

Russia's Campaign in Africa

Overwatch Podcast Transcript



Featuring Nataliya Bugayova, Darina Regio and Maseh Zarif

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Maseh Zarif talks with his ISW colleagues Nataliya Bugayova and Darina Regio about what Russia is up to in Africa. They discuss Russia's coordinated campaign to gain economic and political influence, and its attempt to create opportunities for expanding its military presence on the continent. Nataliya and Darina also put this campaign in the context of U.S. interests, identifying why the United States should be concerned and what to look for in the coming months. For background, read "The Kremlin's Campaign in Africa."

Maseh Zarif:

This is Overwatch, a podcast brought to you by The Institute for the Study of War. My name is Maseh Zarif and I'm your host for this episode.

I spoke with two of my ISW colleagues. Nataliya Bugayova and Darina Regio, who both work on Russia. A key focus of their work involves Russia's global campaigns, examining how the Kremlin is advancing Russian President Vladimir Putin's ambitions and what that means for U.S. interests. One area they've been watching closely in that context is Africa. Ahead of the October 2019 summit in Sochi, we discussed how the Russians view the continent, how their efforts play out on the ground, and why the United States should be paying attention.

All right. So, in about a month, Russia's going to host a summit in Sochi that's focused on the African continent. Darina, what exactly is the summit, and why is it significant for the Russians?

Darina Regio:

The summit is the first summit of this scale. It's the biggest conference between Russia and African states in history. Even considering the strong Soviet ties with African states, this is still bigger than what the Soviet Union had. The summit will also be co-chaired by the African Union chairmanship, and this year it is Egypt. Russia is heavily leveraging its relationship with Egypt, the personal ties between President Putin and President el-Sisi, but also Russia's economic investment in Egypt, such as construction of the economic industrial zone, and also construction of the nuclear power plant, as well as Russia's heavy investment in Egyptian tourism industry.

Russia will also host an economic conference the day before the Russia-Africa summit, and we're watching for possible facilitation of the economic deals between Russian private and state-owned enterprises and African entities. The summit will have dedicated session to the cooperation with African states in oil and gas industry, in diamond mining, in role of the Russian media in Russia-Africa relations, nuclear technology and transportation, digital commerce, and others.

Maseh Zarif:

So, I note that Egypt is in that elevated role that you're describing. It sounds like in part that's based on their chairmanship of the African Union but then also a deeper strain of ties between Putin and Egyptian President Sisi. In some ways, the way in which the Russians, for instance, have tried to build a relationship with Turkey, knowing that Turkey is in the NATO alliance and a partner of the United States, I wonder if there's also a parallel here, where Putin is also very alert to the idea that Egypt has been a longstanding U.S. partner, and whether there's an opportunity to be able to drive a wedge. Do you think that kind of thinking is also behind the elevated role for Egypt?

Darina Regio:

Definitely. Egypt is also an important regional partner for Russian in the MENA region. It provides a lot of support and it has a lot of influence in different regional conflicts. In addition, Soviet Union had pretty strong ties with Egypt, so Putin is capitalizing on a long historic relationship and not just building something from scratch.

Maseh Zarif:

Right. So, speaking of the Soviet Union, going back to the pre-1990's period. You know, the Soviets had relationships across Africa. They had embassies. They've had some type of presence in different countries across the continent. What would you say is new or noteworthy about what Russia today is doing in Africa?

Darina Regio:

I think what is most noteworthy is the scale of African campaigns for the Kremlin. Russia has launched a coordinated effort, a push into Africa, around 2017, after it established a foothold in the Middle East. The first push for Africa was mainly to establish access to naval bases. After that, it has switched to more of a blanket approach, where Russia is using different ways to interact with African states. The difference between the Soviet Union is that Russia has also expanded its diplomatic relations with more states. Just last month, Russia has established diplomatic relations with Niger, in preparation for the Russia-Africa summit, and Egypt, in its role of the African Union chairmanship, has heavily facilitated a lot of personal ties between Russia and multiple African states.

Maseh Zarif:

So, you two have been tracking very closely exactly what the Russians are doing in conducting some of their outreach, even down to identifying some of the senior-level action officers, as you describe them, and the types of tools they're employing as they conduct operations. But for me, I often find it hard to be able to understand the nitty-gritty without also trying to get a sense of how the different pieces fit together. So Nataliya, let me bring you in to the conversation to ask you how should we understand Russia's broader foreign policy goals, and then how the African continent fits within those goals?

Nataliya Bugayova:

Sure. First, African outreach is not an isolated campaign. It's yet another theatre where Vladimir Putin is pursuing his core objectives. First, Kremlin seeks to develop additional economic streams in Africa, not just for Russia, but also for Putin's associates. If you actually look at who's getting contracts on African continent, a lot of them are related to Kremlin, specifically. This supports Putin's broader objective to preserve his regime.

Second, we're watching for a potential of Russia using Africa as a platform to evade sanctions in the longer term. Russia invests in industries that are well suited for money laundering, specifically natural resources.

Next, Russia is also seeking to bolster its great power, and Africa is very much a part of that effort. Not only Russia is trying to expand its military footprint, as we discussed, through additional basing and access to naval facilities, but it also attempts to pull Africa into Russia's global information space. It's very important effort to put in, not just to position Russia as a global power, but also gain acceptance to a set of Russian narratives and illegal behavior. One of the goals of Sochi summit, for example, is to sign an agreement between the African Union and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union. Part of Kremlin's broader effort to create this network of formal and informal alliances that gravitate toward Russia.

Finally, I think Africa is also part of the broader campaign to manage Russia's relationship with China, and balance China's great expansion.

Maseh Zarif:

I want to pick up on one aspect that you were describing in terms of the platform that the continent could provide for things like sanctions evasion. Obviously, a big piece of U.S. policy is to be able to raise the costs for some of Putin's malign behavior, on a global scale. And so, if you look at a theatre like Europe, for instance, there are some natural points of resistance and exposure that the Russians have been met with. If you look at how Putin perceives the playing field in Africa, do you feel like he senses there's more opportunity to be able to do things, for instance, to be able to slip the sanctions noose, and to be able to find different relief valves there as opposed to some other places where there might be more of a spotlight on Russian activity?

Nataliya Bugayova:

Sure. I think definitely, and for two reasons. One is that obviously, there are major issues with governance throughout African continent, in particular in places where Russia is doing business. Secondly, as I've mentioned, the specific investment activities that Russia is prioritizing lend themselves quite well to illicit finance. Russia has effort to expand its access to mineral resources, such as gold, platinum, etc., and I think that provides a vulnerability for Russia to exploit.

Maseh Zarif:

Sure. So, with that view of how the map looks like to Putin, what types of forms of influence and presence are the Russians prioritizing, if you look at specific countries where they're operating in?

Darina Regio:

Sure. I think we can split the Kremlin's priority lines into four in Africa. The first one I think is the economic one, and that one includes getting access to natural resources, helping develop African countries their own deposits of natural resources. Construction of nuclear power plants. Russia has heavily advocated for nuclear technology, and has signed multiple agreements with African countries on joint development of nuclear technologies. We are also looking whether Russia is going to use those natural resources to be used in the nuclear technology projects. For example, right now we're watching whether Russia will get access to the uranium mines in Uganda. Russia and Uganda just recently signed a nuclear cooperation agreement.

The second bucket of priority lines is the security cooperation, and that includes the training of African security personnel, either in Africa or in Russia, by Russian special forces or security officials, and getting access to basing facilities. And the third one is the different arms deals that Russia has with African states.

Another bucket would be political relations, and that is mainly building interpersonal and institutional ties with different institutions in Africa. Russia, for example, in the lead-up to the Russia-Africa conference, hosted the meeting of the African Export-Import Bank in Moscow this summer. This is the second time the meeting was held outside of an African country. The first time it was held in China. Russia also held, on the sidelines, Russia-Africa Economic Summit and later also held Russia-Africa Development of Parliamentarism Summit, which focused heavily on inter-parliamentary relations, and thirty-eight countries came to Moscow to talk about potential inter-parliamentary ties. So, there's a lot of building of different institutions.

Last but not least is, so to speak, the soft power campaign in Africa, and that one is more in support to other priority lines. For example, there's a big focus on education, where Russia would provide scholarships to African students to study in Russia and sometimes those scholarships are attached to a specific degree or area of study, such as nuclear technology, and that ties into Russia's bigger push for nuclear technology in Africa. Sometimes it's any kind of education. There are different scholarships. There are different conferences. There's also cultural ties. Russia hosting the Russian Film Week at the DRC Embassy, or the potential cooperation that Russia

might have with the African Union, with the Southern African Development Community.

An additional push for that is Russian media, which is right now developing its presence in Africa. It already has its own location branches open throughout Africa and it's already providing content in different languages that are spoken throughout Africa. But currently we have noticed, specifically Russia Today and Sputnik channels, facilitating cooperation agreements with local African TV channels and radio stations, and potentially providing them with equipment for broadcasting or even content for their channels.

Maseh Zarif:

So, some of the types of cooperation and deals that you are describing, they sound really ambitious. I know that in the most recent update that you all wrote on Russian's campaign in Africa, you had a really nice map that laid out some of the different countries in which the Russians had struck some type of security cooperation agreement. It was a helpful way to be able to visualize that. I think there's a couple dozen, or maybe more than a couple dozen countries, that were on that map. Are there some specific country examples that provide a view of what a robust Russian security relationship looks like on the ground? What exactly do those kinds of agreements entail, and what are the different ways in which they do security cooperation?

Nataliya Bugayova:

Sure. Russia has a pattern of progression, of how it layers additional services on basic framework agreements. It has signed such framework agreements with over twenty countries. However, in the last two years, they successfully managed to layer additional services, specifically training of local security forces, and ranges from law enforcement to actual military. Now Russia would like to start opening official representations of its Ministry of Defense in some local African Ministries of Defense. Have not yet been successful, thus far.

The next logical layer that they're pushing for is access, expanded access to naval facilities, and we assess that they have had basing aspirations at least in Egypt, Libya, Eritrea, Sudan. Once again, those efforts have had limited success thus far.

The second I think great example is Rosatom, Russia's atomic agency, approaches numerous African countries for a basic framework agreement, then it starts to layer on additional services and offers to build nuclear technology and science centers, such as it did in Zambia and has aspirations to do so in Rwanda and Uganda currently, then it approaches for more substantial offers. In Egypt, where Russia is already building El Dabaa Nuclear Power Plant, Russia has to secure a contract to also supply fuel. We assess that the goal is to build a full range of services, from construction to delivery to supply of fuel to potentially supply of security for some of these facilities.

Maseh Zarif:

Actually, the expansion of nuclear technology deals really interest me, especially given that we all know the type of record that the Russians have had in terms of nuclear industry safety and those types of things. Do those issues play into whether or not African states are willing to sort of sign on to some of these deals?

Nataliya Bugayova:

Sure. The only deal that we currently have is Egypt's nuclear power plant and an agreement to build in Nigeria as well. The rest of the deals are actually in progress, and Russia is in the phase still where it's trying to cultivate the market and actually create the broader acceptance for the idea of nuclear energy. We believe that Russia has assessed that it first needs to build the layer of human network with whom it could work now and future. Therefore, it invests so much in the educational programs, scholarships, etc. And only then start laying on additional,

more substantive deals.

Maseh Z̧arif:

Right. The financing for some of the nuclear technology is obviously not a cheap undertaking. Are they generating the financing themselves for it?

Nataliya Bugayova:

In the case of Egypt, Russia has actually provided a substantial portion of the financing for El Dabaa Nuclear Power Plant.

Maseh Z̧arif:

Okay. Another issue that you touched on that I know garners a lot of headlines and interest, when you think about Russia's presence in Africa, you sometimes think about mercenaries and Private Military Contractors, otherwise known as PMCs. We've discussed this internally, how they operate. But one of the issues that I think you take in some of the coverage is getting lost in the weeds of what they're doing, and not sort of understanding how they're being used as a tool, and sort of how they fit into the bigger structure. So I wonder if you could educate us on how these entities operate, but then more importantly, how they fit into that bigger picture.

Nataliya Bugayova:

Sure. First of all, PMCs are important, but only a small part of Kremlin's campaign in Africa, and I think there is insufficient focus on the broader goals that PMCs are supporting. For example, in some cases their presence supports broader pitch to the local leaders to provide security on the ground. In other cases, we see them supporting Kremlin's broader objective to secure access to mineral resources. We have also seen PMCs taking part in the information campaigns on the ground. There are some reports coming out of Libya that is actually supporting the information campaigns.

Maseh Z̧arif:

Okay, so looking at the range of these activities that you're describing, if the Russians were evaluating how well they've done at advancing some of these lines of effort in order to achieve some of their broader objectives, what do you think that report card would look like for them?

Nataliya Bugayova:

Sure. I think the question of how we frame what Russia thinks of success in Africa is very important here. On the one side, they have not achieved certain goals. For example, the basing aspirations are going quite slowly. They have also not achieved the access to all the mineral resources or have signed all the contracts that they have wanted so far.

On the other side, Russia is definitely advancing its objectives. For example, they were successful in cohering numerous African leaders at variety of summits that Darina talked about earlier. They have signed specific deals, including concessions for the mineral resources. They have expanded their reach and they are building out their human network on the continent. It's also important to caveat that while Russia's investment is limited in Africa, it is strategic and it does have a potential to produce longer-term consequences. We alluded to some of them, including Russia's ability to link Africa to its broader geopolitical campaigns, especially information campaign and the global narrative space. There are longer-term implications for Russian ability to potentially undermine sanctions regime, and others.

Finally, I think it's also important to think of the framework of risk. This is a very important theater for Russia, yet it still has a higher margin for risk in Africa than it does, for example, in a core theater like Ukraine.

Maseh Zarif:

It's a really good point you raise about long-term implications. I know that our colleague over at the Critical Threats Project at AEI, Fred Kagan, has written and thought a lot about what it would mean if the Russians were able to fulfill some of these longer-term basing aspirations, because you're talking not only about a physical Russian military presence, but then how does that interact with the U.S. military's ability to be able to maneuver, to have freedom of action, and those types of things. So, from a planning perspective, even if some of these deals haven't actually broken ground, thinking about moments and opportunities, if they were able to be successful, is what that would mean for U.S. requirements, and the conditions within which the U.S. military has to operate, in particular.

So I want to talk about failures, particularly Russian failures, where they've tried to set out to achieve something in a particular state in Africa and have failed. I know that in the deeper Russia global work that you and a couple colleagues wrote earlier this year, you described something you called the 'blowback phenomenon' - cases where Vladimir Putin is after a certain mission set beyond Russia's borders, he tends to achieve some of his goals but not all of them, but then ends up having to absorb cost that he certainly did not intend to bear. Are there examples of that in Africa?

Nataliya Bugayova:

We have seen examples where Russian efforts were exposed, such as Russian attempts potentially to influence elections in Libya. Similarly, we have seen reports from Madagascar of alleged Russian attempts to influence elections in 2018. The interesting side note is that those were the same individuals participating in both activities, which could indicate limitations on Russian human assets on the ground, but also once again, perception of risk or just general sloppiness.

That said, we have seen Russian efforts being exposed in the case of South Africa, where Russia attempted to see through a deal with the former president, Zuma, about the construction of a nuclear power plant. The deal was exposed, and Russia still has a very hard time to re-establishing that relationship with South African state, and we believe that it will not be able to successfully establish a new deal like that in the near future.

Maseh Zarif:

So, Russia obviously does not operate in isolation. Africa in fact has a very large neighbor that also operates on the continent. I'm thinking of China here. How, if at all, is the Russian campaign in Africa interacting with what the Chinese are doing?

Darina Regio:

I think Russia and China are trying to strike a very delicate balance in Africa. It is one of the theaters where that is happening for Russia and China. It's not the only place. I think Russian campaign in Africa has mainly a different target than that of China. China's lines of efforts are mainly economic in nature, whereas Russia is pursuing more of political gains in addition to economic gains. Russia is trying to sort of co-opt the African countries, to make sure that they will support pro-Russia and Kremlin-friendly policies at the international level. That might look as support for Russian-led resolution in the UN level, or generally potential agreements, such as free trade agreement between the African Union and Russia. Something that they can politically be in favor. And Kremlin is providing their support in return for them at the international level and also support to the leaders of these African states.

The Kremlin has really pushed to develop personal ties with African states. We have not observed that with China yet. I think that's why there's a stark difference between the two approaches. However, there is also, of course, on the ground competition. The most recent one that comes to mind is when the Rio Tinto Corporation sold its shares of the Russian uranium mine in Namibia to China rather than to Russia, in July this year. But this is just an example of an economic company-to-company competition, rather than a state-level competition.

Maseh Zarif:

So, I want to read a passage from the most recent U.S. National Security Strategy. The document says that, "China is expanding its economic and military presence in Africa, growing from a small investor in the continent two decades ago into Africa's largest trading partner today. Some Chinese practices undermine Africa's long-term development, by corrupting elites, dominating extractive industries, and locking countries into unsustainable and opaque debts and commitments." So, that's about China, but I can't help but think that it also in some ways can apply to what the Russians are doing. Is that fair?

Nataliya Bugayova:

I can see one parallel in that Russia, similar to China, does not have a goal or even a consideration of good governance on the continent. Fighting corruption or helping local leaders enhance transparency is just not an objective for Russia, and Russia is supporting several local authoritarian leaders through its security and military cooperation.

Maseh Zarif:

If the Russians were able to meet some standard of success that they've set for themselves on the continent, taking a step back here, why would that matter?

Nataliya Bugayova:

I think first is that Russia's expansion of influence could, in the long term, reduce the impact of coercive measures on Russia, if Russia manages to use Africa as a potential money laundering platform that we discussed earlier. Secondly is the expansion of global military footprint, and the resource requirements it imposes on the U.S., but also the access to maritime chokepoints. Finally, I do think it's very important to consider potential counter-terrorism implications for the U.S., as Russia is supporting local authoritarian leaders that could fuel, in some cases, local grievances even further.

Maseh Zarif:

So, we've had a good overview of the summit, the background in what the Russians have been doing in Africa, where they'd like to go. I'd like to get a little bit of sense of what you're looking out for in the next few months, going into 2020. What should we be watching out for? What are the priority items that are on your list?

Nataliya Bugayova:

I am particularly worried about the expansion of Russia's information networks in Africa. We will be watching very closely the additional deals that both RT and Sputnik might be signing with local radio or TV stations, and further agreements to train and enhance local content and personnel. I think secondly, it would be very interesting to see whether Russia is successful or not in securing some of the security corporation deals, in terms of arms sales but also training contracts and potentially opening a representation of some of its Ministry of Defense in the local Ministries of Defense on the continent.

Maseh Zarif:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Darina Regio:

I think I would be mainly looking for the signing of free trade agreements with the African Union or any other regional organizations in Africa, or individual states. Any form of facilitation of economic deals between Russia and African countries. In addition, I would also look for a potential humanitarian agreement. Russia has recently framed itself as a potential savior for Ebola. Russia has developed a vaccine for Ebola and has tested it in Guinea, and then later received a request from DRC to ship more vaccines to help with the Ebola crisis. So if that happens and Russia actually secures more contracts, it will help boost Russia's image on the continent, not only from economic-political perspective, but also from a humanitarian perspective, which will effectively impact the Western image in Africa.

Maseh Zarif:

One final question. We're recording here during UN General Assembly week, so I'll put you all on the spot and ask, is Putin going to show? I've seen the agenda and his name wasn't necessarily on it as giving an address. So, do we know? And then if he does show, are there any priorities that he would be showing up to try to advance?

Darina Regio:

He's not scheduled to show. This year, it's only Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who is scheduled to co-chair two sessions at the UN General Assembly. Mainly, Russia will be focusing on counter-terrorism efforts, and trying to get support to lift sanctions, and Russian-led peace deals, whether it's in Ukraine or in Syria. In addition, the United States Embassy in Moscow has not issued visas to some of the Russian diplomatic delegation and Lavrov promised to address that issue at the UN as well. So, we're watching what kind of address, and if that's going to lead to a resolution.

Maseh Zarif:

Thank you for joining us, Nataliya and Darina. Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn more about ISW's work, and to sign up for our mailing list.

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