



France and the Russian Presence in Africa

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In 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron initiated a Franco-Russian dialogue aimed at improving bilateral relations, as well as EU-Russia relations. This effort could be confounded by the growing Russian engagement in Africa, mainly through their military, business, and propaganda activities. These are increasingly harmful to France, which traditionally engages in the politics and economies of African states. The French government hasn't yet prepared any coherent strategy vis-à-vis the Russian challenge, preferring to wait it out.

As a result of the isolation in its relations with the most developed countries, Russia is engaging in economic and political expansion on the emerging markets. Africa is [an important battleground](#) of this policy, as many countries of the continent need support in developing infrastructure and reinforcing security. Franco-Russian competition is taking place mainly in the Sahel region and in the Central African Republic (CAR), which, as former French colonies, still draw France's attention. Those countries abound in natural resources and suffer from a weakness of central power. This weakness is caused, in the case of the Sahel, by the presence of Salafist jihadist groups in the borderland of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. The CAR is torn by civil conflict between Muslim and Christian-animist militias.

French and Russian Engagement in the Region. Since 2014, France has been leading operation *Barkhane* in the Sahel region. Its purpose is to fight jihadism, but also to protect investments of the Total (Mali) and Areva (Niger) groups. It also contributes to European security by decreasing migratory pressure. The French forces are supported by the armies of G5 countries (Burkina Faso, Tchad, Mali, Mauretania and Niger) as well as by British, Canadian and Estonian units. The military engagement is accompanied by a €2 billion development aid package (2013 to 2018).

Russia is present especially in Mali and Burkina Faso, through military cooperation and arms deals. It also destabilises France-G5 cooperation, seeding propaganda in social media. Russia-linked "trolls" create profiles and promote a negative image of Europe, with particular regard to France. Simultaneously, they present Russian engagement as selfless. The Russia government media are active too, as shown by the example of the French-language version of *Sputnik*.

Russia's engagement in the CAR is [more advanced](#) thanks to the decreased presence of France in this country after the peacekeeping operation *Sangaris* ended in 2016. From the Russian perspective, the geographical situation of the CAR is crucial: the country borders the Sahel as well as Sudan, traditionally influenced by Russia. Of equal importance are diamond mines, controlled by Russia, in the north of the country.

The Image of France and Russia. In theory, the Russian and French objectives in this part of Africa are similar: both countries declare their support for local authorities, fight against terror and development cooperation. The Russian offer may be an interesting alternative for African governments, as Russia is more focused on stability and unity of power than on inter-ethnic reconciliation. The French approach encourages democratisation, regular elections and consensus. However, France, unlike Russia, is viewed as

an oppressive power, especially by the populations of Mali, Burkina Faso and the CAR. This is a result of collective memory about the colonial past of France and the “international aid” of the former USSR. French troops in the Sahel are accused by the locals of ineffectiveness and of favouring irredentist forces (such as Tuaregs in the north of Mali). Allegedly, French troops don’t care enough about the security of civilians in the vicinity of operations.

Neither does the Russian presence always foster stability. A good example is the RCA, where Russia’s actions, aimed at the domination of diamond mines, have only embittered internal conflicts. The Wagner Group, a private military company, doesn’t hesitate to make tactical deals with opponents of official authorities when it comes to securing access to resources.

France’s Reactions. The French authorities are laconic in comments on Russian actions. Early in 2019, foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian was critical. Then, defence minister Florence Parly, on the occasion of her visit to Bangui, handed over to the CAR government 1,400 pieces of hand and amphibious weapons, a gift that can be treated as a reaction to Russian military assistance. In November 2019, Macron announced the intensification of French engagement to the EU training mission in the CAR (EUTM RCA), as well as in development aid for the country. The muffling of anti-French campaigns in the Central African media would have been the price to pay for this step.

At the France-G5 Summit in Pau (January 2020), Macron issued a warning about “third countries” intervening in Africa through mercenaries. Those words, along with the decision to send 600 additional French soldiers to the Sahel, can also be treated as a signal to Russia. The meeting was a reaction to the helicopter crash in Mali, in November 2019, that killed 13 French soldiers. After the crash, many articles and internet posts appeared accusing the French of incapacity and hidden colonial intentions in Africa. French analysis suggests the publications may have been inspired by Russia.

It’s unknown whether Africa was a topic in talks between Macron and Putin last year. Pierre Vimont, Macron’s special envoy for trust-building with Russia, announced this issue would be raised. The dialogue should prevent the collapse of the situation in the Sahel and the CAR into a Syrian or Libyan scenario. French restraint may also arise from hope for Russian self-defeat in Africa, caused by excessive engagement in military actions and clumsy meddling in the political life of African states. In some countries (Sudan, South Africa and Algeria), Russia has recently lost trustworthy leaders. To others (Madagascar, Comoros and Guinea), it has sent political consultants whose activity has raised negative emotions. Russia still doesn’t have any coherent strategy for Africa, instead benefitting from the vacuum created by the previous disengagement of France and the United States. Granting the main role in Russian expansion to a private person (Yevgeny Prigozhin) could mean, in the opinion of some French analysts, that Africa is not among Putin’s priorities. All this taken together, it can be tempting for the French authorities to wait out Russian expansion.

If a confrontation were inevitable, France would be willing on economic grounds. This year’s France-Africa Summit (scheduled for 4 to 6 June in Bordeaux) was to coincide with the Saint Petersburg Economic Forum (just cancelled because of coronavirus). For Macron, the June meeting in Bordeaux would be an opportunity to redefine France’s relations with African countries. The summit program unveils teleological differences, with Russia strengthening intergovernmental cooperation while France directs its development aid to local authorities, NGO-s and private organisations. For Russia, security issues are at the core of its relations with Africa. The organisers of the Bordeaux forums want to focus on the quality of life in the cities and rural areas, public services, environmental and overpopulation issues.

Prospects and Conclusions. France aims to de-escalate tensions with Russia caused by the illegal annexation of Crimea. Unlike his two pro-Atlantic predecessors, Macron’s priority is to restore ancient France’s status as “power of counterweight”, balancing between China, Russia and the United States. Although its interests are jeopardised by Russian expansion in Africa, France tries to avoid emphasising this or showing a reaction to it. France tries instead to step up its economic and social engagement, by offering a distinct model of cooperation.

At the same time, France aims to internationalise the military presence in Africa. Poland could be asked to participate in an operation in the Sahel. By contrast, no increased presence of France on the Eastern NATO or EU border should be expected. French leaders and analysts seem to agree that Russia intensified its engagement in Africa as a result of Western sanctions. This leads them to conclude that the sanctions should be eased to facilitate detente with Russia in Europe. This approach discourages the Eastern Europeans states from engagement in the Sahel.

Russian actions in Africa are aligned with the country’s general tactic to penetrate those places in Europe’s neighbourhood where the European presence diminishes. The French decision to wait it out could be perceived by Russia as proof of weakness and encouragement to further actions. Instead of easing sanctions against Russia, tightening them be advisable to decrease its destabilising potential.