

# Russia is Stepping Up its Military Cooperation in Africa

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**Since 2000 and the coming to power of Vladimir Putin, Russia has taken concrete steps to develop ties with African states in order to advance its geopolitical goals and economic interests. Recent news reports claim that Moscow is establishing an airbase in Burundi and has signed numerous new military cooperation agreements with several African countries. The main interests of Russia in its military relations with Africa are arms exports, imports of natural resources, and projection of power.**

## **NEW MILITARY COOPERATION AGREEMENTS**

Since 2015, Russia has signed over 20 bilateral military cooperation agreements with African states. There has been much speculation about whether these agreements deal with the possibility of establishing a permanent Russian military base. According to an unverified source, some of the agreements allow Russia the use of airfields or naval access to ports (see map and table). In certain cases, they have also given Russia access to the decision-making circles of the country. At Sudan's Ministry of Defence, for example, Russia has managed to establish representation by its own defence ministry. In the Central African Republic (CAR), President Faustin-Archange Touadéra even agreed to the appointment of a Russian citizen, Valeriy Zakharov, as his national security advisor.

Speculation about a Russian military base in Africa has focused on several countries where the Soviet Union had a regular military presence. For instance, in 2016 the Russian press reported that Moscow was negotiating with Egypt's al-Sisi regime on terms of access to the Sidi-Barrani base.

The idea of opening a military base in Sudan was discussed during President Omar al-Bashir's visit to Moscow in late 2017. The Sudanese president cannot be considered the most credible partner, however, as he has become the first sitting president to be indicted by the International Criminal Court, for allegedly having directed a campaign of mass killing, rape, and pillage against civilians in Darfur.

An alternative to Sudan, if Russia is looking to strengthen its ability to sustain naval deployments in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and western Indian Ocean, could be Eritrea. In September 2018, an Eritrean delegation led by the foreign minister Osman Saleh met with Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov in Sochi. The parties signed an agreement which suggests an emerging commercial-military relationship including the establishment of a logistics centre in the Eritrean port of Assab.

Russia has also had contacts with the breakaway region of

Somaliland. In exchange for establishing a small multiuse air and naval facility in the Djibouti-bordering town of Zeila, Russia would formally recognize the region's 'independence' from Somalia, according to media reporting.

Another country mentioned as a possible host of a Russian military base is Mozambique. It is known to have an important geostrategic position in the securing of sea lines of communication and there are not many other countries in Africa that have a port that can take deep-hulled vessels.

Most recently, the sudden Russian interest in the resource-rich CAR has raised questions regarding Moscow's intentions in the violence-plagued nation. Since January 2018, Russia has deployed 175 civilian experts and military instructors, mostly under the cover of a private security company, Sewa Security Services, and delivered light weapons, such as pistols, artillery, and rocket-launchers, and also trained the CAR army. The Russian troops were also mandated to ensure that the weapons did not fall into the hands of militia groups, which control vast territory and are accused of human rights abuses.

The Russian opposition newspaper, *Novaia Gazeta*, claims that most of the Russian 'experts' in the CAR in fact belong to the private military company Wagner, associated with Yevgeny Prigozhin, a St. Petersburg businessman close to the Russian president. Wagner has also been noticed in Sudan and Syria as well as in the Russian military operation in Eastern Ukraine. According to other Russian opposition media sources, another private military company, Patriot, has been connected to the construction of a Russian air base in Burundi. This work is supposed to be coordinated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) and the Federal Security Service (FSB). It still remains for Russian legislature to legalise the existence of private military companies.

As mentioned above, Russia's main interest in renewing its engagement in Africa involves arms exports, imports of natural resources, and the projection of power.

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## **ARMS TRADE AND MILITARY TRAINING**

The Soviet Union was a major supplier of arms and military equipment to African states. With regard to Russia, despite a dramatic decline in the volume of its exports of major conventional weapons to African states during the 1990s, the amount increased again during the 2000s.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Institute, by 2012-2016 Russia had become the largest supplier of arms to Africa, accounting for 35 per cent of arms exports to the region, followed by China (17 per cent), the United States (9.6 per cent), and France (6.9 per cent). Arms export is a lucrative area for Russian economic growth, especially in the context of continued Western sanctions and a stagnant economy caused by falling global oil prices. Currently, exports of Russian-made weapons and military equipment to Africa amount to 4.6 billion USD annually, with a contract portfolio worth over 50 billion USD.

The main importers of Russian arms in Africa are Algeria (helicopters, main battle tanks, submarines), Egypt (combat aircraft, long-range air defence systems, helicopters), Angola (fighter jets, main battle tanks, artillery, arms and ammunition), and Uganda (tanks, air defence systems). Other importers of Russian arms are Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Sudan, and Rwanda. Lately, Tanzania and Somalia have also made requests for Russian military equipment.

In connection with arms transfers and bilateral training programmes, the Russian Ministry of Defence is involved in the training of African military personnel, and also offers related opportunities at educational establishments in Russia.

In both military technology and equipment as well as training, Russia provides an alternative source for African countries. In 2014, for example, when the United Kingdom and the United States were slow to respond to Nigeria's request for help, Nigeria turned to Russia for counter-terrorism training for its special forces and bought military hardware to fight Boko Haram.

With regard to peace operations, several hundred peacekeepers from African countries have been trained at the Advanced Training Centre of the Russian Ministry of Interior since 2006. Since 2000, Russia has contributed troops, expertise, and military observers to different UN peacekeepers operations in Africa. By 2018, however, only Western Sahara (MINURSO) remained.

Since 2008, Russia has also participated in the international anti-piracy efforts off the coast of Somalia.

## **IMPORTS OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND FOOD**

In terms of access to natural resources, such as oil and natural gas, Africa represents a strategic interest for Russia. Despite its own huge mineral resources, Russia has some critical shortage of certain raw materials, including chrome, manganese, mercury, and titanium, and faces depletion of

reserves of others, including copper, nickel, tin, and zinc. It also needs coltan and rare earth metals for new technologies. For instance, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Russia is engaged in the extraction of coltan, cobalt, gold and diamonds and, in the CAR, uranium and diamonds. Moreover, about one-third of its African imports are agricultural: fruits, cocoa, coffee, and potatoes.

## **PROJECTION OF POWER**

During the Cold War, at the height of its military might, the Soviet Union had several military bridgeheads on the African continent. Although it never had a military base of its own, for decades the Soviet Navy made frequent naval visits and had long-term access to bases in Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Guinea. Moscow also supported the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) in the civil war in Angola and as a result its naval, army, and air force troops and advisors had access to the Luanda military base for more than 25 years.

Today, Russia benefits from these ties established decades ago. The facts that Moscow never tried to colonise the African continent and that the Soviet Union supported the anti-colonial struggle in Africa give the country credibility as a reliable partner. Russia today cultivates basically the same countries that the Soviets did during the Cold War. In Libya, for instance, Russia has been nurturing ties with the military strongman Khalifa Haftar. Intelligence reports indicate that Russia was helping the former Libyan general in a fight for control of the country's government and vast oil resources. Since 2017, Russia has quietly but steadily entrenched its influence, sending military advisors and intelligence officers to the country's east, and supplying General Haftar's troops with spare parts, repairs, and medical care. Russia seeks a political settlement; it prefers a central government favourable to its economic interests, especially in arms, energy deals, and railway projects.

## **POTENTIAL FUTURE BASES?**

The overall goal of President Vladimir Putin's assertive and autonomous foreign policy is that Russia should be recognised as a Great Power. After the largely successful reestablishment of Moscow's intentions in the Middle East, Africa serves as another arena in Russia's challenging of the United States and the Euro-Atlantic international security order. An additional reason for its engagement in Africa is probably diplomatic. Like many countries, Russia is seeking to build good relations with African states – notably through military ties and arms sales – to strengthen its position in the United Nations, to get votes from African countries, and to achieve support for particular Russian interests, such as support for its annexation of Crimea.

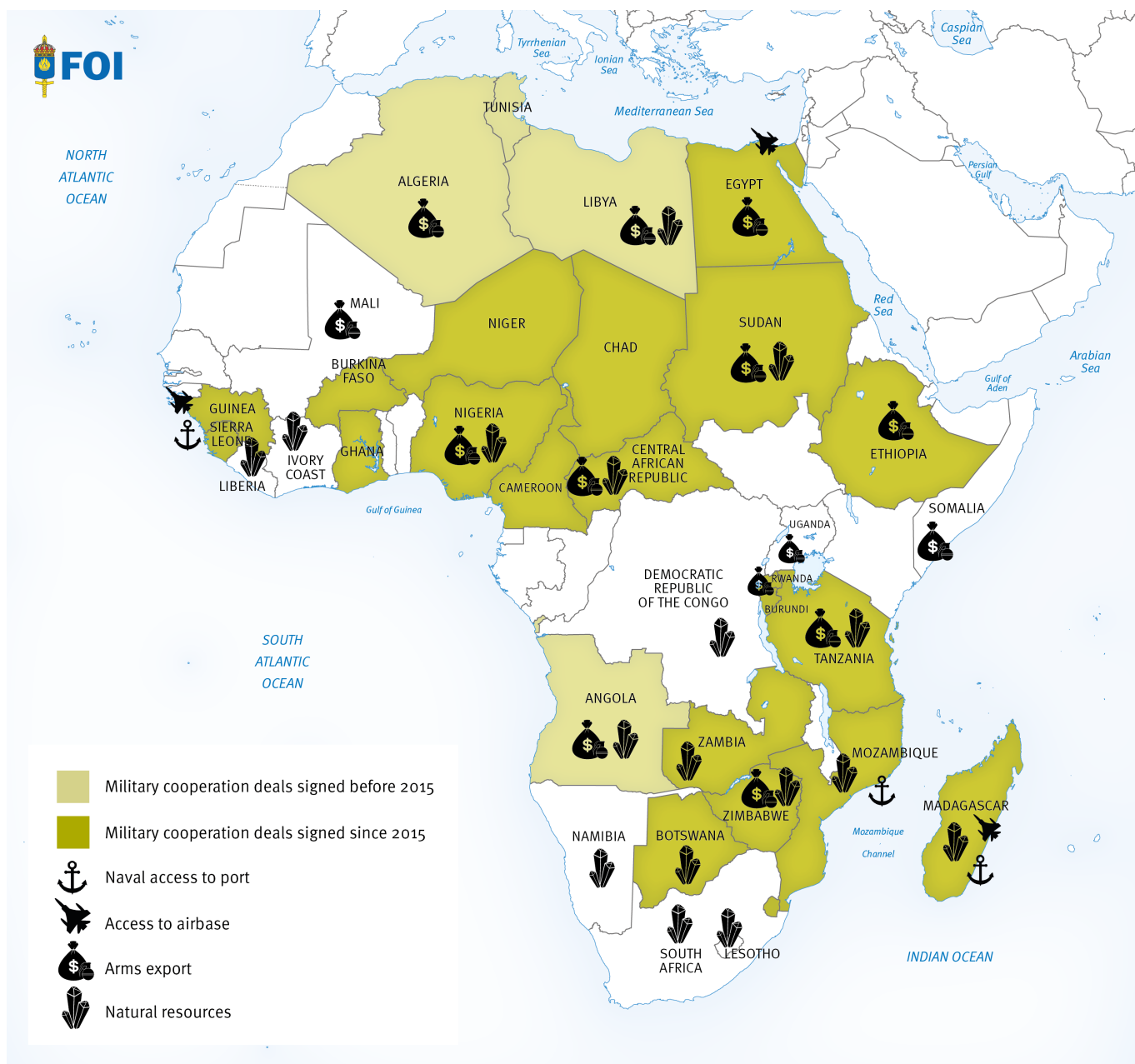
Russia's traditional interests in the security sphere in Africa

are arms trade and projection of power. Nowadays, private Russian military companies serve as tools for expanding and promoting Russian interests. It is easy to understand that the presence of lucrative gold and diamond reserves make African countries attractive and profitable targets for Moscow and its private mercenaries.

There is heated speculation about the potential for establishing military bases in several countries, with Burundi,

Mozambique, Eritrea, Somaliland, Egypt, Libya and Sudan as the hottest candidates. Whatever the outcome, although Russia is clearly stepping up its actions in Africa, it is nevertheless too early to say that Russia's policy is strategic and long-term. A lot of Moscow's actions looks ad hoc and piecemeal and Africa is still rather a low priority over all for Russia, at least in comparison to Europe, the United States, and the Middle East.

## Russia's Military Cooperation and Strategic Interests in Africa



Sources: Reuters, Jeune Afrique, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Swedish Center for Russian Studies, Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Atlantic Council.

# Military Cooperation Agreements in Africa since 2015

Country	Date	Note
<b>Botswana</b>	August 2018	Peace-keeping and military training.
<b>Burkina Faso</b>	August 2018	Cooperation on countering terrorism. Deal not yet in force.
<b>Burundi</b>	August 2018	Cooperation on counter-terrorism and joint training of troops.
<b>Cameroon</b>	April 2015	Military and technical cooperation.
<b>Central African Republic</b>	August 2018	Training of armed forces.
<b>Chad</b>	August 2017	Anti-terrorism cooperation and joint training exercises.
<b>Egypt</b>	November 2017	Deliveries of equipment and weapons for counter-terrorism operations.
<b>Eswatini (former Swaziland)</b>	February 2017	Supply of weapons, maintenance and other military assistance.
<b>Ethiopia</b>	April 2018	Training and cooperation on peace-keeping and counter-terrorism and anti-piracy efforts. Deal not yet in force.
<b>Gambia</b>	September 2016	Training of armed forces, deliveries of military equipment.
<b>Ghana</b>	June 2016	Military and technical cooperation. Deal not yet in force.
<b>Guinea</b>	April 2018	Cooperation on peace-keeping, counter-terrorism, search and rescue at sea. Deal not yet in force.
<b>Mozambique</b>	January 2017	Deliveries of military equipment, spare parts and component.
<b>Niger</b>	August 2017	Working meetings of military experts and cooperation on military education.
<b>Nigeria</b>	August 2017	Cooperation on military training, peace-keeping and efforts to counter-terrorism and anti-piracy.
<b>Rwanda</b>	October 2016	Supply of weapons and other military equipment.
<b>Sierra Leone</b>	August 2018	Supply of weapons and other military equipment as well as the provision of other military technical assistance.
<b>Sudan</b>	February 2018	Develop the Sudanese armed forces
<b>Tanzania</b>	January 2018	Arms shipments as well as joint training and research and development.
<b>Zambia</b>	April 2017	Provisions for the supply of weapons and delivery of spare parts.
<b>Zimbabwe</b>	October 2015	Supply of weapons and cooperation on producing military products.

Sources: Reuters, Jeune Afrique, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation.

*This text is a part of a forthcoming FOI report on foreign military bases and installations in Africa and the strategic interests behind their presence. Twelve state actors are included in the report: the United States, France, United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, Spain, Russia, China, Japan, India, Turkey, and United Arab Emirates.*