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## Russian Influence in Africa



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President Putin's invasion of Ukraine has turned the world on its head and threatens an escalation which could lead to a much wider conflict in Europe and beyond.

The East-West Cold War conflict which was supposed to have been resolved thirty years ago when the Berlin Wall came down and communism and the Soviet Union collapsed has returned with a vengeance – And the fall out of the war in Ukraine will be felt far and wide, in Africa as well as the rest of the world.

Just as the Cold War was often prosecuted as a "hot war" in Africa particularly in countries like Angola and Mozambique, there are genuine fears that the African continent could be sucked into a protracted Russian conflict and suffer dire consequences.

African analysts have often spoken of a "new scramble for Africa" as competing outside powers battle for Africa's resources. This war in Ukraine seems likely to intensify that scramble to exploit the continent again. It is by no means certain that African states will line up behind the West in condemnation of Russia's aggression.

Although at the United Nations 141 countries voted for Russia to end its invasion and to completely withdraw its forces from Ukraine, some 17 African countries abstained, revealing a dangerous fault line in Africa that threatens to thrust the Russia-Ukraine conflict into the heart of the continent's economic and political future.

Those 17 countries included South Africa which meekly called on Russia "to immediately withdraw its forces from Ukraine in line with the United Nations Charter", while the African Union just called on both Russia and Ukraine to observe a ceasefire to "preserve the world from the consequences of planetary conflict".

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It is perhaps a reflection that for several years Russia has been deepening its presence in Africa with economic deals, arms sales and military and mercenary collaborations. Trade between Russia and Africa has doubled since 2015. It's now worth around \$20 billion a year.

Thousands of Russian mercenaries are operating in countries like Mali, Sudan and the Central African Republic – and through them Russia's influence in Africa is growing. Sudan has already sided with Russia. Its deputy leader flew into Moscow on the day Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine to negotiate for Russian money and political support to suppress pressures to move to civilian rule.

Russian military involvement is a force in the volatile Sahel region where Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger have sought Russian fighters in their war against Islamic extremists. In Mali the regime is so close to the Russian mercenary presence that it has ceased to collaborate with France, its former colonial power. As a result France is pulling out its 2,400 troops citing obstructions by the military junta that took power in 2020. Where Western powers retreat, Russian mercenaries advance.

Russian mercenaries are also fighting in Mozambique and Angola. Private military contractors like the so-called Wagner Group are proliferating on the ground in many of Africa's conflict zones. The Wagner Group is said to be controlled by President Putin's associate Yevgeny Prigozhin, although Putin denies any links with them and calls them "private businesses with private interests tied to extracting energy resources like gold or precious stones".

Wagner operatives have also been spotted on the ground in Ukraine where they are said to be leading the hunt to track down and assassinate Ukraine's President Zelenskyy. The Group's track record in Africa has been one of brutality and human rights abuses. According to Joseph Siegle of the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies the Wagner Group operate in league with the Kremlin and are part of Putin's toolkit to prop up weak African regimes in exchange for economic advantage and the exploitation of Africa's precious mineral resources:

"Every place we've seen Wagner deployed around the world and in Africa – be it Libya, Sudan, Mozambique, Central African Republic- it has been a destabilising force. What Russia has been doing has been deploying mercenaries, disinformation, election interference, arms-for-resources deals, aiming at capturing wider influence".

Whatever happens in the Ukraine Russia is planning a 2<sup>nd</sup> Russia-Africa Summit in St Petersburg this October, hoping to build on the Sochi summit in 2019 when deals were signed with some 43 African leaders to provide their countries with military armaments and agricultural products. Far more African leaders attended the Russian Summit than came to the UK's pre-lockdown UK-Africa Summit in 2020.

Undoubtedly some African countries prefer to hedge their bets rather than fall out with Russia. South Africa, the continent's only representative in the G20, demonstrated this new non-aligned trend perfectly when it abstained in the UN vote rather than condemn Russia's invasion. As one of President Cyril Ramaphosa's Ministers Lindiwe Zulu put it "Russia is our friend through and through and we are not about to denounce that relationship that we have always had".

Ms Zulu studied in Moscow during the apartheid time and clearly those historic links run deep. It is a relationship that Russia continues to foster in its bid to present itself as Africa's best friend in its objective to expand its influence on the African continent. It was no accident that three days into its invasion of Ukraine Russia's Foreign Ministry found the time to tweet a reminder to South Africa of its support in the fight against apartheid.

There remains a gap of understanding between leaders like Ms Zulu and other South Africans who were appalled by their country's decision to abstain. A headline by the South African News 24 website declared:

"History will show South Africa sided with the oppressor".

News24 accused South Africa of "misplaced, corrupted loyalty to a dictator who is losing his empire day by day" and went on to quote the late Archbishop Tutu who once said:

"If you are neutral in situations of injustice you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality".

South Africa exports 12% of its apples and pears to Russia, and 7% of its citrus fruits, but surely this can't be the reason for South Africa's reticence to speak out against Russia's aggression?

Perhaps the most interesting African perspective on the invasion has come from Kenya's UN Ambassador Martin Kimani. His comments also drew on Africa's history when he summoned the continent's painful colonial past to compare President Putin's invasion as the act of a leader "stoking the embers of dead Empires".

Ambassador Kimani said Kenya opposed Putin's war, and went on to teach President Putin a lesson from history, comparing Russia's invasion to Africa's colonisation under the British, French and Portuguese Empires:

"Kenya and almost every African country was birthed by the ending of empire. Our borders were not of our own drawing. They were drawn in the distant colonial metropolises of London, Paris, and Lisbon with no regard for the ancient nations that they cleaved apart.

"Today, across the border of every single African country live our countrymen, with whom we share deep historical, cultural, and linguistic bonds. At independence, had we chosen to pursue states on the basis of ethnic, racial, or religious homogeneity, we would still be waging bloody wars these many decades later. Instead, we agreed that we would settle for the borders that we inherited, but we would pursue continental political, economic, and legal integration".

And in a reference to President Putin's claim that Ukraine wasn't an independent country but belonged as part of Russia he warned him of the dangers of trying to re-create what he called "dead empires":

"We believe that all states formed from empires that have collapsed or retreated have many peoples in them yearning for integration with peoples in neighbouring states. Kenya rejects such a yearning from being pursued by force. We must complete our recovery from **the embers of dead empires** in a way that does not plunge us back into new forms of domination and oppression".

Ambassador Kimani, who is a former Director of Kenya's National Counter Terrorism Centre and a Doctor of War Studies at Kings College London, said Africa had rejected yearnings for redrawing its often contrived borders in the interests of peace:

“Rather than form nations that looked ever backwards into history with a dangerous nostalgia, we chose to look forward to a greatness none of our many nations and peoples had ever known. We chose to follow the rules of the Organisation of African Unity and the United Nations Charter, not because our borders satisfied us, but because we wanted something greater, forged in peace”.

As Russian guns blaze in Ukraine it remains to be seen if President Putin will heed this advice from Africa to pull back or whether he will continue to bombard Ukraine into submission with heavy weapons, kill its citizens and seek to annex it into a new Russian Empire. It also remains to be seen how the invasion will play out on an African continent whose leaders have been deliberately courted by Putin. He has signed military cooperation agreements with various African countries and he doesn't demand Western-style commitments for human rights improvements in return.

Russia also taps into African sentiments of anti-colonialism and decolonisation, while seeking to recreate the old Soviet Empire by the invasion of Ukraine. And what happens after Putin achieves that? An invasion of Poland? Hungary? Romania? The Baltic States? All new democracies but once part of the dead embers of the old Soviet Empire.

It was one of Putin's Communist icons Leon Trotsky who promised to throw his opponents into “the dustbin of history”. The phrase was re-purposed in 1982 by the former US President Ronald Reagan who declared that “freedom and democracy will leave Marxism and Leninism on the ash heap of history”. Now Vladimir Putin has blown the lid off the dustbin of history and, as in the Cold War, we wait to see whether Russia's authoritarianism or Ukraine's democracy will prevail.

The stakes are high. According to the former British Ambassador to the eastern European capitals of Warsaw, Belgrade and Sarajevo, Charles Crawford of The Ambassador Partnership, an Estonian diplomat recently asked someone from Putin's inner circle when all this Russian aggressive posturing and behaviour was going to end.

The reply was stark: “it ends when you stop us”.

We should not be surprised if the flames we see in Ukraine today don't spread to Africa tomorrow.

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