

**WEAPONS & MERCENARIES**

# Will African countries give beleaguered Russia a lifeline?

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Posted on Monday, 4 April 2022 09:17



Russia's President Vladimir Putin waves during a family photo with heads of countries taking part in the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit at the Sirius Park of Science and Art in Sochi, Russia, October 24, 2019. Sergei Chirikov/Pool via REUTERS

**Russia's ties and involvement in Africa had been growing for the better part of a decade, but the sanction-hit country cannot capitalise on its relations with African countries to either buoy its**

## economy or dampen the effect of being a pariah state.

Following its attack on Ukraine on 24 February, Russia has been hit by a swathe of sanctions from the West, most notably the European Union (EU) and the G7 countries. Should the war be drawn out further, Russia could default on its debt and provoke a wider economic crisis.

Unlike China, Russia has not been at the forefront of infrastructure development in Africa, but it has worked to develop a tangible presence there.

*The Africa Report* looks into Moscow's relationships on the continent.

## Transactions, not investments

Russia's modus operandi in Africa differs from that of other world powers. "Their activity on the continent, unlike China for instance, and the US and others, they're really not investments, they're more transactions. They'll purchase natural resources," Harry G. Broadman, the managing director of the Berkeley Research Group, says.

"You don't find a lot of [...] Russian mines or Russian factories, where[as] you do find that with respect to the Chinese," adds the author of *Africa's Silk Road: China and India's New Economic Frontier*.

"[Russia] doesn't have the financial resources to spread its wings on the continent as much as it would want to," Aanu Adeoye, an analyst at Chatham House, tells *The Africa Report*.

**"I wouldn't expect much to change in terms of Russia's interest in Africa,"** he adds. "Certainly I could expect Russia to go closer to certain countries, like Mali," whose military junta has been frozen out by its closest allies, the

## Economic Community of West African States.

Russia has ratcheted up its presence on the continent in recent years, pushing its trade with Africa to \$20bn per annum, double what it was in 2015.

That total, however, remains negligible compared with that of China, whose annual trade with Africa is valued at a whopping \$254bn – almost equivalent to the GDP of Algeria and Morocco combined.

## Weapons and mercenaries

Russia has been particularly interested in extractives deals and nuclear power projects in Africa, in addition to exporting grain – most notably wheat – to countries on the continent.

**With many of such activities either hurt by or put on hold** due to the war, Russia's provision of weapons and mercenary services to African countries might thrive.

“Those seem to be two big items,” Maxim Matushevich, a history professor at Seton Hall University in New Jersey, tells *The Africa Report*. “Beyond that I don't see much.”

Russia boasts half of the arms deals struck in Africa, including top markets such as Egypt, Algeria, Sudan and Angola.

Russian mercenaries are in conflict-hit African countries, namely Mali, Central African Republic and Libya. The Kremlin has shrugged off claims of its involvement in the provision of mercenary services through the shadowy Wagner Group.

“They are making money out of it,” Adeoye says. “For example, we know that ... they [Wagner Group] have been paid about \$10m a month to be in Mali. [...] It’s not a lot of money in the grand scheme of things.”

## Rapport with military leaders

Russia has been supporting some fragile regimes: military regimes and unstable governments, but not mainly for financial reasons it seems. “The framework through which Russia sees Africa ... is not an economic one,” Broadman says.

“They see it more as building up a political capital or alliances, and largely propping up regimes that will allow some kind of loyalty to Russia that Russia can count on [...] from a geopolitical perspective. For instance, when you saw the UN vote, you saw a sizeable number of the 54 African countries who abstained.”


Seventeen African countries – including Algeria, Angola, Mali, Mozambique, Senegal and South Africa – abstained from the voting on a UN resolution condemning the invasion of Ukraine early in March. Eritrea was the only African country to vote against it, while eight others did not vote.

## ‘Challenging the West from the right’

The Soviet Union, for decades, made major inroads in Africa, providing aid in different fields including infrastructure, agriculture and security.

**It was also politically influential**, having supported national liberation movements in South Africa, Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, in addition to being involved in other conflicts across Africa.

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Following the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia opted for a strategic withdrawal from the continent in the 1990s. But a political meltdown on the back of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 led the cut-off country to revive its relations with Africa.

“I think what the Russians are doing in Africa [...] are presenting an alternative to [...] Western liberal democracy. And that's what the Soviets did back in the day,” Matushevich says. “Once again they are challenging the West. But they are not challenging the west from the left, they are challenging the West from the right.”

## **Little comparative advantage for trade**

The sanctions that hurt Russia the most are those from the United States, the EU and Great Britain relating to Russian oil and gas exports, the revenue from which makes up about 40% of Russia's federal budget.

German economic minister Robert Habeck announced on 20 March that Germany and Qatar, one of the world's largest liquified natural gas exporters, had reached a long-term partnership agreement that will diminish Germany's dependence on Russian gas.

The International Energy Agency said that **3m barrels per day of Russian crude and refined oil**, around a quarter of its production quota, might be taken off the market starting from April.

“While oil is very pronounced [as an economic activity] in Russia, it's very pronounced in Africa. So I don't see [...] a strong comparative advantage,” says Berkeley Research Group's Broadman. “Maybe they would sell the refined products to Africa, but most of the oil they are selling is crude oil,” along with natural gas, which is also abundant in Africa.