or opinions of the institution with which the author is affiliated.

Orion Policy Institute (OPI) is an independent, non-profit, tax-exempt think tank focusing on a broad range of issues at the local, national, and global levels. OPI does not take institutional policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions represented herein should be understood to be solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of

OPI.