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Russia's Security Operations in Africa

Thousands of Russian security personnel have deployed to Africa since 2017, offering support to regimes facing insurgent threats and other challenges in what some analysts refer to as a “military-business model.” Russia has expanded operations and placed them under more explicit state control since mid-2023, after formally disbanding the Wagner Group, a nominally private military company (PMC) that had spearheaded activities in Africa. Russia has rebranded deployments as a new “Africa Corps” overseen by its military intelligence agency, often referred to as the GRU. On the ground, Africa Corps operations appear to comprise a mix of Russian state personnel, various PMCs, and former Wagner personnel. Russia has also pursued military basing deals in Africa, including in Sudan.

Some African leaders appear to view Russian personnel as furnishing valuable support (such as regime protection and combat assistance) that others are unwilling or unable to provide. For Moscow's part, security activities in Africa—paired with information operations—appear to fit within a global strategy to undermine the West and its image as a reliable security partner. Russian and African elites may also derive profits. U.S. officials have argued that Russian atrocities and economic exploitation undermine stability in Africa. The U.S. Treasury Department has reported that gold and other resources from Africa have helped Russia evade sanctions and fund military efforts in Ukraine.

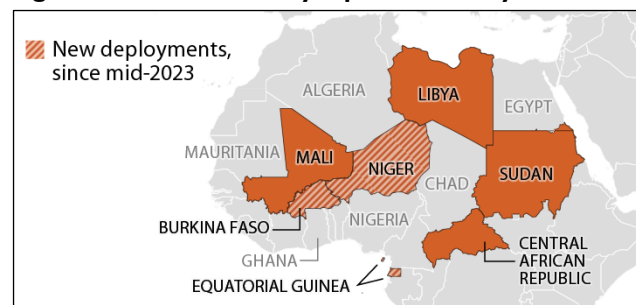
Many African countries have warm ties with Russia, with which over 40 reportedly have military cooperation agreements—though most have not partnered with Russian security personnel. Some African leaders, including in Algeria and Ghana, have voiced concern about Russian deployments to neighboring states.

Some reports suggest that Ukraine has tried to challenge Russian forces in Africa, including in Sudan and Mali. In mid-2024, a Ukrainian official said that Ukraine had aided rebels in Mali who killed dozens of Russian and Malian forces in an ambush. The claim led several West African countries to cut ties with Ukraine and sparked regional criticism. The extent of Ukraine's support was uncertain.

Key Areas of Activity

The Wagner Group initiated missions in Sudan, the Central African Republic (CAR), Libya, and Mali between 2017 and 2021. As of late 2024, CAR, Libya, and Mali continued to host the largest Russian deployments in Africa, including military logistics facilities. Smaller Russian contingents have arrived in other countries since mid-2023 (**Figure 1**), including Burkina Faso and Niger, where military regimes have formed a Russian-backed alliance with Mali and moved to leave the Economic Community of West African States. Russian forces arrived in Niger—previously host to the second-largest U.S. military presence in Africa—in April 2024, as the United States withdrew its more than 1,000 troops under pressure from the ruling junta.

Figure 1. Russian Security Operations: Key Countries



Source: CRS, from U.S. government statements and news reports.

Reports suggest that Russia may seek to expand activities into countries such as Chad, and that Russian personnel may already be active in other countries, such as Togo. The Wagner Group sent counterinsurgency forces to Mozambique in 2019 but withdrew after heavy casualties.

Russia's security partnerships have leveraged Cold War-era ties in Africa, as well as the vulnerabilities and ambitions of particular leaders. Russian operators have used, and stoked, local grievances and resentment of Western powers and UN peacekeeping missions. Russian forces' scorched-earth tactics may appeal to some leaders struggling to reverse insurgent gains. In CAR and Mali, Russian support has enabled state forces to retake territory from rebel groups—albeit accompanied by abuses. Leaders chafing at arms embargoes or human rights criticism may view Russia as a counterweight to Western donor pressure. In the Sahel, Russian partnership has become a symbol of leaders' populist rejection of French postcolonial influence. In Libya, Wagner is aiding an armed group that has sought state power. Some surveys suggest that positive views of Russia are rising in Africa, including among young people.

Syria's Asad regime provided Russia with military bases that served as logistical hubs for operations in Africa. Syria's regime change in late 2024 may therefore affect Russian operations in and through the region. In December 2024, unnamed U.S. and Libyan officials stated that Russia was moving some military equipment from Syria to Libya.

CAR. About 175 Russian “instructors,” including Wagner personnel, entered CAR in 2017, after Russia obtained an exemption to a UN arms embargo to provide weapons to CAR's military. Russian personnel rose as high as 2,100 in 2021 as they played a key role in military operations against rebel groups. President Faustin-Archange Touadera has reportedly had Russians in his personal guard and as his advisors. Former Wagner-affiliated companies are active in private security, mining, and commerce. As of mid-2024, Russia was reportedly refurbishing a military base that a presidential advisor described as a future regional hub for up to 10,000 Russian personnel. UN peacekeepers in CAR have reportedly been targets of Russian disinformation.

Libya. Libya's importance as a Russian logistical hub may increase due to regime change in Syria. Wagner personnel reportedly began providing support in 2018 to Libyan National Army (LNA) leader Khalifa Haftar, a rival to Libya's internationally-recognized government in Tripoli. U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) described Wagner forces as providing vital support to the LNA's failed 2019-2020 campaign to seize Tripoli. According to AFRICOM, Wagner's presence totaled about 2,000 as of 2020, but declined in 2022 as some personnel left for Ukraine. In mid-2024, U.S. officials criticized reported new shipments of Russian weaponry and transfers of Africa Corps personnel to LNA-controlled eastern and southern Libya as "destabilizing" for Libya and the region.

Mali. A military junta seized power in 2020 and reportedly contracted with Wagner in 2021 to support operations against Islamist insurgents. Bamako agreed to pay Wagner \$10 million per month, according to U.S. officials.

Wagner's entry intensified diplomatic strains with France, which withdrew 2,400 troops from Mali in 2022, ending a U.S.-backed counterterrorism mission. In 2023, the junta forced the exit of a UN peacekeeping operation that had supported a 2015 peace accord with separatist rebels. The junta later ended the accord. In late 2023, with Russian support, Malian state forces reclaimed the separatist stronghold of Kidal, a longstanding goal. Separatist and Islamist insurgents dealt a heavy setback to Russian forces in northern Mali in July 2024, killing dozens in an ambush.

Sudan. Wagner-affiliated entities have reportedly been active in Sudan since former President Omar al Bashir struck a series of deals with Russia in 2017. Associated firms have been involved in gold mining—in collaboration with elements of Sudan's security forces—and in training and provision of security services. In 2022, Wagner operatives were implicated in a scheme to smuggle gold from Sudan to Russia. In mid-2023, after fighting broke out between Sudan's rival security forces, the U.S. Treasury Department reported that Wagner had supplied Sudan's Rapid Support Forces with surface-to-air missiles to fight the military. Russia subsequently offered support to the military-led government, reportedly with the aim of securing access for a naval base on Sudan's Red Sea coast.

Potential Issues for Congress

Oversight. Congress has enacted various legislation requiring the executive branch to report on Russian PMC activities and influence in Africa and worldwide (e.g., under several provisions of the FY2023 National Defense Authorization Act, P.L. 117-263). A possible issue for Congress is whether existing reports enable sufficient review of Russia's activities and U.S. responses, or whether new, amended, or consolidated requirements are warranted.

Sanctions. The United States has sanctioned the Wagner Group under executive orders pertaining to Russia and its war on Ukraine, transnational organized crime, and the conflict in CAR. A number of individuals and entities active in Africa are also designated for U.S. sanctions due to ties with Wagner. These designations freeze assets under U.S. jurisdiction, prohibit transactions with U.S. persons, and impose visa and entry restrictions (for individuals). The State Department, citing actions in CAR, named the Wagner Group as an Entity of Particular Concern under the

International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (P.L. 105-292) in 2022, but has not redesignated it in later years.

Congress may seek to evaluate the effectiveness of current sanctions, the resources required to enforce them, and the impact (if any) on regional perceptions of Russia. Congress may also assess the potential need to amend or update sanctions in light of Wagner's formal dissolution in 2023 and the restructuring of Russia's Africa deployments. Congress may examine U.S. coordination with partners such as the European Union and United Kingdom, which maintain similar sanctions in Africa.

In the 118th Congress, Members considered legislation aimed at requiring the Secretary of State to designate the Wagner Group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (S. 416/H.R. 506). Such a designation could have implications for U.S. relations with African governments that reportedly contracted directly with Wagner, such as in Mali.

Conditionality. Congress may consider whether to restrict or condition U.S. aid and/or support for multilateral lending to governments that host or pursue partnerships with Russian security personnel. (U.S. aid to several such governments is already subject to legal restrictions due to military coups and other factors.) Conditions could impact humanitarian conditions and may have other consequences for U.S. diplomatic relations and contacts.

Offering Alternatives. News reports indicate that the Biden Administration offered CAR's President Touadera alternative security arrangements and incentives in a bid to decrease Wagner's influence, in coordination with European countries and Rwanda, which has troops in CAR. In 2023, U.S. officials reportedly considered offering military aid to Burkina Faso in order to deter a deal with Wagner. Congress may consider whether to authorize, fund, or condition the use of such tools. It may be possible in some cases to convince African leaders to pursue options other than a Russian deployment. Such offers may provide undesired incentives, such as potentially encouraging leaders to signal an interest in working with Russia in order to attract U.S. interest. Policy risks also may arise from U.S. support to authoritarian or abusive regimes.

Strategic Competition and U.S. Messaging. Some African leaders and commentators have chafed at U.S. pressure to avoid working with Russia, including with regard to legislative proposals and other congressional actions. For example, leaders in southern Africa assailed the Countering Malign Russian Activities Globally Act (H.R. 9374), which the House passed in 2022, as a U.S. effort to restrict African diplomatic relations. Such reactions reflect enduring sensitivities over state sovereignty and the legacy of the Cold War (and U.S. policies) in the region. Russia's reframing of operations as state-to-state cooperation, versus PMC or "mercenary" deployments, may further complicate U.S. diplomatic and congressional messaging.

Alexis Arieff, Coordinator, Specialist in African Affairs
Christopher M. Blanchard, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

Lauren Ploch Blanchard, Specialist in African Affairs
Andrew S. Bowen, Analyst in Russian and European Affairs

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