

# The growing Russian role in sub-Saharan Africa: interests, opportunities and limitations

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to identify various Russian manifestations on expanding its role in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as shed light on the major obstacles it may face.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research paper uses the “national role theory” to analyze the factors that helped in the growing Russian role in sub-Saharan African countries. It assumes that every state seeks to play a particular role, and that role is reflected in its foreign policy, which is known as “role performance,” and this role originates from several sources. On the other hand, this role faces various obstacles, mostly from the external environment, especially the international system’s structure, global values and international obligations, known as “role prescriptions.”

**Findings** – Despite Russia’s ability to use all its capacities in expanding its role in the African continent, the degree of its influence varied from one field to another. While it was very influential in the military, security, political, diplomatic and technical fields, it is relatively less in the economic and counter-terrorism areas.

**Research limitations/implications** – This study paves the way for further researches related to international competition over sub-Saharan Africa, whether economically, militarily or politically, in addition to other studies related to potential cooperation opportunities, especially in security and combating terrorism.

**Originality/value** – This research’s significance stems from using the existing theoretical structure represented in national role theory in analyzing the Russian orientation toward sub-Saharan Africa, giving more attention to the latest developments in Russian strategy, as well as clarifying the major obstacles that may hinder its activities.

**Keywords** Russia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Cooperation, Foreign policy, International role

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

The partial American retreat from supporting African countries prompted other major global powers competing with it, especially Russia, to seek a return to its former era during the period of the Soviet Union in which Russia had the upper hand. The Russian desire seemed unbridled to establish a new foothold in the Russia–Africa Summit, which was held in the Russian city of Sochi on 23–24 October 2019, which dealt with strengthening the bonds of Russian–African relations in various strategic, political and military fields.

Since President Vladimir Putin came to power in the early 2000s, Russia began implementing a multi-track strategy to achieve further expansion in sub-Saharan Africa.



Russia has intensified its political and diplomatic presence by playing the role of mediator between the conflicting parties in many African countries, and it has also helped in providing necessary weapons, equipment and military training to combat extremist terrorist organizations in those countries as part of its global strategy to combat violent extremism, in addition to its active participation in peacekeeping operations in African countries.

Russia also seeks to take advantage of the African continent's promising economic opportunities by expanding its work scope in mining and exploring minerals and hydrocarbon resources. In conjunction with its continued leadership in peaceful nuclear technology and space, it opened new prospects for cooperation in various countries of the continent.

At the same time, it faced a set of challenges that hindered its expansion in some of these tracks, foremost of which is the severity of international competition between global powers, whether the major ones such as China, the European Union, India and the USA, or the medium ones such as Turkey and Israel. Also, the value of trade exchange between Russia and sub-Saharan African countries is weak compared to its counterpart in the European Union and China. In addition to the geopolitical risks resulting from the spread of armed terrorist organizations in various countries, the fragility of settlement paths between rebels and governments and the fall of some Moscow-allied regimes on the backdrop of revolutions such as the Bashir regime.

Accordingly, this study's time frame starts from the year 2000, in which Putin came to power until 2020. Putin gave the utmost importance to Africa as an essential arena of influence through which he can realize his vision for returning the multipolar world order.

### *1.1 Main research question*

This paper tries to investigate the main research question, which is as follows:

- RQ1.* What are the Russian Federation strategy's major pillars to expand its influence in sub-Saharan Africa since Vladimir Putin came to power?

### *1.2 Sub-questions*

To answer the previous question, the paper aims to find interpretations for the following sub-questions:

- Q1.* What are the significant factors that helped in growing the Russian role in sub-Saharan Africa?
- Q2.* What are the dimensions of the Russian strategy for expansion in sub-Saharan Africa?
- Q3.* What are the primary Russian interests in sub-Saharan Africa?
- Q4.* What are the crucial limitations that face the Russian strategy for expansion in sub-Saharan Africa?

### *1.3 Literature review*

Several scholars were interested in investigating the mainstream of the Russian foreign policy orientations. [Kumar \(2016\)](#) emphasized that clarifying Russian foreign policy requires a deep understanding of several indispensable elements, the first of which is the national and ideological peculiarity. Russia was never part of the so-called progressive West; even in

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the 19th century, Russia tended to conservative models such as Germany and Austria, not progressive France. Also, Russia has always given priority to the state over the people and centralization rather than the diffusion of power. Likewise, religion plays a unique role in Russia as it has isolated it from its European neighbors, which are dominated by Catholics and Protestants. Russia's geopolitics provides it with the comparative advantage of possessing a substantial geographical area with its enormous natural resources. Furthermore, the limited access to the warm-water port represents one of the most crucial reasons for a lot of Russian foreign policy orientations.

Zakaurtseva (2008) believed that President Vladimir Putin's era represents a milestone in the course of Russian foreign policy. During his first term in office, Putin upgrades national security, foreign and military policy concepts to guarantee Russia's progress regarding a multidirectional, balanced and pragmatic external strategy. In his second term, Putin continued implementing his new policy without facing any severe internal resistance.

While another category of studies dealt with Russia's policy toward sub-Saharan Africa in particular. Fidan and Aras (2010) argued that the Russian foreign policy toward Africa has passed through several phases. The first is trustworthy relations during the period of the Soviet Union when the USSR provided great political, ideological and military support to many African countries. With the collapse of the Union, the Russian–African relations witnessed a deterioration of its most prominent features, Boris Yeltsin's declaration, at the end of 1991, that Russia's foreign aid policy would be halted and that Russia would ask African countries to repay their debts as soon as possible. By the year 2000, with President Vladimir Putin's arrival in power, Russian–African relations began to return to their previous state before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Despite Russia's return to the African arena in recent years, Marten (2019) believes that the idea of a cold war in Africa did not erupt for several reasons, including the late arrival of Russia in Africa in comparison to other powers as the USA, the European Union and China all have long relationships across the continent, while Moscow is burdened of distrust after it left most of its old allies after the collapse of Soviet Union the early 1990s.

After reviewing all these literature, the researcher found that most of them are historical, outdated, descriptive, limited scope oriented and lack comprehensive analysis.

Therefore, this paper tries to fill the gap between what is already written and the latest developments that took place on reality, particularly in the previous three years. The researcher contribution will appear through making a clear categorization for various Russian manifestations in several groups (political, economic, nuclear, military, security and counter-terrorism) which is not mentioned in the previous literature.

Perhaps, the most prominent contribution of this paper will be discussing the challenges facing the Russian expansion process in sub-Saharan Africa. Consequently, it will pave the way for other studies on various means of overcoming those challenges, as well as it could be a good base for other papers about the nature of international competition in the African continent.

#### *1.4 Theoretical framework of the role theory in international relations*

The role theory found its roots mainly in psychology, not political science or international relations, as it focused on studying the behavior of individuals, as it referred to individual behaviors accompanied by their expectations that largely determine their position within the social system (Grossman, 2005, pp. 335–336).

The role theory emerged as one of foreign policy analysis theories since the 1970s, after scholars shed more light on the analysis of different patterns of behavior of countries during the Cold War period (Harnisch *et al.*, 2011, p. 1), some of which tended to prefer entering into alliances, while other international actors preferred non-alignment. Since then, other scholars have expanded the characterization of roles to include leadership, mediation or initiator and some counter-roles such as subordinate or aggressor within the social structure of international relations (Sekhri, 2009, p. 424).

The role can be defined as “specific norms (prescriptions arising from self-image and the expectations of the international system) and beliefs (referring to subjective probabilities about other actors’ demands) that translate into preferences” (Prestre, 1997, p. 7).

K.J. Holsti is considered a pioneer of the role theory in international relations, as he presented a comprehensive framework through which we can explain the reason behind performing a specific role in the global or regional arena (Herbut, 2017, p. 163) when he introduced his theory of national role conceptions (Thies, 2009, p. 2). Perhaps, the most crucial distinction of Holsti’s theory about international actor’s roles is that it is based on summoning approaches and role theories from sociology and other sciences and linking them to interactions and international relation (Mowad, 2009, p. 7).

Holsti’s role theory in international relations presents a comprehensive framework for describing national role performance, role conceptions, discovering the sources of those role conceptions and the external prescriptions of the role (Holsti, 1970, pp. 246–247).

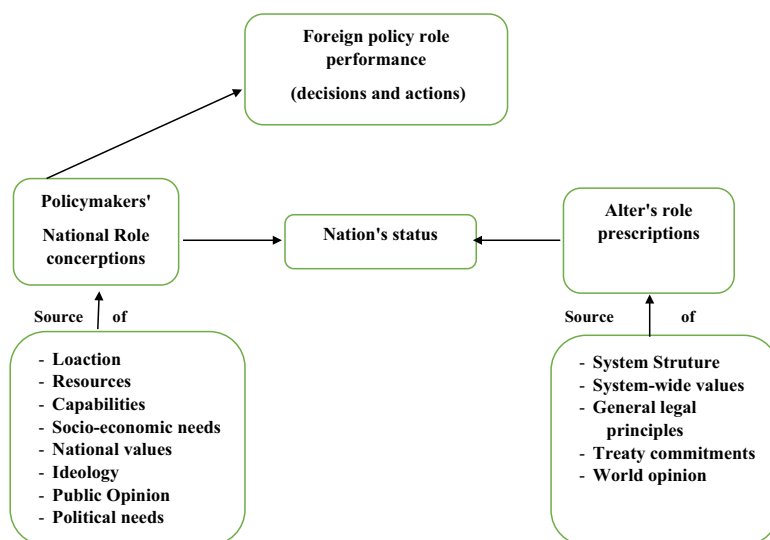
- Role performance is the overall foreign policy behavior of governments. It involves patterns of attitudes, decisions, responses, functions and commitments toward other states in the international system (Seeters, 2017, p. 10).
- National role conception: refers to the policymaker’s meanings of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules, actions to their state and the functions their country should perform in the international or regional systems (Holsti, 1970, p. 245) as well as their vision of the appropriate orientations and roles of their state toward the international arena (Krotz, 2002, p. 6).
- Role prescriptions: national role conceptions are linked to the role prescriptions originating from the external environment. There are several sources of role prescriptions, which are the structure of the international system; general legal principles and the rules, traditions and expectations of states as expressed in the charters of global and regional organizations, world opinion, multilateral and bilateral treaties; and less formal or implicit commitments (Holsti, 1970, p. 246; Figure 1).

## 2. Factors facilitated the Russian expansion in sub-Saharan Africa

Several factors facilitated the possibility of Russia’s role growing in the African continent, as it encompasses political, economic and cultural aspects, which are as follows.

### 2.1 Absence of a colonial legacy of Russia in Africa

Unlike many Western and European powers, Russia does not have a negative colonial experience with African countries, either politically or economically. On the contrary, it has contributed to supporting national liberation movements in some of them. Thus, a base of trust between the two parties could pave the way for further future cooperation (Balytnikov *et al.*, 2019, p. 4).



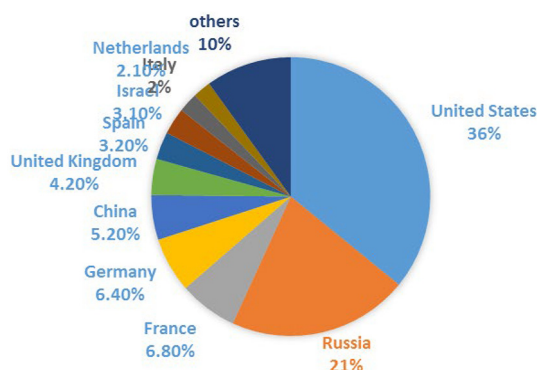
**Figure 1.** Holsti model of role theory and foreign policy

*2.2 Russian capabilities in providing African needs, especially weapons and arms*

Russia ranks second after the USA in terms of arms exports; during 2014–2018, Russian exports of arms constituted 21% of global exports (Wezeman *et al.*, 2019, p. 2). [Figure 2](#)

*2.3 Positive Russian attitude toward the African intellectuals*

Comparing to the negative prevailed Western perspective about the Africans as “useless students” who are unable to learn, the Russians committed themselves to unleash the creative and technological potentials of the continent and to build their education based upon their real capabilities (World Economic Forum, 2019).



**Source:** SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, March 2019

**Figure 2.** Global share of the largest 10 arms exporters 2014–2018

#### *2.4 Possessing giant hydrocarbons exploration and mining corporations*

The Russian Federation is considered one of the world-leading countries in natural resources development and exploration, as it has several huge companies working in hydrocarbons exploration such as Gazprom, Rosneft and Lukoil, in addition to those working in mining operations, for instance, Alrosa, Rusal, Nord Gold, Uralchem, Norilsk Nickel and Lobaye invest sarlu (Baobab, 2019).

The African continent is one of the world's wealthiest regions, including diamonds, whose production is concentrated in South Africa, Namibia, Botswana and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, with almost 55% of the world production. The continent alone produces 22% of the world's gold production. It also contributes 7% of the global production of natural gas, with reserves estimated at 513.2 trillion cubic feet, in addition to uranium, whose production is located mainly in South Africa, Niger and Namibia, and cobalt, which is unique to the Democratic Republic of the Congo by providing up to 55% of the total global supply. The continent also produces large quantities of bauxite in various countries, notably Ghana, Mozambique and Guinea, ranked fifth in the world in its production (Mining Africa, 2020). Thus, African countries are in dire need of Russia's efforts in these areas.

#### *2.5 African acceptance of Russia partnership*

Moscow represents a significant opportunity to the Africans, as their partnership will contribute to decreasing the African dependency on the giant lenders, such as China, and, thus, minimizing the possibilities of falling into a debt trap (Cilliers, 2016).

### **3. Russia's growing role manifestations in sub-Saharan Africa (role performance)**

Russia has relied on implementing an integrated strategy to develop more influence in sub-Saharan Africa based on several dimensions, which are as follows:

#### *3.1 Political and diplomatic manifestations*

The expansion of Russia's political role in Africa is not limited to achieving its interests but also includes reducing the space of other international powers' roles, especially the USA and the European Union, to back away from African countries. Hence, every new foothold or interest for Russia in the African region is at the expense of diminishing other powers' area. It is worth noting that this is entirely consistent with the significant Russian strategy to become a "major balance force" in both Africa and Asia, depending on its diplomatic skills in settling internal regional conflicts (Blank, 2020).

The Russian presence in Africa provides it with a more exceptional ability to form an influential voting bloc in the United Nations by forming new allies, which constitutes a real challenge to American and European domination of the international security system. Perhaps, this is what was expressed by the former National Security Adviser, John Bolton, in 2018, accusing Russia of selling weapons to African countries in exchange for their votes at the United Nations, as well as other incentives (Adibe, 2019).

On the political level also, Russia played a crucial role as a mediator in settling some political conflicts in Africa. This was evident in its role as a mediator in the Central African Republic case. In addition to its role in supporting the army to face terrorist organizations, Russia has paid great attention to mediation in settling disputes between armed groups. On 1 September 2018, Russia brokered a two-day secret peace meeting in Khartoum between the Christian Balaka Militia, led by Maxim Mokum, and the Muslim Seleka faction led by

Nur al-Din Adam. At the end of the meeting, the two movements echoed a statement declaring their commitment to peace ([Dabanga Sudan, 2018](#)).

On 30 September 2018, with a Russian initiative and the auspices of former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, Khartoum hosted a new round of negotiations between the most prominent armed groups in the Central Africa Republic, which resulted in the signing of an agreement laying down the basic principles for ensuring security and peace in the Central African Republic.

The Russian position was significantly optimistic about the agreement, as the special envoy for the Russian Foreign Ministry and the head of the Russian delegation, Konstantin Shuvalov, said, “The signing of the peace documents and the beginning of the negotiation process is a necessary step to achieve sustainable and stable development of the Central African Republic” ([Russia Today, 2018](#)).

As a result of the Russian initiative’s success, the African Union announced on 28 September 2018 that it had adopted the outputs of the Khartoum Declaration, which was based mainly built on the Russian initiative ([Sudan Tribune, 2018](#)) that paved the way to signing the agreement of peace and reconciliation between Central African Republic government and 14 armed movements on 5 February 2019 ([Sky New Arabia, 2019](#)).

On the diplomatic level, in June 2018, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov visited both South Africa and Rwanda, whereas the Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev a few months later visited Angola, South Africa and Algeria ([Stronki, 2019](#), p. 5) as well as Russian President Vladimir Putin attended the BRICS Summit during the same year ([Munusamy, 2018](#)).

On the other hand, 12 African heads of states visited Moscow from 2015 to August 2019. The Russian Duma also hosted delegations from several African countries in July 2019 within the international parliamentary forum devoted a full day to Russian–African relations ([Stronki, 2019](#), p. 6).

The Sochi Summit held in October 2019 is an essential milestone in the diplomatic cooperation between Russia and African countries, as it served as a meeting place not only for politicians but also for business people, as representatives of 54 African countries attended, including 40 heads of state and government, and resulted in the signing of about 50 contracts, agreements and memoranda of understanding in all economic, military, environmental and nuclear fields, with an estimated value of \$12.2bn. The summit also witnessed dropping debts on African countries estimated at \$20bn ([Simoncelli, 2019](#)).

### *3.2 Economic and natural resources manifestations*

Many Russian companies operating in the mining field in Africa are in the forefront; Alrosa Company, which is one of the largest international companies in diamond production, works in several mines in Angola. The Russian company signed a memorandum of understanding with the Angolan government in April 2019, according to which it will expand its activities and carry out new joint explorations with British companies in Botswana and Zimbabwe to find more diamonds. RUSAL, also one of the largest global aluminum producers, even exists in bauxite mining operations in Guinea and Nord Gold Company that operates in several locations in six African countries, most notably Burkina Faso and “Guinea Conakry.” Meanwhile, there is a strong presence of the Russian, Uralchem, company specialized in phosphate production in the south of the continent, especially Zambia and Zimbabwe. Moreover, The Norilsk Nickel company’s operations for mining and melting of nickel and palladium are spread in several African countries, especially South Africa and Botswana ([Baobab, 2019](#)).

The Russian companies' activities in Africa have extended to hydrocarbon resources, especially natural gas and oil. In 2019, Rosneft, one of the global largest producers of hydrocarbons, signed a memorandum with the National Hydrocarbon Company in Mozambique, according to which the Russian company will develop natural gas fields in Mozambique in a concession area that Russia had obtained in a global tender in 2015 (Metsel, 2019).

Russia's Lukoil is one of the most beneficiaries of Moscow's expansion into Africa. During the visit made by Felix Tshisekedi, president of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the Kremlin in May 2019, the company signed a letter of intent with the state-owned Congolese Oil Company (SNPC), according to which the company acquired an estimated share of \$800m from the Marine 12 natural gas field (Energypedia, 2019), in addition to the spread of the Russian company's investments in several other African countries, especially Cameroon, Nigeria and Ghana (Russia Business Today, 2019).

The Russian tendency to have a strong presence on the African continent was expressed in 2015, when the state-owned company, Rostec, won a \$4bn tender to build and finance a refinery project in Uganda (Manson, 2015). The Russian state-owned Gazprom Company is also seeking to participate in constructing the natural gas transmission pipeline from Nigeria through other African countries and then Algeria to Europe (France 24, 2019).

### *3.3 Technical and nuclear manifestations*

The Russian–African nuclear cooperation enjoyed a vast space at the Sochi summit and before that. On the sidelines of the nuclear energy conference held in Abu Dhabi on 30 October 2017, the Russian company, Rosatom, announced that it had signed an agreement with Nigeria to build and operate a nuclear power plant and a research center in the largest economy in Africa. Antoine Moskvén, Vice President of Rosatom for external marketing and activity development, asserted that “The development of nuclear technologies will allow Nigeria to strengthen its position as one of the leading countries on the African continent” (Reuters, 2017).

During Sochi Summit on 23 October 2019, the Russian company also signed various cooperation agreements in the field of the peaceful uses of nuclear energy with 16 countries, including a memorandum of understanding with Ethiopia for cooperation in the field of nuclear energy for peaceful uses, so that the deal includes the establishment of a center for nuclear science and technology in Ethiopia, as well as a high-energy nuclear plant, in addition to cooperation in the field of radioactive nuclear material control, and production of isotopes for use in industry, medicine and agriculture (Sputnik, 2019).

The CEO of Rosatom also signed with the Rwandan infrastructure minister the next day, an agreement under which the first center for nuclear science and technology will be established in Rwanda. It is expected to include a multi-purpose research reactor with a power of 10 MW and advanced research laboratories, which will contribute to researching the field of radiological biology and the production of radioisotopes used in the diagnosis and treatment of cancerous tumors (Mwai, 2019).

However, the Russian nuclear presence in the African continent dates back to before that, specifically for the year 2014 when the Russian company “Rosatom” signed a strategic partnership with South Africa, according to which Russia will build eight nuclear reactors by 2023 in a deal estimated at \$50bn (Khan, 2014). The Russian company also signed a similar agreement with Nigeria in April 2015, according to which Russia will construct four nuclear plants so that the first station will enter the work field in 2025 at an estimated cost of \$80bn (Rochan, 2015).



The space field also had a share of Russian expansion in the African continent. In January 2020, Sergei Dubic, Vice President of the Russian space company, Roscosmos, announced Angola's contract with the Russian companies Energia, and Information satellite systems, to develop a new satellite known as "Angosat 2." It will be more developed and able to transfer data to replace the Angolan satellite, which has experienced technical problems and has been lost nearly three years ago, as it is assumed that its development will be completed by the end of the 2021 (Russia Today, 2020).

### 3.4 Military manifestations

Russia has emerged as the largest supplier of arms to the African continent, with its arms exports accounting for nearly half of the continent's imports, more than twice as much as China and the USA. According to the data of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, during the period 2015–2019, Africa imported 49% of its military equipment from Russia, which is almost twice the size of that purchased from the USA by 14% and China by 13% (Defense world, 2020). Figure 3

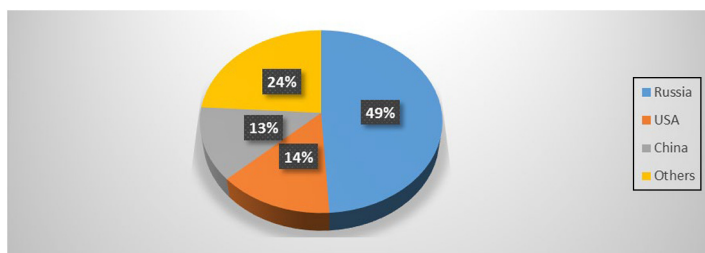
Angola is one of the essential markets not only for importing Russian weapons but also for its manufacture and distribution. In 2019, it acquired 12 SU-30K fighters through the Russian company Rosoboronexport (Defense World, 2019), with an estimated value reaching \$1bn. Angola is also seeking to become a country that manufactures and assembles Russian weapons on its territory, which was revealed by Angolan President "Joao Lawrence" on his official visit to Moscow in April of the previous year (Klomegah, 2019).

Russia–Africa military cooperation extended to Nigeria, on 23 October 2019; during Sochi Summit, Nigeria and Russia signed an agreement whereby Russia would supply 12 MI-35 helicopters to Nigeria (Reuters, 2019).

Cameroon also seeks to obtain a Russian Pantsir-s1 air defense system designed to protect military, industrial targets and ground forces units. The system includes combat vehicles, surface-to-air missiles, 30-mm bullets and a vehicle loaded with two combat vehicles (Army Recognition, 2019).

Russia also had signed an agreement earlier in March 2018 with Burkina Faso to supply it with two Mi-171Sh helicopters, knowing that it is not the first agreement between the two countries since Russia had given it in 2005 some other helicopters (African Aerospace, 2018).

It seems that Russia has a real desire for military cooperation with many countries of the African continent in the field of armament, especially South Africa, which was clearly



Source: Own Elaboration based data of <http://en.interaffairs.ru/experts/1035-africa-becomes-area-of-global-competition.html>

**Figure 3.**  
Arms exports to  
Africa by % from  
2015–2019 by source

expressed by Dmitry Shujayev, Head of the Russian federal service for military and technical cooperation on the sidelines of the Sochi Summit, stressing that Russia is interested in partnership with South Africa, which has an advanced level of military industries (Defence Web, 2019; Figure 4).

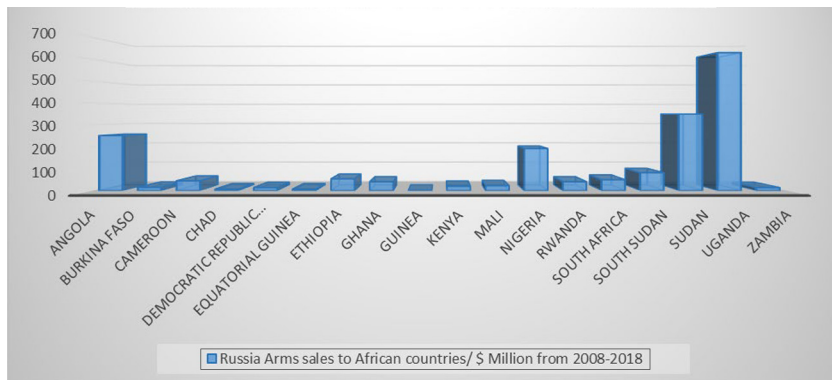
3.5 Security cooperation manifestations

Since 2014, Russia has signed a large number of joint security cooperation agreements with 19 African countries, which are Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroun, Central African Republic, Chad, Niger, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Military maneuvers are the latest Russian mechanisms that contribute to training in counter-terrorism operations. On 25 November 2011, the first joint maritime training between Russia, China and South Africa was launched (Fabricius, 2020). Russia participated by a naval group led by the Marshal Ustinov cruiser, as well as the medium-sized naval carrier “Vyazma” and an SB-406 rescue boat. South Africa contributes with SAS Amatola, SAS Drakenberg and Chinese Weifang guided-missile frigate also participated in the exercises. This training bore the codename “Mosi” which means “smoke” in one of the South African languages (Fedoseev, 2020).

Russia plays an active role in UN peacekeeping operations not only in Africa but in the world. Russia ranks among the top countries in terms of military observers working in UN missions. (Russian Federation Ministry of defense, 2020). As of January 2020, The Russian military observers participating in the UN missions amounted to 78 observers (United Nations, 2020). Among them, 26 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 10 in the Ivory Coast, 5 in South Sudan, 4 in Liberia and 2 in North Sudan (The Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 2020).

The Russian Federation has attached particular attention to the Central African Republic during the previous three years, especially after the security situation’s deterioration (Hassan, 2018). In this regard, at the beginning of 2018, Russia sent five military officers and 170 civilian trainers to the capital, Bangui, and Moscow handed over new weapons to the national army after the end of the UN embargo on Bangui (France 24, 2018).



**Figure 4.**  
Russia arms sales to African countries/\$ million from 2009 to 2018

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

Moscow continued to follow the same path toward the Central African Republic. In April 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decision whereby his country sends 30 soldiers to the Central African Republic within the United Nations peacekeeping mission to help achieve more stability, which has already resulted in sending military observers and officers, as well as specialists in the areas of military communications (Elwatan News, 2019a, 2019b). Andriy Kemarski confirmed in February 2020 that his country had sent 235 soldiers to the Central African Republic to train the army and police, noting that this came after coordination with the UN Security Council (Elwatan News, 2020).

Russia has replaced establishing military bases in African countries by extending the role of some private security companies that carry out various security tasks in the forefront of which provide technical support and training for armies and national security services to be eligible to confront extremist armed terrorist organizations in different African countries (Ostensen and Bukkvoll, 2019, p. 22). It is worth noting that some of the African countries, especially the Central African Republic, have already discussed with Russia the opportunities to establish a Russian military base on its territory, according to the President of the Republic's statements, Faustin Arkang Tuadira, on 25 October 2019. However, the Russian Ambassador to the Central African Republic, Vladimir Tutorenko, has denied this precisely on 3 February 2020, stressing no Russian military bases. He also asserted that Russia is not participating in any military operation in Bangui, noting that there is only one military base belonging to France (Elshourouk News, 2020).

Operations of Russian private military and security companies, particularly the Wagner Group with close ties to the Russian intelligence service, are active in the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Mozambique and Libya. Despite their special legal status, it acts as a proxy for Russia in these countries. Wagner Group members provide security assistance and military training, as well as combat support. In return, the company owners, especially Yevgeny Viktorovich – who is close to President Putin – will receive concessions and contracts for mining and oil production, in addition to other economic advantages.

The company's members are deployed extensively in the Central African Republic; in January 2018, the company announced the deployment of 175 of its civilian members, who provides the army with a set of light weapons and missiles, as well as their notable role in training regular forces to counter armed opposition terrorist organizations, in addition to their role in ensuring that no weapons or equipment reach the armed terrorist militias deployed in the country (Hedenskog, 2018).

In north Sudan, particularly near the border between Darfur and the Central African Republic, 500 Russian elements were seen claiming to belong to Russian private security companies, so that their mission is to train the army and equip them with weapons, and that was confirmed by Moscow for the first time on 24 January 2019, in a statement issued by the ministry of foreign affairs (Euro News, 2019).

Several reports indicated that 200 elements of the Russian security group Wagner arrived in Maputo, Mozambique's capital, to assist the army in confronting armed jihadi groups linked to ISIS and the Ansar al-Sunna group in the Cabo Delgado region of northern Mozambique (Sauer, 2019). However, it appears that these elements have faced significant losses, which prompted the company to withdraw some of them to reduce these losses (Flanagan, 2019). The military experts justified the failure of the Wagner elements in dealing with the conflict in Mozambique that they were "unprepared" for the mission and that they were "trying to apply the Russian or European pattern in the fight against the African conflict" (Bishop, 2019).

From the Russian perspective, relying on those companies, whether Wagner or other – Moscow has 12 private military companies [1] – offers several benefits, foremost of which is

the repudiation of accountability, whether local or international, because Wagner elements are not considered military personnel, but rather as employees in a private company, so Russia can deny that it is formally involved in any of the operations in those countries (Rácz, 2020).

### *3.6 Counter-terrorism efforts manifestations*

Fighting terrorist groups lies at the heart of the Russian strategy not only in Africa but also in its regional and international arena. The Russian federation dedicates all its military, political and intelligence capabilities to combat terrorism and undermines its activities, and that was reflected in the adoption of a set of laws on combating terrorism, the most prominent of which are the federal law to “combat terrorism” adopted by the government on 25 July 1998, which represents the central legal pillar of all Russian efforts to combat terrorism (Omelicheva, 2009).

Under the Russian vision that views terrorism as an imminent threat and consistent with its strategy in confronting armed terrorist organizations in Africa, Moscow has played an active role in assisting African countries in facing Boko Haram terrorist organization (Moore, 2020).

The Boko Haram Nigerian movement is a group with Islamic religious background founded in 2002 in the state of Borno in northern Nigeria, led by Muhammad Yusuf. Still, its actual presence began in 2004 after it moved to the state of Yobe near the border with Niger, where its military operations against security and civil institutions started in Nigeria. But the Nigerian authorities confirm that the movement’s origin dates back to before that, specifically for 1995, when Abu Bakr Luan founded the Ahl al-Sunna and Immigration group at Maiduguri University Borno State. There is no comprehensive, exact statistics about the number of its members; however, it encompasses students who refused to complete their study because of rejecting Western educational curricula that corrupt their beliefs. According to them, the group calls for the necessity of applying Islamic sharia in all Nigerian territories, including the southern states with a Christian majority (Aljazeera Encyclopedia, 2013). Over the past years, the movement’s operations have contributed to many victims in Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Niger (Brechenmacher, 2019, p. 1).

As a result of the continuous threats and losses left by Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Nigerian authorities have been searching for foreign military assistance to confront their operations, but they have not found a sufficient response, especially from the American and European parties, which led them to head toward Russia mainly in 2014 to provide training for its forces, as well as supply it with military equipment to counter the armed organization, which Moscow welcomed, significantly as this will expand its influence in the region at the expense of other competing international parties, and consequently achieving the Russian vision of returning as an influential power on the international scene (Hedenskog, 2018). Although there are no official data on the nature of the weapons supplied by Moscow to Nigeria, several reports indicated that they were provided with T-72 tanks, multiple RM70 missile launchers, anti-mine mines as well as MI35 helicopters with all associated weapons and accessories (Fahaum Network for social justice, 2020).

Russian support to Nigeria took an official dimension in August 2017, after the two sides signed a cooperation agreement according to which Moscow provided training in some military missions to combat terrorism and piracy and train Nigerian personnel in peacekeeping missions. Also, October 2019 witnessed the signing of a security agreement between Russia and Nigeria, under which Russia pledged to provide weapons, equipment and training to Nigerian security forces to counter the ongoing activities of Boko Haram inside Nigerian territory, as some reports indicated the possibility of a role for Wagner

private Security Group in these training (Daily Maverick, 2019). Russian assistants to Nigeria prompted several high-ranking officials to express their gratitude to Russia, headed by the minister of defense Mansour Dan Ali, who expressed his appreciation at the eighth international security conference held in the Russian capital, in April 2019, for the Russian government for its training and grants that have benefited his country over the past years, in addition to providing weapons and equipment that have contributed to combat armed terrorist organizations, especially Boko Haram (Obichie, 2019).

The Russian support in countering Boko Haram extended to neighboring countries that are experiencing intensive activities. Foremost among them is Niger, where the Russian strategy relied on two main pillars. The first is to provide Niger with 12 MI-35 attack helicopters to be used in confronting their extremist activities in October 2019 (Elwatan News, 2019a, 2019b). The second is to offer training grants to Niger army personnel in Russian academies on the latest methods of confronting armed organizations. This was recognized by Niger's Foreign Minister, Kala Ankurau, in several press interviews for various international news agencies (Russia Today, 2019).

Cameroon was also among those countries that Russia was interested in helping to combat Boko Haram operations. In 2015, Russia unveiled a plan to provide military aid to Cameroon, which included heavy artillery equipment, missiles, air defenses, anti-aircraft missile systems and armored vehicles. In addition to signing military and technical cooperation agreements between the two countries, Moscow has provided specialized military training for Cameroonian forces to confront Boko Haram (Adamowski, 2015).

Contrary to Russia's remarkable activities in combating terrorism in those countries, the Russian efforts in the Horn of Africa countries, such as Somalia, especially in facing ISIS and Shabab Mujahedeen, are at their minimal level (Ramani, 2020, p. 2).

#### 4. Challenges facing the growing Russian role in sub-Saharan Africa

The Russian expansion strategy in Africa faces a set of challenges that can hinder its path, which is as follows:

##### 4.1 International competition on Africa

Africa is witnessing an influential presence not only from major global powers such as the USA, China and France but also from some middle powers, especially India, Turkey, Israel and some Gulf countries, particularly the UAE. Therefore, Russia faces fierce competition with those influential powers, especially China, which has expanded its role greatly in recent years (Balytnikov *et al.*, 2019, p. 13).

China is at the forefront of Russia's rival powers in Africa. In recent years, Beijing has provided easy loans to African countries. China also has expanded significantly in establishing infrastructure projects on the African continent. Since the beginning of this century, the China–Africa Cooperation Forum has been held regularly, and nearly four countries have joined in a project, “One Belt One Road.” The Chinese also prioritized soft power by promoting cultural and scientific relations to attract the African national elite's loyalty, which reflected in provisioning thousands of scholarships for African students in Chinese universities (Isaev, 2019). Moreover, China did not ignore the military dimension, as it established its first military base outside of the People's Republic of China borders in Djibouti in 2017 (Jacobs and Perlez, 2017).

France is considered the most active power in Africa because of its long colonial history. Even after independence, France remains strongly present, especially at the military level. France has signed defense agreements with several countries such as Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Senegal, Central African Republic, Cameroon, Gabon and Comoros. However, some of these

agreements have been revised, and others have been canceled. France appears to have strengthened its ground military presence in the Central African Republic as part of the mission to stabilize and train local security forces. Likewise, France has been heavily militarized in Chad from 1986 until now (Signe, 2019). Military bases, whether permanent or temporary, are also widespread in Africa. The permanent bases are the most important strategically; they are located in seven countries: Cameroon, Gabon, Ivory Coast, Central African Republic, Senegal and Chad (Degang, 2011, p. 93).

#### *4.2 Depreciation of trade value between Russia and the African continent*

Russia is still relatively far in terms of trade exchange value with African countries, especially sub-Saharan countries if compared with both the European Union and China. The total value of trade exchange reached only \$5bn between Russia and the South countries, and in the case of adding the North African countries amounted to nearly \$20bn. Meanwhile, the value of trade exchange between Africa and the European Union reached \$275bn, \$200bn with China, \$70bn with India, \$53bn with India and \$20bn with Turkey (Kalika, 2019, p. 7). Perhaps that is what prompted Russian President Vladimir Putin, during his meeting with leaders and senior officials of African countries at the Sochi summit, to announce his intention to double this trade value to account for \$40bn during the next five years (Niba, 2019).

#### *4.3 Limited Russian fields*

Despite what Russia possesses, it only has weapons and military training to provide to Africa. Many analysts and experts believe that it is insufficient, especially after the international scene developments in recent years (Blank, 2020).

#### *4.4 Geopolitical risks*

Over the past decades, the African scene witnessed many conflicts as a result of the remarkable growth of armed terrorist group's activities, especially in the Sahel region, where those conflicts varied in terms of their intensity and causes, including political, religious and ethnic reasons (Nizard and Mauratille, 2019). This led to a decline in foreign investment and trade flow, resulting in the disruption of the African development process and the overthrow of some Russian allies' regimes, particularly Omar Al-Bashir in north Sudan. This affects the nature of Russian alliances in the region, as well as the possibility of reducing the Russian expansion capability in Africa.

### **5. Conclusion**

Russia has seized the opportunity of the partial American retreat from the continent to expand its influence in the southern half, meanwhile, setting a solid foundation in the northern part of it. This enables Russia to play an influential and noticeable role in the entire continent.

The Russian strategy relied on a multi-dimensional approach to expand its influence in Sub-Saharan Africa. It has increased its political presence aiming to create effective voting blocks in the United Nations. It also played a vital role as a mediator in some cases, such as the mediation between different factions and the Central African Republic government.

On the military level, it provided arms and military assistance to African countries to counter-terrorism, as well as military training and joint maneuvers. However, the Russian pattern in dealing with the terrorist phenomenon in Africa varied from one region to another, as it was more intense in some countries in the middle of the continent, especially

Nigeria and Cameroon, and the Central African Republic in countering Boko Haram, and relatively less in the Horn of Africa, particularly in dealing with Shabab Mujahedeen Movement and ISIS. It was then almost a shallow profile in the Sahel regions because of Mali's influential French presence.

Despite the Russian efforts in combating terrorism in Africa, terrorist activities have increased significantly in recent years because of the spread of other objective reasons such as the complexity of reconciliation paths between African parties and the retreat of other international forces in combating African terrorism. In addition to Russia's lack of experience in fighting terrorism in the African environment.

Economically, Russia has strengthened its presence by intensifying the activities of companies operating in hydrocarbons and natural resources exploration, as economic penetration to Africa came on the top priority of the Russian president. This was reflected in many economic agreements and contracts between the Russian companies and African counterparts during the Sochi summit with more than \$12.5bn.

On a technical level, Russia found its way to the African sub-Saharan countries by building nuclear reactors and satellites in several countries, such as Angola.

Despite Russia's ability to use all its capacities in expanding its role in the African continent, the degree of its influence varied from one field to another. While it was very influential in the military, security, political, diplomatic and technical fields, it was relatively less in the economic and counter-terrorism areas because of the many challenges it faces.

Russia faced a set of challenges that slowed its progress pace, especially the fierce international competition between various international powers, and the low value of trade exchange between sub-Saharan countries and Russia compared to other global powers.

However, Russia's opportunities remain convincing in achieving further expansion in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly with the unbridled political desire by Russian President Vladimir Putin that appeared in the Sochi summit in October 2019.

#### Note

1. RSB-Group, Antiterror, MAP, MSGroup, Centre R, ATKGroup, Slaycorps, PMC Wagner, ENOT Corp, Cossacks, Patriot and Shchit.

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